TEMPORARY EMPLOYMENT SERVICES AND THE LAW

Temporary employment services (TES) are commonly referred to as labour brokers, in South Africa.

TES are regulated mainly by the Labour Relations Act, No 66 of 1995 (LRA) and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, No 75 of 1997 (BCEA).

Amendments to the LRA, which came into effect in January 2015, affect s198 and 198A of the act, and brought about changes to the way a relationship between a TES, its employees and its clients is regulated.

Some of the amendments and their interpretations have been tested in the courts and the outcomes of the interpretations has significant consequences on employers in South Africa.

WHAT IS A TEMPORARY EMPLOYMENT SERVICE?

The LRA defines a TES as:

"... any person who, for reward, procures for or provides to a client other persons who render services to, or perform work for, the client and who are remunerated by the temporary employment service."

MUST A TES REGISTER?

A TES must register to conduct business, but the fact that it is not registered is not a defence to any claim instituted in terms of s198A of the LRA, which is discussed below. The effective date of this requirement is yet to be proclaimed.

DOES THE LRA DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN TES EMPLOYEES?

The LRA contains general provisions that apply to a TES and all of its employees, and specific provisions that apply to the TES and its employees earning below the prescribed BCEA threshold. The threshold is currently R205,433.30 per annum. Section 198A of the LRA applies only to employees earning below the threshold. These employees are often considered to be vulnerable employees and are afforded additional protections in terms of s198A.

WHAT ARE TEMPORARY SERVICES?

The term "temporary services" is defined in the LRA as:

- Services limited to a fixed time period of not more than three months
- Where the employee is a substitute for a temporarily absent employee of another employer (ie the client of the TES)
- Where a collective agreement or sectoral determination designated a particular work category as a temporary service, or designated the maximum temporary period
WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN A TES AND AN INDEPENDENT CONTRACTOR OR SERVICE PROVIDER?

A person who is an independent contractor or service provider is not an employee of a client and is not a TES.

The employees of the independent contractor or service provider cannot claim that a TES relationship exists between the company outsourcing the work and the independent contractor or service provider rendering the service.

The employees of an independent contractor or service provider cannot be deemed employees of the company outsourcing the work, even after the expiry of the three-month period.

WHAT IS AN INDEPENDENT CONTRACTOR?

An independent contractor renders the service itself and does not provide labour to another.

An independent contractor is a person or entity undertaking to perform a specific service or task and on completion of the task or production of the result, its client pays the independent contractor for the result or product.

There is no employment (or even co-employment) relationship between the client and the independent contractor or any relationship between the employees of the independent contractor and the client.

WHAT DOES JOINT AND SEVERAL LIABILITY MEAN?

The TES and its client are jointly and severally liable if the TES contravenes a collective agreement it concluded with its employees in a bargaining council that regulates terms and conditions of employment or a binding arbitration award regulating terms and conditions of employment, the BCEA and/or a sectoral determination made in terms of the BCEA.

The employee may institute proceedings against the TES, the client of the TES, or both, where there is joint and several liability or where the employee (earning below the threshold) is deemed to be an employee of the client of the TES.

In addition, an employee may enforce an order or award made against the TES or the client against either party.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE REMUNERATION AND EMPLOYMENT CONTRACTS OF THE TES EMPLOYEE?

The TES must provide the employee with written particulars of employment that comply with s29 of the BCEA when the employee commences employment. If the TES fails to remunerate its employees placed with a client, the failure constitutes a breach of the BCEA, and the TES and its client are jointly and severally liable for payment of remuneration. After a three-month period of employment with the client, the TES and the client may elect to re-evaluate their commercial arrangement.

WHO ENFORCES THE PROVISIONS RELATING TO TEMPORARY EMPLOYMENT?

The Department of Labour may intervene.

A bargaining council which has jurisdiction over the client may enforce the provisions of an agreement concluded in the bargaining council relating to temporary employment.

The employees may seek relief in the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA).
WHAT IS “DEEMED EMPLOYMENT”? 

