

# Workplace Investigations

## Contributing Editors

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

## 01. What legislation, guidance and/or policies govern a workplace investigation?

### Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

There is no legislation on this area in Poland. However, employers implement internal policies that provide for workplace investigation rules to fulfil certain legal obligations, including those arising directly from labour law.

Based on the currently binding provisions of labour law, an employer must counteract unwanted behaviour in the workplace (eg, bullying, discrimination and unequal treatment). To fulfil this obligation, employers implement internal policies that provide a framework for reporting misconduct and conducting internal investigations. They may freely design the rules of such investigations, within the constraints of their policy. Therefore, it is recommended they create the policy based on the following:

- it should be possible to effectively report the misconduct;
- there should be more than one way to report misconduct;
- anonymous reporting should be allowed;
- an investigation committee should be appointed and be objective;
- rules on excluding persons with a conflict of interest from conducting the investigation should be provided; and
- the report from the investigation should be prepared and signed by all persons participating in the process.

However, work on a bill on whistleblower protections is in progress (the Draft Law). The Draft Law will not determine the rules of workplace investigations but it will force employers to implement a whistleblowing procedure and follow-up on recommendations in the case of a report, including initiating an internal investigation where appropriate. Whether an internal investigation is initiated depends on the assessment of a reported irregularity by the employer.

In addition, employers (especially those that are part of an international group) often already implement internal policies on whistleblowing management and internal investigations. Employers often base their policies on guidelines issued by relevant (usually international) organisations.

## 02. How is a workplace investigation usually commenced?



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

There are no legal requirements in this respect – it depends on the internal policies or practices at a given working establishment. Based on our experience – an internal investigation usually commences with a preliminary assessment of a reported irregularity. If the preliminary assessment leads to a conclusion that a reported situation may be an irregularity, an investigation is launched by appointing a commission or team that conducts the investigation or selecting an investigator. Then, a plan of investigation is established. Depending on the circumstances, the investigation plan may involve a collection of documents or files, their analysis, and interviews with a victim, witnesses or a subject (although the procedure depends on the type of case, internal rules and practice). At the end of the process, the report is prepared by the commission or team with facts established during the process, recommendations, and other suggestions as to the investigated issue.

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## 03. Can an employee be suspended during a workplace investigation? Are there any conditions on suspension (eg, pay, duration)?



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

Polish law does not provide for the suspension of an employee. Instead, an employer may agree with an employee that he or she will be released from the obligation to perform work during a relevant period of investigation (with the right to remuneration). The employer may not do this unilaterally, unless the employee is in a notice period. As an alternative, which is more common in practice, the employer may force the employee to use outstanding holiday leave (subject to limitations provided by law) or the parties may mutually agree on the use of holiday leave or unpaid leave (if the employee has already used his or her holiday entitlement in full).

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



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

There are no legal requirements in this regard but it is good practice if the team of investigators or individuals who deal with the case consists of:

- a person who has specific knowledge in a given field (concerning the violation);
- a member of the HR team; and
- a lawyer (it is recommended to engage an independent, external lawyer who can maintain the objectivity of the investigation, especially in complex matters or where a conflict of interest arises or may arise).

It is crucial that the investigators are independent (and they must be allowed to act independently).

Also, certain personal features are useful (eg, the ability to objectively assess a situation, empathy, and managing skills).

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## **05. Can the employee under investigation bring legal action to stop the investigation?**



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

This is unlikely. Theoretically, an employee can file a claim against an employer concerning the infringement of personal rights in the course of an investigation and a motion to secure his or her claims, which would consist of an employer being forced to suspend the proceedings, but in practice we have not encountered such a situation.

