



EMPLOYMENT

Employers have rights too: Rebalancing the modern workplace

21 May 2026 4 min read

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South African labour law is often discussed through the lens of employee protection. That is unsurprising. The Labour Relations Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, and the raft of constitutional rights underpinning workplace regulation were all designed to address historical inequality and imbalance in the employment relationship. Yet, somewhere in the modern discourse, a dangerous misconception has emerged: that employers are little more than passive participants in their own businesses, stripped of the ability to manage risk, enforce standards, and protect commercial sustainability.

That is not the law.

The modern employer retains extensive rights recognised by statute, contract, and the courts. Those rights matter. Without them, businesses cannot function effectively, workplaces become unmanageable, and ultimately jobs themselves are placed at risk.

At the centre of the employer's rights framework lies a simple principle: employers are entitled to run their businesses efficiently, profitably, and safely. The Constitutional Court and Labour Appeal Court have repeatedly recognised that managerial prerogative remains a foundational component of labour law. While employers must exercise that prerogative fairly and lawfully, the law does not require employers to tolerate misconduct, underperformance, insubordination, incompatibility, operational inefficiency, or conduct that undermines trust.

Too often employers are advised as though every disciplinary process is merely an obstacle course designed to avoid litigation. That mindset fundamentally misunderstands the purpose of workplace discipline. Discipline is not punishment for punishment's sake. It is a legitimate operational mechanism intended to preserve standards, accountability, and workplace order.

An employer has the right to expect honesty from employees. That principle remains one of the most strongly protected interests in South African labour jurisprudence. Courts consistently recognise that dishonesty strikes at the heart of the employment relationship because it destroys trust. Once trust is irreparably damaged, continued employment may become intolerable irrespective of the employee's length of service or prior record.

Similarly, employers are entitled to demand acceptable performance standards. Poor work performance processes are not acts of victimisation. They are lawful mechanisms intended to assist employees to meet operational requirements. The law does not require employers to indefinitely carry employees who are unable or unwilling to perform at the required standard, provided that fair procedures are followed and reasonable assistance is offered.

The same applies to incompatibility and workplace harmony. Senior employees in particular occupy positions requiring collaboration, leadership, and strategic alignment. Where an employee creates conflict, undermines management, damages workplace cohesion, or becomes fundamentally incompatible with the organisation's culture or leadership structure, employers are entitled to intervene. Courts have increasingly recognised incompatibility as a legitimate basis for dismissal where the employment relationship has become unsustainable.

Importantly, employers also have the right to protect confidential information, customer connections, intellectual property, and competitive advantage. In an era where employees can move between competitors with unprecedented ease, restraints of trade and confidentiality obligations remain critical commercial tools. Courts will not enforce unreasonable restraints, but they continue to uphold legitimate protections where proprietary interests are genuinely at risk.

Operational requirements dismissals are another area where employer rights are frequently misunderstood. Retrenchment is not unlawful merely because it is unpopular. Businesses are entitled to restructure operations, reduce costs, introduce technology, outsource functions, or redesign reporting structures in pursuit of sustainability and efficiency. The law requires meaningful consultation and procedural fairness — not business paralysis.

Perhaps most overlooked of all is the employer's right to workplace safety and risk management. Employers carry statutory obligations under health and safety legislation, regulatory frameworks, and common law duties of care. Those obligations necessarily include the right to investigate misconduct, suspend employees where appropriate, restrict access to systems or sites, and take decisive action where operational or reputational risks arise.

There is also a growing trend in modern labour disputes where every managerial decision is framed as retaliation, victimisation, or constructive dismissal. Courts, however, continue to distinguish between genuine unlawful conduct and ordinary workplace management. Employees do not acquire immunity from accountability simply because grievances have been raised or protected disclosures have been made. Employers remain entitled to manage performance, discipline misconduct, and protect operational integrity, provided those actions are not motivated by ulterior or unlawful purposes.

None of this means employers are above the law. Far from it. Fairness remains the cornerstone of South African labour relations. But fairness is reciprocal. The employment relationship is not designed to operate exclusively for the benefit of one side.

Healthy workplaces depend upon balance. Employees are entitled to dignity, fairness, and protection from arbitrary treatment. Employers are equally entitled to accountability, productivity, loyalty, and operational stability.

The most effective organisations are not those paralysed by fear of litigation. They are those that understand their rights, exercise them consistently, and implement fair but decisive management practices.



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