The LRA amendments (specifically s198A(3)(b)) introduced the concept of “deemed employment” in instances where TES employees, who earn below the threshold, do not perform a temporary service as defined in the LRA (ie where the TES employee is assigned to the client for longer than three-months, not as a substitute for a temporarily absent employee of the client, nor assigned to a particular work category designated by a collective agreement or sectoral determination as a temporary service).

In such circumstances, the employee is “deemed to be the employee of that client and the client is deemed to be the employer.” Unless the provisions in the LRA relating to fixed-term contracts in respect of employees earning below the threshold applies, the employees will be deemed to be employed on an indefinite basis by the client. In other words, the TES will no longer be considered to be the employer of the employee at the expiry of the three-month period.

WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF THE DEEMING PROVISION? 

In Assign Services (Pty) Limited v National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa and Others (CCT194/17) [2018] ZACC 22 (26 July 2018), the Constitutional Court considered the deeming provision created in s198A(3)(b) of the LRA. The court confirmed that there are two competing interpretations of the deeming provision as follows:

- Sole employer interpretation: once the deeming provision applies, the client becomes the sole employer of the employee(s).
- Dual employer interpretation: once the deeming provision applies, the TES and the client are dual employers of the employee(s).

The Constitutional Court held that the sole employer interpretation of the deeming provision is the correct interpretation. This interpretation ensures that the provision of temporary services is in fact temporary. After the expiry of the three-month period, the client becomes of the sole employer of the employee(s). The client is then under an obligation to ensure that the employee(s) are fully integrated into the workplace.

The effect of the deeming provision is therefore as follows:

- The TES is considered to be the employer of the placed employee until the employee is deemed to be the employee of the client. At that point the TES ceases to be considered as the employer of the placed employee.
- Once the deeming provision kicks in the client becomes the sole employer of the employee.
- The employee is deemed, subject to the provisions of the LRA relating to fixed-term contracts for employees earning below the threshold, to be the permanent employee of the client.

It is important to note that the judgment applies to TES employees earning below the BCEA earnings threshold, ie lower-paid employees. The judgment does not apply to “substitute” employees or fixed-term contract employees. However, TES employees who are employed on a fixed-term basis are covered by the judgment.

The judgment applies retrospectively – ie three months after the commencement of the Labour Relations Amendment Act, No 6 of 2014 (the LRAA). The LRAA came into force on 1 January 2015. Therefore, TES employees assigned to a client on 1 January 2015 are deemed employees of that client with effect 1 April 2015. At this stage, it is presumed that the deeming provision will be triggered by three continuous and consecutive months of work by the TES employee.
IS THERE A BAN ON LABOUR BROKING?
No. The intention of the amendments to the LRA was not to ban labour broking. The Assign Services judgment also does not ban labour broking. Read together, the amendments and the judgment is to protect lower-paid workers and to ensure that temporary services are truly temporary in nature.

WHAT CONDUCT WOULD AMOUNT TO AVOIDING THE DEEMING PROVISION?
Termination of the assignment of TES employees to a client, whether at the instance of the TES or the client, to avoid the deeming provision or because the employee exercised a right in terms of the LRA, will constitute a dismissal. This will particularly be the case where the client elects to terminate the employment of TES employees immediately after expiry of the three-month period.

MAY A CLIENT REQUEST THAT TES EMPLOYEES APPLY FOR PERMANENT POSTS AFTER THE DEEMING PROVISION APPLIES?
Once the client becomes the employer, by operation of law, there is no basis for the employees (earning below the threshold) to apply for their own positions that have been accorded to them by operation of law in terms of the deeming provision.

Conduct, such as subjecting deemed employees to job interviews for their own positions at the client, will be viewed as an ill-disguised attempt to undermine the status of the applicants as employees of the client.

IS THERE A TRANSFER OF EMPLOYMENT FROM THE TES TO THE CLIENT?
Once the deeming provision applies, there is no transfer of employment. The Assign Services judgment expressly finds that there is no transfer to a new employment relationship once s198A(3) (b) is triggered. Once the deeming provision applies, the deemed employees will automatically become the employees of the client.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF "NO LESS FAVOURABLE TREATMENT"?
In terms of s198A(5), an employee (earning below the threshold) deemed to be an employee of the client must be treated on the whole no less favourably than an actual employee of the client performing the same or similar work, unless the distinction is justifiable. This means that the client must treat the deemed employee on the whole not less favourably than its employees performing the same or similar work from the date upon which the employee becomes a deemed employee.