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## **06. Can co-workers be compelled to act as witnesses? What legal protections do employees have when acting as witnesses in an investigation?**



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

In general, an employee may not be forced to act as a witness, but based on the provisions of the Polish Labour Code, an employee must act for the benefit of a working establishment or employer and perform work in line with the instructions of an employer. A lack of cooperation from an employee (eg, refusing to attend a hearing, hiding facts or even false testimony) may constitute a basis for the loss of an employer's trust in the employee and, as a consequence, may constitute a valid reason for termination (in some specific situations, even without notice).

There is no formal protection for employees who act as witnesses. However, participation in an investigation cannot result in negative consequences (eg, no retaliation is allowed). Also, during an investigation, employees who are bound by professional secrecy are not required to provide information that would imply a breach of such secrecy.

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## **07. What data protection or other regulations apply when gathering physical evidence?**



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

If personal data is involved – the rules and principles of the GDPR will apply. If the physical evidence includes e-mail correspondence, files, or an employee's equipment and possessions, the Labour Code will apply (ie, as a general rule, to monitor it, a monitoring policy must be implemented at that working establishment). Such a policy must strictly determine the aim of the surveillance and an employer must only apply surveillance in situations that reflect this aim. Also, when it comes to monitoring correspondence, it must not infringe on the secrecy of the correspondence, which in practice means that the employer should not check employees' private correspondence when checking their business mailboxes.

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



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

It depends on whether the employer implemented rules of personal control at the workplace. If yes, such rules are applicable. If not, in our opinion if there is suspicion of a serious violation, it is possible to carry out an ad hoc inspection but its scope should be limited only to necessary activities and should not concern an employee's private files or correspondence, so as not to infringe on personal rights. If there is an ad hoc inspection, an employee should be informed in advance, and it should take place in the presence of the employee or employee's representative, observing the rules of fairness and equity.

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## **09. What additional considerations apply when the investigation involves whistleblowing?**



Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

In principle, an internal investigation should be conducted in the same way, regardless of whether it is initiated following a whistleblowing report, an audit, or a monitoring result. This includes anything related to confidentiality, fairness, data privacy protection, etc.

If an internal investigation is initiated following a whistleblower report, the main characteristic that is imposed by the EU Directive on the protection of persons who report breaches of EU Law (Whistleblowers Directive) and that will also be available under the Draft Law is for the organisation (employer) to communicate (if practicable) the report to the whistleblower. Furthermore, the whistleblower should receive feedback as to whether follow-up actions were undertaken following the report and, if yes – what actions were taken – and if not – why the follow-up actions were not taken.

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## **10. What confidentiality obligations apply during an investigation?**

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

The law does not cover this issue, apart from whistleblower regulations, as it should be regulated by the employer in their internal rules. The employer should ensure all participants of the investigation keep information related to it secret, as long as is necessary for the investigation (or even longer, if required by law concerning personal data or other specially protected information). Reputation, personal data and the personal rights of other people cannot be breached during the proceedings and this should be protected.

Moreover, according to the Draft Law – a whistleblower's personal data should be kept confidential. It can only be disclosed if law enforcement authorities require it. Also, confidentiality should be guaranteed for the subject and other interested persons.

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## **11. What information must the employee under investigation be given about the allegations against them?**

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

There is no specific mandatory information that should be given to an employee who is the subject of an internal investigation. However, it is common practice that he or she must know what the allegations against them are, on what grounds these allegations are formulated and be given a right to discuss these

allegations and the evidence or grounds for these allegations.

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## **12. Can the identity of the complainant, witnesses or sources of information for the investigation be kept confidential?**



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

Yes.

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## **13. Can non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) be used to keep the fact and substance of an investigation confidential?**



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

Yes, but it may not stop the disclosure of information at the request of relevant law enforcement authorities.

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## **14. When does privilege attach to investigation materials?**



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

In general, findings made and documents established during an internal investigation, including the report thereof, are not covered by privilege per se. It can be claimed that they are covered by the employer's commercial secrecy, but this secrecy is not very well protected from requests of law enforcement authorities. Hence, if prosecuting authorities find a report of an internal investigation or other documents established during an investigation relevant for criminal proceedings, they can ask for them. If they are not produced voluntarily, a search can be performed.

