

Workplace Investigations

Contributing Editors

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

04. Who should conduct a workplace investigation, are there minimum qualifications or criteria that need to be met?

Japan

Author: *Chisako Takaya*
at Mori Hamada & Matsumoto

There are no specific qualifications or requirements for an investigator. In many cases, the investigation is handled by a department or employee as deemed appropriate by the company. In some cases, an outside attorney may be asked to handle the investigation. Also, when it is a serious matter for the company, a third-party committee may be formed and commissioned to conduct an investigation.

However, under the revision of the Whistleblower Protection Act, which came into effect in June 2022, entities employing 300 or more employees must designate a person (whistleblower response service employee) in charge of accepting internal whistleblowing reports, investigating internal whistleblowing reports, or taking corrective measures as a whistleblower response service provider. Entities with less than 300 employees must also make an effort to do the same.

The person designated as a whistleblower response service provider must not divulge the name, employee ID number, or other information that would enable whistleblower identification without a justifiable reason. Criminal penalties (fines of up to 300,000 yen) have been established for violations of this confidentiality obligation.

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Switzerland

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

The examinations can be carried out internally by designated internal employees, by external specialists, or by a combination thereof. The addition of external advisors is particularly recommended if the allegations are against an employee of a high hierarchical level^[1], if the allegations concerned are quite substantive and, in any case, where an increased degree of independence is sought.

[1] David Rosenthal et al., *Praxishandbuch für interne Untersuchungen und eDiscovery*, Release 1.01, Zürich/Bern 2021, p. 18.

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United States

Author: *Rachel G. Skaistis, Eric W. Hilfers, Jenny X. Zhang*
at Cravath, Swaine & Moore

While every internal investigation should be carried out promptly, thoroughly and in a well-documented manner, employers should appoint one individual or team of individuals to oversee all complaints regardless of how they are received. Doing so helps to ensure that all allegations are documented, reviewed and assigned for investigation as consistently as practicable.

Once a complaint is received and recorded, the company should undertake an initial triage process to determine:

- the risk of the alleged misconduct from a reputational, operational and legal perspective;
- who is best suited to conduct an investigation based on the nature of the alleged misconduct and the perceived risk level (potential candidates may include members of human resources, legal or compliance departments, or outside counsel); and
- a plan for investigating the factual allegations raised in the complaint.

The appropriate investigator should be able to investigate objectively without bias (ie, the investigator cannot have a stake in the outcome, a personal relationship with the involved parties and the outcome of the investigation should not directly affect the investigator's position within the organisation); has skills that include prior investigative knowledge and a working knowledge of employment laws; has strong interpersonal skills to build a rapport with the parties involved and to be perceived as neutral and fair; is detail-oriented; has the right temperament to conduct interviews; can be trusted to maintain confidentiality; is respected within the organisation; and can act as a credible witness.

At this triage stage, an employer may also wish to use the information collected from the complaint to proactively identify potential patterns or systemic issues at an individual, divisional or corporate level and react accordingly. For example, if a company receives a complaint against a supervisor for harassing conduct and that same individual has already been the subject of previous complaints, the company should consider whether it may be appropriate to engage outside counsel to carry out a new investigation to bring objectivity and lend credibility to the review – even if the prior complaints were not ultimately substantiated following thorough internal investigations. Similarly, the engagement of outside counsel is often appropriate where a complaint involves alleged misconduct on the part of a company's senior management or board members.

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Contributors



Japan

Chisako Takaya
Mori Hamada & Matsumoto



Switzerland

Laura Widmer
Sandra Schaffner
Bär & Karrer



United States

Rachel G. Skaistis
Eric W. Hilfers
Jenny X. Zhang
Cravath, Swaine & Moore

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