The Assign Services judgment states that once the deeming provision applies:
“The employee automatically becomes employed on the same terms and conditions of similar employees with the same benefits, the same prospects of internal growth and the same job security that follows.”

This part of the judgment differs slightly from the wording used in s198A(5). The judgment suggests that deemed employees need to be employed on the same terms and conditions as permanent employees performing the same of similar work. This is different to deemed employees being employed on terms and conditions that are “on the whole not less favourable” to permanent employees of the client. Included within terms and conditions of employment is remuneration and benefits (such as medical aid, bonuses, provident funds and any other benefit) that are granted to permanent employees by the client.

MAY A TES EMPLOY EMPLOYEES ON ANY CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT?
A TES may not employ any employee (above and below the threshold) on terms and conditions contrary to the various employment laws and collective agreements applicable to the client with whom the TES places the employee.
Section 6(1) of the Employment Equity Act, No 55 of 1998 (EEA) prohibits unfair discrimination against an employee on any of the grounds contained in this section. The reason for different treatment may, therefore, not be one that is prohibited in terms of s6(1) of the EEA as it would constitute unfair discrimination. A justifiable reason for different treatment for purposes of the EEA may include:

- seniority
- experience or length of service
- merit
- the quality or quantity of work performed
- any other criteria of a similar nature

WHO BEARS THE ONUS TO REINSTATE A TES EMPLOYEE AFTER AN UNFAIR DISMISSAL?

In the case of an unfair dismissal, where the client is the deemed employer of the TES employee, the client must reinstate the employee into employment with the client.

If the employee is not a deemed employee, the TES must reinstate its employees.

CAN AN EMPLOYEE ENFORCE AN AWARD AGAINST A CLIENT THAT WAS NOT CITED AS A PARTY TO THE DISPUTE IN WHICH THE AWARD WAS MADE IN FAVOUR OF THE DEEMED EMPLOYEE?

A deemed employee can enforce such order or award against the client, the TES, or both. The employee therefore, has a choice, however they should cite both the TES and client.

A client should obtain a suitable undertaking or indemnity from the TES against any adverse order that may impact the client. It is advisable that the TES, by agreement, should notify the client of any claim brought against the TES that may affect the client, thus allowing the client the option to participate in the proceedings.

In the event that a claim is brought solely against the TES, the client may request that the TES be joined as an interested party. However, the client may only do so if there is still a contractual relationship between the client and the TES.

WHEN WILL A TES RELATIONSHIP NOT EXIST?

If a company decides to outsource the work or service to an independent contractor or service provider, there is no TES relationship in existence.

Provided that there is a genuine outsourcing arrangement in place, the employees of the independent contractor or service provider may not claim a TES relationship with the client as their employer.

A TES triangular relationship may cease to exist where the TES and/or the client elect to terminate the commercial agreement between them.

WHAT IS OUTSOURCING?

Outsourcing is the strategic use of outside resources such as an independent contractor or a service provider which, independently from the client, perform activities or services required by the client. Outsourcing does not amount to a TES.

HOW DOES ONE ESTABLISH IF IT IS A RELATIONSHIP WITH A TES OR AN INDEPENDENT CONTRACTOR?

A TES provides employees to the client to render services to the client. An independent contractor renders a service to the client. The terms of an outsourcing agreement that covers specific work or services, how the parties are described in the agreement and other relevant terms of the agreement are indicative of an independent contractor arrangement.

If a fee is paid for the provision of a specialised service/task, it is indicative of an independent contractor arrangement while if the fee is paid for the provision of specific employees, it is indicative of a TES arrangement.

The relevance of some other factors are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EMPLOYEES OF A TES</th>
<th>EMPLOYEES OF A SERVICE PROVIDER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide labour directly to the client</td>
<td>Provide labour to the service provider or outsource company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject to the client’s control and supervision</td>
<td>Subject to the service provider or outsource company’s control and supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The TES or the client monitors individual employee’s performance</td>
<td>The client monitors the service provider’s performance against the service level agreement</td>
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The fact that the work is performed at the premises of the client is not in itself evidence of a TES relationship, as sometimes for operational necessity, work may have to be rendered on the premises of the client and not at the outsourced company’s premises.

