The Summer HR Policy Tune-Up Canadian Employers Need Before Heat, Holidays and Staffing Pressure Hit

Summer has a way of exposing weak HR policies.

It rarely happens all at once. It starts with vacation requests. Then a manager asks whether they can hire two students for the warehouse. An employee wants to work from a cottage for July. Someone asks whether shorts are allowed in the office. Outdoor crews are dealing with heat. A delivery team is working through wildfire smoke. Payroll is preparing for Canada Day or a provincial holiday. A team barbecue is planned, alcohol is being served, and nobody has clarified whether workplace conduct rules still apply.

Each issue may seem small on its own. Together, they can create a serious compliance problem.

Summer operations touch employment standards, occupational health and safety, payroll, accommodation, harassment prevention, dress codes, remote work, young worker onboarding, emergency planning and manager decision-making. The mistake many employers make is treating these issues as seasonal annoyances rather than predictable operational risks.

Canadian HR professionals should treat summer like any other known business cycle. If an employer plans for year-end payroll, holiday shutdowns, performance reviews and open enrolment, it should also plan for heat, holidays, students, vacations, smoke, summer events and staffing pressure.

That planning starts with policy.

A summer HR policy tune-up does not require rewriting the employee handbook. It requires reviewing the policies most likely to be tested between late May and early September, identifying where managers need clearer direction, and making sure HR, payroll, safety and operations are aligned before the pressure arrives.

Vacation Policies Need More Than Entitlement Language

Most vacation policies explain how much vacation employees receive. Fewer explain how vacation is scheduled fairly when everyone wants time off at once.

That is where summer problems begin.

In many workplaces, vacation pressure peaks in June, July and August. Employees want time with children during school breaks, travel during warmer weather, long weekends, weddings, family events and cottage time. Managers want to support employees, but they also have to maintain coverage. If the policy only says that vacation must be approved by a manager, inconsistent decisions are almost guaranteed.

One manager may approve requests on a first-come basis. Another may use seniority. Another may favour high performers. Another may deny requests because the department is short-staffed. Employees may perceive favouritism even when managers are acting in good faith.

HR should review whether the vacation policy answers the practical questions managers face. How far in advance should summer vacation be requested? Can departments set blackout periods? If multiple employees request the same week, what criteria apply? Can approval be withdrawn if business needs change? How are partial-week requests handled? What happens when a statutory holiday falls during vacation? How does the policy apply to new employees, part-time employees, probationary employees and employees returning from leave?

Employment standards set minimum entitlements, but employers still need scheduling rules. Ontario’s Employment Standards Act guidance, for example, provides minimum vacation time rules, including two weeks of vacation time for employees with less than five years of employment and three weeks after completing five years, with vacation pay accruing as wages are earned. Federally regulated employees have separate annual vacation and general holiday standards under federal labour standards.

Those legal entitlements do not remove the need for practical administration. HR should ensure the vacation policy clearly separates entitlement from approval. Employees may be entitled to vacation, but the timing of vacation still usually requires scheduling that accounts for business operations and applicable law.

The best summer vacation policies are transparent. They tell employees how to request time off, when to request it, what factors managers will consider, and how conflicts will be resolved. They also require managers to document denials, especially where denial may affect an employee with childcare, disability, religious, family status or other protected needs.

A clear policy helps employees plan. It also protects managers from making decisions that look arbitrary after the fact.

Statutory Holiday Payroll Should Be Checked Before the Long Weekend

Summer statutory holidays create recurring payroll risk.

Canada Day, provincial holidays, civic holidays, Labour Day and other jurisdiction-specific holidays often fall during periods of variable scheduling. Employees may be on vacation. Part-time workers may pick up extra shifts. Seasonal workers may be new. Managers may ask employees to work the holiday. Remote employees may work in different provinces. Payroll may have to calculate public holiday pay, premium pay, substitute days or eligibility under different rules.

This is where HR and payroll need to work together.

