

The Superior Court Applies a Penal Clause to Sanction an Employees Solicitation

November 01, 2017

In a recent Superior Court of Québec decision¹, a former employee, as well as one of the employer's customers, were condemned jointly and severally to pay the employer a substantial penalty provided for by a service agreement, for breaching a non-solicitation clause governing the employees.

Mr. Louhaur worked for Groupe SL inc. ("SL") and was bound by a confidentiality agreement prohibiting him, in particular, from soliciting any of SL's customers during the term of his employment. Mr. Louhaur advised SL that he was resigning from his position, but he continued working for the company beyond his notice period so as to facilitate a smooth transition.

During his notice period, Mr. Louhaur attended a selection interview with Groupe ABS inc. ("ABS"), one of SL's customers. He never told SL that he had done that. Moreover, the service agreement between SL and ABS included a penalty clause applicable in the event that ABS decided or attempted to retain the services of anyone working for SL.

Following his interview with ABS, Mr. Louhaur agreed with SL that, thereafter, he would perform his duties as an independent worker. The obligation not to solicit SL's customers and the obligation of loyalty remained unchanged. Mr. Louhaur then ceased performing any services for SL. Two months later, SL learned that Mr. Louhaur was working for ABS.

Madam Justice Marie-Claude Armstrong condemned SL and Mr. Louhaur jointly and severally to pay the penalty provided for by the agreement, corresponding to an amount of \$104,751.96, equivalent to two years of Mr. Louhaur's salary. Although he was a third party with respect to the agreement between SL and ABS, Mr. Louhaur had assisted ABS in breaching its obligations thereunder.

ABS, by attempting to retain Mr. Louhaur's services during the term of the service agreement, had contravened its contractual obligations under that agreement. Although Mr. Louhaur had been hired by ABS after his employment with SL had ended, his first selection interview, occurring while he was still employed, constituted solicitation.

Mr. Louhaur, for his part, had breached his contractual obligation to behave loyally (i.e. faithfully and honestly) in regard to SL. He had also breached his duty to act in good faith. Citing a recent Québec Court of Appeal decision², Justice Armstrong recalled that the Civil Code of Québec enshrines a broad notion of good faith, namely, the standard of acceptable conduct.

Mr. Louhaur and ABS had therefore jointly breached their obligation of good faith in failing to act transparently. The Court drew an inference by presumption that Mr. Louhaur and ABS had agreed to alter the employee's status while he was continuing to work for SL, in order to hire him thereafter without contravening the agreement.

Finally, the Court enforced the penalty clause, since the parties had specifically agreed on the liquidated damages to which SL would be entitled. In fact, this "poaching" of the employer's clientele caused the supplier to suffer damages on two levels: it was forced to look for and train a new technician and its needs for customer service were reduced.

This type of scenario occurs frequently. An employer who assigns an employee to service a customer is certainly entitled to protect its staff from being poached by that customer. This decision confirms that the Superior Court of Québec is inclined to uphold penalty clauses intended to safeguard the obligations of loyalty and good faith of both customers and ex-employees, however substantial may be the amount of the liquidated damages agreed to by the parties. Courts hold that in the case of a clause contracted by mutual consent, whichever contracting party breaches the clause is making an enlightened business decision, with a full understanding of the amount that it risks having to pay. As a result, customers who sign this type of clause must be prudent and realize that attempting to escape their obligations under the agreement, such as by changing an employee's status to that of an independent contractor, will not necessarily suffice to elude the enforceability of the penalty clause.

1 Groupe SL inc. c. Groupe ABS inc., 2017 QCCS 4411.

2 Droit de la famille-171197, 2017 QCCA 861, at para. 90 et seq.

By

[Michael Grodinsky, Rose Massicotte](#)

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

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 or manage your subscription preferences at blg.com/MyPreferences. If you feel you have received this message in error please contact communications@blg.com. BLG's privacy policy for publications may be found at blg.com/en/privacy.

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