

Workplace Investigations

Contributing Editors

Phil Linnard at Slaughter and May
Clare Fletcher at Slaughter and May

08. Can the employer search employees' possessions or files as part of an investigation?

Austria

Author: *Michaela Gerlach, Sonia Ben Brahim*
at GERLACH

In general, it is advisable to back up data, documents, emails and other records promptly to prevent their deletion. Admissibility depends on whether the data originates from personal or professional records and whether they are legally relevant. If internal investigations are carried out based on a specific suspicion of a criminal offence, it is the processing of legally relevant data. In general, the processing of professional emails or documents is permissible. If there is no professional connection, access to private files and documents is only permitted in exceptional cases.

If, for example, using a business email account for private purposes is not allowed, the employer can usually assume that the data processed is only "general" data within the meaning of article 6 GDPR and that such data processing is justified by a balancing of interests. However, if private use is allowed, the data may still be part of a special category within the meaning of article 9 GDPR. In such cases, the justification for its use must be based on one of the grounds explicitly mentioned in article 9(2) GDPR.

The employer must protect the employee's rights under section 16 of the ABGB and must consider the proportionality of the interference. Only the least restrictive means – the method that least interferes with the employee's rights – may be used to obtain the necessary information. The employer's interest in obtaining the information must outweigh the employee's interest in protecting his or her rights. The implementation or initiation of controls by the employer does not automatically constitute an interference with personal rights, as being subject to the employer's rights of control is part of the position as an employee.

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South Korea

Author: *Hyunjae Park, Paul Cho, Jihay Ellie Kwack, Kyson Keebong Paek*
at Kim & Chang

As discussed in question 7, it may be difficult for a company to search an employee's personal possessions.

The company may search and gather electronic data stored in work laptops or company servers, subject to legal requirements and restrictions (eg, obtaining consent).

The PIPA provides specific guidance on the requirements for obtaining consent. Under the PIPA, to collect or use an individual's personal information, the information holder must be informed of and consent to:

- the purpose of the collection or use;
- the personal information that will be collected;
- the period of retention and use; and
- his or her right to refuse to provide consent and any disadvantages that may result from such refusal.

There are separate requirements for obtaining consent to provide an individual's personal information to a third party. Also, consent must be obtained separately for the collection, use or provision of sensitive or unique identification information.

Under limited circumstances, personal information may be collected, used, or provided to third parties without obtaining the consent of the information holder. For instance, a company may collect and use personal information without obtaining consent where obtaining the information is necessary to achieve the company's "legitimate interests", which clearly exceed the information holder's right to his or her personal information, and the collection and use are carried out within reasonable bounds. The term "legitimate interests" in this context is generally understood as a concept similar to "justifiable act" under the Criminal Code. The Korean Supreme Court has held that under exceptional circumstances such as the following, the company's collection and review of employee data may constitute a "justifiable act" under the Criminal Code:

1. the company had specific and reasonable suspicion that the employee had committed a crime and the company had an urgent need to verify the facts;
2. the scope of the company's review was limited to the suspected crime through the use of keywords, etc;
3. the employee had signed an agreement stating that he or she would not use work computers in an unauthorised manner and that all work products would belong to the company; and
4. the company's review uncovered materials that could be used to verify whether the employee committed the alleged crime.

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Switzerland

Author: *Laura Widmer, Sandra Schaffner*
at Bär & Karrer

The basic rule is that the employer may not search private data during internal investigations.

If there is a strong suspicion of criminal conduct on the part of the employee and a sufficiently strong justification exists, a search of private data may be justified.^[1] The factual connection with the employment relationship is given, for example, in the case of a criminal act committed during working hours or using workplace infrastructure.^[2]

^[1] Claudia Fritsche, *Interne Untersuchungen in der Schweiz: Ein Handbuch für regulierte Finanzinstitute und andere Unternehmen*, Zürich/St. Gallen 2013, p. 168.

^[2] Claudia Fritsche, *Interne Untersuchungen in der Schweiz: Ein Handbuch für regulierte Finanzinstitute und andere Unternehmen*, Zürich/St. Gallen 2013, p. 168 et seq.

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