Public holiday rules vary across Canada. Ontario’s employment standards guidance lists nine public holidays and states that most qualifying employees are entitled to take those days off and receive public holiday pay. Federally regulated employees are

entitled to 10 general holidays under federal labour standards, including National Day for Truth and Reconciliation and Remembrance Day.

A national employer cannot simply apply one holiday calendar everywhere. Nor can HR assume payroll will catch every issue if managers do not code schedules properly.

Before each summer holiday, HR should confirm which employees are covered by which jurisdiction, which employees are scheduled to work, who is on vacation, whether substitute holidays are being used, and whether part-time or variable-hour employees meet eligibility rules. Payroll should confirm the correct formula and source deduction treatment. Managers should know they cannot casually promise a substitute day or extra pay without using the proper process.

Statutory holiday errors are often small at the individual level, but they create disproportionate employee frustration. Workers notice when holiday pay is wrong. If one employee raises the issue, others will compare pay statements. A preventable payroll issue can quickly become a trust issue.

The summer policy tune-up should therefore include a statutory holiday workflow, not just a holiday calendar.

Heat Stress Requires a Real Workplace Plan

Heat stress is no longer just an outdoor construction issue.

It can affect construction crews, landscapers, delivery drivers, warehouse workers, manufacturing employees, restaurant and kitchen staff, agricultural workers, event staff, security guards, cleaners, maintenance employees, vehicle operators and employees working in poorly cooled indoor spaces. It can also affect office employees if air conditioning fails or buildings are not designed for extended high temperatures.

CCOHS warns that workers exposed to extreme heat or hot environments may be at increased risk of heat stress, whether the work is performed indoors in a hot plant or outdoors during summer months. CCOHS also identifies control measures for hot environments, including engineering controls, administrative controls, reducing physical demands, providing rest areas, training workers and ensuring access to fluids. Federal guidance on thermal stress states that hot and cold work environments are occupational physical hazards and that thermal stress must be addressed in a timely manner to avoid catastrophic effects.

That language should matter to HR because heat is not only a safety issue. It is also a staffing, scheduling, accommodation and policy issue.

HR and OHS should review whether the organization has a heat stress procedure that identifies high-risk roles, sets expectations for hydration and rest, explains how heat risks will be monitored, defines when work will be modified, and tells supervisors what to do when employees report symptoms. Workers should know how to recognize heat exhaustion and heat stroke. CCOHS describes heat exhaustion symptoms such as dizziness, muscle cramps, weakness, headache, fatigue, thirst and heavy sweating, and warns that heat exhaustion may develop into heat stroke, which can include confusion, loss of consciousness, seizures and very high body temperature.

The summer policy review should also address acclimatization. New and returning workers may be more vulnerable because their bodies have not adjusted to hot conditions. Seasonal workers and students may not recognize early symptoms. Supervisors may push through heat because they are focused on production. That is

exactly why a written process matters.

A heat policy should not simply say employees should drink water. It should define how the employer will reduce exposure when conditions become unsafe. That may include rescheduling strenuous work to cooler times, rotating tasks, adding rest breaks, providing shade or cooling areas, modifying PPE where safely possible, using mechanical aids, increasing supervision, and creating emergency response procedures.

If employees may be at risk of heat stress in B.C., WorkSafeBC says employers need to develop and implement a heat stress exposure control plan. Other jurisdictions may frame obligations differently, but the practical HR lesson is the same: heat must be managed before someone gets hurt.

Wildfire Smoke Needs to Be Built Into Summer Operations

Wildfire smoke has become a recurring workplace issue in many parts of Canada.

It affects outdoor work first, but it can also affect indoor workplaces if ventilation is poor, doors are open, vehicles are used frequently, or employees move between indoor and outdoor environments. It may affect employees with asthma, respiratory conditions, heart conditions, pregnancy, disability-related vulnerabilities or other health factors. It may also affect employees who commute through smoky conditions or perform mobile work.

WorkSafeBC has urged employers to prepare for the health and safety risks associated with extreme heat and wildfire smoke, warning that if these risks are not properly managed, they can lead to serious injuries such as heat stress and respiratory problems. WorkSafeBC also advises employers to follow air quality advisories, consider relocating or rescheduling work, reduce physical activity in smoky conditions where possible, and temporarily assign alternative work for workers who are more susceptible to smoke-related health effects.