Legal privilege will, on the other hand, cover an internal investigation if it is entrusted to an independent lawyer. Specifically, client-attorney privilege will cover all documents that are established during the investigation by a lawyer.

Under Polish law there is no distinction between legal advice privilege and litigation privilege. Hence, legal privilege will cover the documentation of the internal investigation led by a lawyer regardless of whether the lawyer's involvement is for the purpose of obtaining legal advice or because of ongoing or contemplated litigation.

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## **15. Does the employee under investigation have a right to be accompanied or have legal representation during the investigation?**



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

This is not regulated by law and it depends on internal procedures or practice at a given working establishment. As a rule, the participation of third parties or proxies is neither a recognised practice nor recommended (according to the principle that the fewer people participate in the investigation, the easier it is to determine the circumstances of the case, the so-called need-to-know rule). However, in certain situations it should be permissible for a proxy (eg, a lawyer) to participate in a meeting with a subject.

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## **16. If there is a works council or trade union, does it have any right to be informed or involved in the investigation?**



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

There is no such obligation, unless it is provided for in an internal procedure or, for example, in the applicable collective bargaining agreement. It is neither a recognised practice nor recommended that such persons participate in the investigation.

However, in the event of violations that justify the termination of an employment contract with the employee, the employer should consult with that employee's union about their intention to immediately terminate any employment contract concluded with that person or to terminate, with notice, the employment contract agreed with him or her for an indefinite term, or apply for consent to terminate the employment contract with an employee who is protected by a union.

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## 17. What other support can employees involved in the investigation be given?



Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

They may be supported by, for example, allowing an alternative work environment (eg, remote work to avoid direct contact with people involved in the case). Depending on circumstances of the case, this solution will be offered to the subject or the victim. However, it is important that such actions do not infringe the rights of other people (eg, the subject itself).

Employees may also be sent on leave (by a unilateral decision of the employer – if possible under currently binding law provisions) or the parties to an employment contract may mutually agree to use such leave. Moreover, if the employer thinks it is necessary, they may assign the employee to another job for a period not exceeding three months (only if it does not result in a reduction in the employee's remuneration and corresponds to the employee's qualifications).

Also, depending on the employer's decision – psychological or even legal assistance can be provided by the employer to a whistleblower or a victim.

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## 18. What if unrelated matters are revealed as a result of the investigation?



Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

It depends on the circumstances of the revealed issue and the employer's compliance culture. Normally, if a new issue is revealed during the investigation, it should be analysed and investigated if appropriate.

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## 19. What if the employee under investigation raises a grievance during the investigation?



Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

It depends on the internal policies in force in the organisation. Most often, it constitutes the basis for separate proceedings.



## 20. What if the employee under investigation goes off sick during the investigation?



Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

This may prolong the investigation, as the employee may be unable to participate for a time (if the employee is not able to work, in many cases he or she will not be able to participate in proceedings that requires some level of engagement and psychophysical ability). Also, an employee is protected against termination of an employment contract with notice during sick leave. During such a period, the employer may only terminate his or her employment contract without notice (with immediate effect).

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## 21. How do you handle a parallel criminal and/or regulatory investigation?



Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

They can be run in parallel. It is up to the company whether it informs the authority about the ongoing internal investigation.

Based on our experience in criminal matters, a report from an internal investigation may not necessarily be treated as evidence per se, but as a source of information about the evidence.

According to procedural rules stemming from, for example, the Criminal Procedure Code, the authorities can demand to see evidence and documents in the employer's possession that they consider relevant to the conducted proceedings and their subject matter.

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## 22. What must the employee under investigation be told about the outcome of an investigation?



Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

He or she must be given feedback about follow-up actions that were undertaken, or reasons why the follow-up actions were not undertaken.

In any case – the feedback must be adapted to the circumstances of each case so as not to reveal too many details or infringe the other interested parties' rights.

