

## From the bagel incident to butt-dialed: relevations context matters, The Annual Just Cause

December 01, 2016

The approaching season of year-end lists would not be complete without our annual review of the top just cause cases, over the past 12 months or so, from across Canada. The 2016 list certainly reminds us that, since the Supreme Court of Canada's judgment in *McKinley v. BC Tel* some 15 years ago, whether it's a violent incident over a bagel or the inadvertent, butt-dialed disclosure of moonlighting on company time, the context of the alleged just cause matters.

In *Ross v. IBM Canada Ltd.* (2015) 259 A.C.W.S. (3d) 293 (Alta. Q.B.), a senior, mobile sales employee was terminated with cause when his employer learned, "as a result of two unintended, butt-dialed, communications", that he was working, by his subsequent admission, some 3-4 hours a week on his family business during regular work hours. IBM Canada was successful at trial before the Alberta Queen's Bench in proving that Ross regularly breached the Company's Business Conduct Guidelines and that IBM could no longer reasonably rely upon Ross to devote his full attention to his employer's interests. As a mobile employee, Ross was on the "honour system", as IBM had no effective means of micro managing him, and the employer was entitled to assume that its employee was devoting his full-time efforts to IBM's interests and doing his part to earn the relatively high income he was paid. The Court concluded that the standards of conduct that Ross breached were at the core of the employment contract, this justifying, objectively, IBM's conclusion that there had been a breakdown in the employment relationship.

In *Garreton v. Complete Innovations Inc.* (2016) 263 A.C.W.S. (3d) 947 (Ont. Div. Ct.), the Ontario Divisional Court had occasion to consider the importance of context as a result of the "bagel incident". The plaintiff, a trainer, had purchased bagels for an internal training session; when an employee who was not part of the session tried to take a bagel, the plaintiff grabbed her wrist. As a result, the plaintiff was suspended two days (with pay), for what the employer described as "retaliating with physical violence". Upon returning to work after the suspension, the plaintiff was terminated with cause, because of the bagel incident and two year-old incidents for which she had received warnings. In the end, though, the Divisional Court agreed with the trial judge's finding that the prior discipline of the plaintiff for the bagel incident, by the way of the

suspension, exhausted the defendant's discipline and "that to subsequently dismiss her from employment constituted double jeopardy".

In *Merritt v. Tigercat Industries Inc.* (2016) 264 A.C.W.S. (3d) 628 (Ont. S.C.J.), a labourer was charged with two counts of sexual assault against minors; in the listing of contextual considerations, it was noted that the alleged events did not occur at work, and did not involve other employees. The Court held that, while off-duty misconduct, including of a criminal nature, will amount to just cause in limited situations, there must be a justifiable connection to the employer or the nature of the work.

In *Goncharova v. Marsh Lake Solid Waste Management Society* (2015) 262 A.C.W.S. (3d) 384 (Y.T. Small Cl. Ct.), after reviewing the case law on cumulative cause, i.e., at what point does the proverbial straw break the camel's back, a Yukon Court summarized the applicable contextual considerations in this way:

My view is that the more similar the prior misconduct of the employee is to the present misconduct complained of, the greater the cumulative effect in supporting the argument for dismissal with cause. Conversely, the less similar the prior acts of misconduct are to

Expertise

[Labour & Employment](#)

---

## BLG | Canada's Law Firm

As the largest, truly full-service Canadian law firm, Borden Ladner Gervais LLP (BLG) delivers practical legal advice for domestic and international clients across more practices and industries than any Canadian firm. With over 800 lawyers, intellectual property agents and other professionals, BLG serves the legal needs of businesses and institutions across Canada and beyond – from M&A and capital markets, to disputes, financing, and trademark & patent registration.

[blg.com](http://blg.com)

### BLG Offices

#### Calgary

Centennial Place, East Tower  
520 3rd Avenue S.W.  
Calgary, AB, Canada  
T2P 0R3

T 403.232.9500  
F 403.266.1395

#### Ottawa

World Exchange Plaza  
100 Queen Street  
Ottawa, ON, Canada  
K1P 1J9

T 613.237.5160  
F 613.230.8842

#### Vancouver

1200 Waterfront Centre  
200 Burrard Street  
Vancouver, BC, Canada  
V7X 1T2

T 604.687.5744  
F 604.687.1415

#### Montréal

1000 De La Gauchetière Street West  
Suite 900  
Montréal, QC, Canada  
H3B 5H4

T 514.954.2555  
F 514.879.9015

#### Toronto

Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower  
22 Adelaide Street West  
Toronto, ON, Canada  
M5H 4E3

T 416.367.6000  
F 416.367.6749

The information contained herein is of a general nature and is not intended to constitute legal advice, a complete statement of the law, or an opinion on any subject. No one should act upon it or refrain from acting without a thorough examination of the law after the facts of a specific situation are considered. You are urged to consult your legal adviser in cases of specific questions or concerns. BLG does not warrant or guarantee the accuracy, currency or completeness of this publication. No part of this publication may be reproduced without prior written permission of Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. If this publication was sent to you by BLG and you do not wish to receive further publications from BLG, you may ask to remove your contact information from our mailing lists by emailing [unsubscribe@blg.com](mailto:unsubscribe@blg.com) or manage your subscription preferences at [blg.com/MyPreferences](http://blg.com/MyPreferences). If you feel you have received this message in error please contact [communications@blg.com](mailto:communications@blg.com). BLG's privacy policy for publications may be found at [blg.com/en/privacy](http://blg.com/en/privacy).

© 2026 Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. Borden Ladner Gervais LLP is an Ontario Limited Liability Partnership.