HR’s role is to make sure wildfire smoke response is not improvised one shift at a time.

The policy should identify who monitors air quality, which thresholds trigger action, who communicates changes to employees, how work will be modified, whether indoor air filtration is sufficient, whether remote work is available, whether masks or respirators are appropriate, and how vulnerable employees can request accommodation or alternative work.

The accommodation issue is important. A young, healthy employee may tolerate smoke exposure differently from an employee with asthma or another medical condition. Managers should not decide informally that “everyone has to work because everyone is breathing the same air.” Equal exposure does not mean equal risk.

A good wildfire smoke procedure should also connect with emergency communication. Employees should know where to check for updates, who has authority to pause or modify work, and what to do if they experience symptoms.

For HR, the policy question is simple: when the air quality changes quickly, does the workplace know who decides what happens next?

Summer Students and Seasonal Workers Need More Than a Quick Orientation

Summer hiring often happens fast.

Managers need coverage. Students are available. Seasonal demand increases. A

department adds temporary help for reception, warehouse work, landscaping, events, production, delivery, retail, hospitality or administrative support. The new worker gets a tour, a few instructions and a login, then begins work.

That is not enough.

Young, new and seasonal workers may be unfamiliar with workplace hazards, reporting procedures, harassment policies, safe work practices, customer conduct expectations, equipment rules, emergency response and the limits of their role. They may also be reluctant to ask questions because they want to make a good impression.

WorkSafeBC says training and orienting young and new workers is a regulatory requirement in B.C. and part of the employer's overall health and safety program. Federal youth workplace safety guidance also states that employers are responsible for informing young workers about hazards, ensuring required safety gear is available and used, providing training, implementing and enforcing policies, and providing a safe and healthy workplace.

The summer HR policy tune-up should therefore include a specific onboarding checklist for students, interns, co-op employees and seasonal hires. That checklist should not only cover payroll forms and system access. It should include role-specific safety training, emergency procedures, harassment and violence prevention, reporting channels, dress code and PPE expectations, privacy and confidentiality, social media rules, hours of work, overtime approval, breaks, supervision and who to contact if something feels unsafe or inappropriate.

HR should also confirm whether any job restrictions apply based on age, equipment, hours, jurisdiction or safety risk. Managers may not know those rules. They may assign a young worker to a task because it seems simple, not realizing it requires training, supervision or restrictions.

Seasonal workers should not be treated as temporary enough to skip proper orientation. If they are performing work for the organization, the organization needs to train and supervise them properly.

Dress Codes Should Be Reviewed Before the First Heat Wave

Dress codes often become contentious in summer because employees want comfort and employers want safety, professionalism and consistency.

A vague policy such as "employees must dress appropriately" is not very helpful when temperatures rise. One employee wears shorts. Another wears sandals. A warehouse employee removes PPE because it is too hot. A customer-facing employee wears clothing a manager considers too casual. Another employee requests an exception for religious, disability, pregnancy or gender expression reasons.

Summer is when dress code ambiguity becomes visible.

HR should review the policy before managers begin enforcing personal preferences. The policy should distinguish between appearance standards and safety requirements. PPE, protective footwear, high-visibility clothing, flame-resistant clothing, hair restraints, gloves, hard hats and other safety-related requirements should be clearly identified and tied to job hazards. Comfort matters, but PPE cannot be relaxed casually if it exposes workers to injury.

At the same time, dress codes must be applied in a way that respects human rights. Rules should not impose gender stereotypes or create different standards based on sex, gender identity, gender expression, religion, disability, pregnancy or body

type. If employees need accommodation, managers should know to involve HR rather than deny the request on the spot.

A stronger summer dress code explains what is required, what is prohibited and why. It also gives managers a consistent process for addressing concerns. “That outfit is inappropriate” is subjective and often unhelpful. “Open-toed footwear is not permitted in the warehouse because of foot injury hazards” is much clearer.