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## **23. Should the investigation report be shared in full, or just the findings?**



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

It does not need to be shared with the employees at all. It may be shared only to the extent such a disclosure will not violate any law, including personal data protection law or personal rights.

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## **24. What next steps are available to the employer?**



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

It depends on the outcome of the investigation: imposing penalties; reporting to a regulator; notifying a suspected offence or civil claim; termination of an employment contract with or without notice; and changes to the work organisation. Following the investigation, the employer must make some legal, business or HR corrective actions.

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## **25. Who can (or must) the investigation findings be disclosed to? Does that include regulators/police? Can the interview records be kept private, or are they at risk of disclosure?**



Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

It depends on the matter. In general, there is no obligation to disclose the report. In some instances, there

is an obligation to notify a suspected offence (for example, a terrorist attack or a political assassination). This, however, does not mean there is an obligation to file a report from the internal investigation, but to provide the law enforcement authority with the facts and evidence at the notifier's disposal. In other instances of criminal offences, for example corruption, there is no obligation to notify law enforcement authorities. Therefore, it is up to the organisation to decide whether it will file a notification for a suspected offence.

At the same time, presenting a report from an internal investigation can constitute an element of defence for an organisation if a regulatory authority initiates proceedings regarding a failure by the organisation to comply with regulatory obligations.

Records of interviews do not need to be produced for the case file provided the law enforcement authority does not ask for them.

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## 26. How long should the outcome of the investigation remain on the employee's record?



### Poland

Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

Neither Polish law nor the Draft Law specifically provide for a mandatory period during which the outcome of the investigation should be kept on the employee's record.

At the same time, the Draft Law indicates that the register of whistleblowing reports, which should also contain information about follow-up actions undertaken as a result of the report, should be kept for 15 months starting from the end of the calendar year in which the follow-up actions have been completed, or the proceedings initiated by those actions have been terminated.

Also, while determining how long the outcome of an internal investigation should be kept, additional legal considerations can be taken into account, especially data privacy.

The GDPR does not specify precise storage time for personal data. The employer must assess what will be an appropriate time for storage of the data, taking into consideration the necessity of keeping personal data concerning the purpose of the processing in question. Employees' personal data should be kept for the period necessary for the performance of the employment relationship and may be kept for a period appropriate for the statute of limitations for claims and criminal deeds. A longer retention period may result from applicable laws. Following the Regulation of the Minister of Family, Labour and Social Policy on employee documentation, the employer may keep a copy of the notice of punishment and other documents related to the employee's incurring of disciplinary responsibility in the employee record.

There are different retention periods for the data contained in employee files:

- 10 years if the employee was hired on or after 1 January 2019;
- if the employment relationship began between 1 January 1999 and 1 January 2019, the retention period is 50 years, but may be reduced to 10 years if the employer provides the Polish Social Insurance Institution with certain mandatory information; and
- for 50 years if the employee was hired before 1 January 1999. It does not matter whether the person is still working or not.

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## 27. What legal exposure could the employer face for errors during the investigation?



Author: *Wioleta Polak, Aleksandra Stępniewska, Julia Jewgraf*  
at WKB Lawyers

If any untrue allegations were made by an employer against an employee without checking them beforehand, there is a risk that such an employee would claim damages eg, for infringement of personal rights or even filing a private indictment for defamation or outrage.

Certainly, an employer must be aware that one must never behave in a way that, for example, in the employee's opinion, could constitute a form of blackmailing or deprivation of liberty. A problem may also arise when accessing the employee's correspondence, especially when access is made to documents or private correspondence. The Draft Law provides for several criminal offences related to, for example, preventing reporting, using retaliatory measures against a whistleblower or disclosing personal data of a whistleblower).

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### Contributors



Wioleta Polak  
Aleksandra Stępniewska  
Julia Jewgraf  
*WKB Lawyers*