

Employment in Financial Services

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14. Are non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) potentially lawful in your jurisdiction? If so, must they follow any particular form or rules?

United Kingdom

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NDAs (also known as confidentiality agreements) are potentially lawful and enforceable in the UK. It is common to include NDAs in employment contracts (to protect the confidential information of the employer during and after employment) and in settlement agreements (to reiterate existing confidentiality obligations and to keep the circumstances of the settlement confidential).

NDAs do not need to follow a particular form, but they must be reasonable in scope. Following #MeToo, there has been considerable government, parliamentary, and regulatory scrutiny of the use of NDAs and their reasonableness in different circumstances.

The following limitations on NDAs should be noted:

- By law, any NDA purporting to prevent an individual from making a “protected disclosure” as defined in the Employment Rights Act 1996 (ie, blowing the whistle about a matter) is void.
- The regulatory body for solicitors in England and Wales, the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA), has issued a detailed warning notice and guidance to practitioners setting out – in its view – inappropriate or improper uses of NDAs. Failure to comply with the SRA’s warning notice may lead to disciplinary action. The SRA lists the following as examples of improper use of NDAs:
 - using an NDA as a means of preventing, or seeking to impede or deter, a person from:
 - cooperating with a criminal investigation or prosecution;
 - reporting an offence to a law enforcement agency;
 - reporting misconduct, or a serious breach of the SRA’s regulatory requirements, to the SRA, or making an equivalent report to any other body responsible for supervising or regulating the matters in question; and
 - making a protected disclosure;
 - using an NDA to influence the substance of such a report, disclosure or cooperation;
 - using an NDA to prevent any disclosure required by law;
 - using an NDA to prevent proper disclosure about the agreement or circumstances surrounding the agreement to professional advisers, such as legal or tax advisors, or

medical professionals and counsellors, who are bound by a duty of confidentiality;

- including or proposing clauses known to be unenforceable; and
- using warranties, indemnities and clawback clauses in a way that is designed to, or has the effect of, improperly preventing or inhibiting permitted reporting or disclosures being made (for example, asking a person to warrant that they are not aware of any reason why they would make a permitted disclosure, in circumstances where a breach of warranty would activate a clawback clause).

- The Law Society of England and Wales, a professional association representing solicitors in England and Wales, has issued similar guidance (including a practice note) on the use of NDAs in the context of the termination of employment relationships.
- Other non-regulatory guidance on the use of NDAs has also been issued, including by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service and by the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Care should be taken accordingly to ensure that the wording of any NDA complies with prevailing guidance, especially from the SRA.

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