ARE AUTOMATIC TERMINATION CLAUSES BETWEEN A TES AND ITS EMPLOYEES VALID?

There are many instances in which an employee’s continued employment is dependent upon the operational requirements of a client of the TES.

A typical clause in an employment contract of a TES employee may provide that the TES employee’s employment automatically terminates if the contract between the TES and its client comes to an end. This would amount to an automatic termination clause.

There are occasions when such clauses are, however, invalid. Advice should be sought around the inclusion of these in order to determine their validity.

WHAT IS THE GENERAL RULE IN RESPECT OF AUTOMATIC TERMINATION CLAUSES?

Our courts do not permit parties to contract out of the protections in the LRA against unfair dismissal through an automatic termination clause or otherwise.

WHEN IS AN AUTOMATIC TERMINATION CLAUSE VALID?

A TES must demonstrate, as must any other employer, that there was “a justifiable reason” for a fixed-term contract, as contemplated by s198B(3)(b) of the LRA, between the TES and its employee and that the fixed-term contract expired upon a fixed date or specified event. If the TES employer discharges that onus in reliance on the expiry of a fixed-term contract with its employee, the TES’s reliance on an automatic termination clause should succeed.
The following are relevant considerations for determining if there is a valid and justifiable fixed-term contract:

- The precise wording of the clause and the context of the entire agreement
- Whether the client or the employer unfairly used the clause to target a particular employee
- Whether the event that triggers the termination of the agreement between the TES and its client is based on proper economic and commercial considerations
- Whether the TES intended the clause to circumvent the TES’s fair dismissal obligations

There are some instances where an automatic termination clause that provides for the termination of the contract of employment on termination of the contract between the TES employer and the client have been held to be valid:

- Where the TES employer played no role in the client’s decision to terminate its contract with the TES
- Where the underlying cause of the termination is one for which employers typically dismiss employees. In this determination, one should have regard to the real reason for termination and not the form only
- Fixed-term contracts terminating on events other than the unilateral exercise of a client’s will are usually in the clear

MAY A TES RETRENCH ITS EMPLOYEES?

The TES may terminate the contract of an employee for operational requirements when the client terminates the contract between the TES and the client. The TES must, however, comply with the requirements in terms of s189.

Once the deeming provision applies, the TES will not be permitted to retrench the deemed employees. The client may elect to retrench deemed employees. However, the client must comply with the requirements in terms of s189. Severance pay will be calculated from the date upon which the TES employee was deemed to be the employee of the client.

The client must ensure that it does not retrench employees purely on the basis of the deeming provision. Such action will amount to a contravention of s198A(4) and, in all likelihood, constitute an unfair dismissal.

ORGANISATIONAL RIGHTS AND TES EMPLOYEES

A trade union is entitled to seek organisational rights in the workplace of an employer and a commissioner must consider the composition of the workforce at the workplace including employees of an independent contractor or TES.

The union may seek organisational rights in respect of the TES employees either at the workplace of the TES or that of the TES and one or more of its clients.

Each individual site of a client of a TES constitutes a workplace for the purposes of s21 of the LRA in which a union may exercise organisational rights.

Once the deeming provision applies, deemed employees will be permitted to join the union(s) and participate in union activities at the workplace of the employer.
MARKET RECOGNITION

Our Employment team is externally praised for its depth of resources, capabilities and experience.


The way we support and interact with our clients attracts significant external recognition.


The Legal 500 EMEA 2020 recommended Jose Jorge for employment.


Chambers Global 2020 ranked Michael Yeates as an up and coming employment lawyer. The Legal 500 EMEA 2020 recommended him for employment. ILO Client Choice Awards 2015-2016 named Michael the exclusive South African winner in the employment & benefits category. In 2018, he was named the exclusive South African winner in the immigration category.
BBBEE STATUS: LEVEL TWO CONTRIBUTOR
Our BBBEE verification is one of several components of our transformation strategy and we continue to seek ways of improving it in a meaningful manner.

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