The goal is not to police employees’ clothing. The goal is to prevent safety risks, inconsistent enforcement and avoidable conflict.

Remote Work and Work-From-Anywhere Requests Need Boundaries

Summer often brings remote work requests that look harmless at first.

An employee wants to work from a cottage for two weeks. Another wants to extend a vacation by working remotely from another province. Someone asks to work from the United States for July. Another employee plans to travel overseas and says the time zone difference will not matter.

These requests may be manageable, but they should not be approved casually.

Domestic remote work can affect scheduling, privacy, cybersecurity, occupational health and safety, payroll and employment standards. Out-of-province work may create additional jurisdictional questions. International work can raise immigration, tax, payroll, benefits, data security and permanent establishment issues.

Managers should not have authority to approve “work from anywhere” informally. The summer policy should require employees to disclose any change in work location before it begins and should identify when HR, payroll, IT, legal or finance must review the request.

The policy should also address availability. Working from a cottage is not the same as being on vacation. If the employee is working, they must be reachable, productive, secure and able to perform the job. If they are caring for children full time, travelling between locations, using unreliable internet or working across major time-zone differences, the arrangement may not be workable.

This is another area where HR should avoid extremes. The answer does not need to be automatic denial. But the organization should know where employees are working and whether the arrangement creates risk.

Summer Social Events Still Count as Workplace Events

Summer events can be good for morale. They can also create HR risk.

Barbecues, golf days, patio afternoons, client events, conferences, retreats and team outings may feel more relaxed than regular work. But if the event is employer-sponsored or connected to work, the organization’s conduct expectations still apply.

Alcohol is the most obvious issue. If alcohol is served, employers should think about intoxication, harassment, transportation, impaired driving, manager conduct, pressure to drink, inclusion of employees who do not drink, and how complaints will be handled. Managers should understand that they remain managers at social events. Their conduct sets the tone, and they may be expected to intervene if behaviour becomes inappropriate.

The summer event policy should be clear that harassment, discrimination, violence,

bullying and unsafe conduct are not acceptable at workplace-related events. It should also address whether alcohol will be served, whether drink limits or tickets will be used, whether safe transportation is available, whether non-alcoholic options are provided, and who is responsible for responding to concerns during the event.

Employers should also consider inclusion. Events built around alcohol, late nights or weekend availability may exclude employees in recovery, employees with religious restrictions, employees with caregiving responsibilities, employees with disabilities or employees who simply do not want to socialize in that way. An inclusive summer event does not have to satisfy every preference, but HR should avoid making alcohol or after-hours participation the centre of workplace culture.

A summer social event should not become the setting for the next harassment investigation.

Accommodation Requests Often Increase in Summer

Summer can generate accommodation and flexibility requests that managers may misread as personal convenience.

Childcare gaps are common when school ends. Employees may need flexibility because summer camps do not cover full workdays, childcare arrangements change weekly, or a child with a disability requires different support during school breaks. Employees with medical conditions may be more vulnerable to heat or smoke. Pregnant employees may need heat-related adjustments. Employees with disabilities may have difficulty commuting in extreme heat or smoke. Religious observances, family responsibilities and medical appointments may also affect schedules.

Managers should not be expected to decide complex accommodation issues alone. They should be trained to recognize when a request may involve human rights, disability, family status, pregnancy, religion or medical vulnerability, and then involve HR.

This does not mean every summer flexibility request must be approved. Employers can still consider operational requirements, coverage, safety, productivity and whether the requested arrangement is reasonable. But they need to assess the request properly rather than dismissing it as a seasonal preference.

The policy should tell managers what to do when an employee says they cannot work certain hours because of childcare, cannot safely perform outdoor work due to a medical condition, needs modified duties during heat events, or needs to work remotely because smoke is affecting a respiratory condition.

A good response is: “Let’s get HR involved so we can understand the need and look at workable options.” A poor response is: “Everyone is dealing with summer.”

Substance Use and Impairment Policies Should Be Refreshed

Summer can also increase impairment risk.

Long weekends, social events, outdoor work, heat, fatigue, alcohol, cannabis, recreational drug use and extended daylight can all affect workplace readiness. For safety-sensitive workplaces, this is especially important.

HR should review the organization’s substance use and impairment policy before summer events and busy operations begin. Employees should understand that reporting fit for work applies regardless of season, location or event. Managers should know how to respond when they suspect impairment. Safety-sensitive roles should have clear procedures. If alcohol is served at a work event, the employer should set

expectations before the event, not after something goes wrong.

The policy should also avoid stigmatizing addiction. An employee with a substance use disorder may have disability-related rights. HR should distinguish between misconduct, impairment at work, safety risk, accommodation and recovery support. That distinction matters in every season, but summer events can bring the issue forward.

Emergency Communication Should Be Tested Before It Is Needed

Summer conditions can change quickly.

Wildfire smoke can move into a region overnight. Heat warnings can arrive during a busy production period. Power outages can affect cooling systems. Severe weather can disrupt worksites. Roads can close. Outdoor events can be unsafe. Employees working remotely may be scattered across multiple locations.

HR should confirm that emergency communication procedures are current. Does the organization know how to reach employees quickly? Are phone numbers and emergency contacts updated? Do managers know who has authority to close a site, send employees home, move work indoors or switch to remote work? Are seasonal workers included in communication systems? Are remote workers receiving the same safety updates as onsite workers?

A policy that sits in a binder is not enough. The organization needs a communication process that works when conditions change.

This is especially important for employers with field crews, mobile employees, outdoor operations, multiple worksites or employees working alone.

The Summer HR Policy Audit

A practical summer policy audit should focus on the policies most likely to be tested.

Start with vacation scheduling. Confirm the request process, approval criteria, conflict rules, blackout periods, vacation during statutory holiday weeks and documentation expectations.

Review statutory holiday payroll. Confirm jurisdictional rules, eligibility, premium pay, substitute holidays, payroll coding and source deduction processes.

Update heat stress procedures. Identify high-risk roles, controls, rest and hydration practices, monitoring, supervisor responsibilities, symptom reporting and emergency response.

Review wildfire smoke procedures. Confirm air quality monitoring, communication, modified work, vulnerable worker accommodation, respiratory protection considerations and indoor air quality plans.

Refresh onboarding for students and seasonal workers. Ensure role-specific training, safety orientation, harassment prevention, emergency procedures and supervision are documented.

Clarify dress code and PPE expectations. Separate safety requirements from appearance standards and identify the accommodation process.

Review remote work location approvals. Require pre-approval for cottage work, out-of-province work and international work.

Update workplace event and alcohol policies. Set expectations for respectful conduct, alcohol service, transportation, manager responsibilities and inclusion.

Train managers on summer accommodation triggers. Make sure they escalate disability, pregnancy, family status, religious, medical and smoke or heat vulnerability concerns to HR.

Confirm emergency communication channels. Make sure all employees, including temporary and remote workers, can be reached quickly.

Finally, conduct a post-summer review. Look at complaints, payroll corrections, absences, heat concerns, smoke disruptions, vacation conflicts, event issues, accommodation requests and manager questions. Those data points will show which policies need deeper revision before the next summer.

The HR Takeaway

Summer operations fail when employers treat predictable seasonal issues as one-off exceptions.

Vacation conflicts are predictable. Statutory holidays are predictable. Heat is increasingly predictable. Wildfire smoke is increasingly foreseeable in many regions. Students and seasonal workers arrive every year. Dress code questions happen every year. Social events happen every year. Remote work requests rise when employees travel.

HR’s job is not to eliminate every summer complication. It is to reduce the risk of avoidable confusion.

The strongest summer HR policies are practical, not overbuilt. They tell managers what they can approve, what they must escalate, what must be documented and where payroll, safety, IT or HR need to be involved. They help employees understand expectations before conflict arises. They help the organization respond to heat, smoke, staffing pressure, vacation requests and social events with consistency.

Summer may feel informal. The workplace is not.

That is why Canadian employers should complete the policy tune-up before the heat, holidays, students, vacations, smoke and staffing pressure arrive.