

Workplace Domestic Violence Readiness



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About this package

Intimate partner violence (IPV) (domestic violence) is widely recognized in Canadian law as a workplace issue. Employment standards, occupational health and safety, human rights, privacy, and related regimes have, for well over a decade, imposed obligations on employers when IPV intersects with work.

In practice, however, IPV is still often treated as private or outside an employer's role. That gap shows up in uncertainty about legal duties, inconsistent responses to disclosure, and a reliance on policy language or improvisation in high-risk moments. The result is that risks go unaddressed, employees hesitate to seek support, and workplaces are left vulnerable.

This resource is intended to help close that gap by supporting **legally grounded, trauma- and violence-informed decision-making** in real workplace conditions.

It brings together three distinct but related tools:

1. A Trauma- and Violence-Informed (TVI) Workplace Response Self-Assessment
2. A Legal Awareness Self-Assessment (IPV & Employment Law)
3. A Practical 90-Day Roadmap for Building Workplace IPV Capability

Used together, these tools are designed to support judgment and implementation – not minimum-standard compliance. They are meant to help organizations understand where risk actually sits, how discretion needs to operate differently when IPV is involved, and how to move from awareness to coordinated, defensible practice.

You can move through the documents in order, or focus on the sections most relevant to your organization's current stage. Each tool is designed to stand on its own, while also contributing to a broader, more coherent approach to workplace IPV readiness.

These materials build on and complement existing evidence-based resources, including the work of the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children at Western University. They are provided for **education and capacity-building purposes only and do not constitute legal advice.**

Trauma- and Violence- Informed Workplace



Why this tool exists

A trauma- and violence-informed (TVI) approach recognizes that violence is often ongoing and shaped by structural inequity, identity, and context.

Gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV) or domestic violence, are not experienced evenly. Women, gender-diverse people, Indigenous and racialized workers, people with disabilities, migrant workers, remote workers, and precariously employed workers often face higher risk and fewer safe options.

You don't need to be an expert to apply TVI principles. This isn't about therapy or clinical expertise. It's about how you do your work in your role. The reality is that many Canadians have experienced trauma at some point in their lives – whether that be a car accident, IPV, workplace bullying, a traumatic emigration/immigration experience, or something else. And so, applying a TVI approach to your interactions with all employees will improve safety, trust, decision quality, and defensibility.

While this self-assessment focuses on IPV in the workplace, the principles also strengthen responses to investigations, accommodation, performance management, and other complex HR processes.

Ultimately, organizations make better, safer, more defensible decisions when they apply a TVI lens to their interactions with employees – for the benefit of the workforce and, ultimately, the organization itself.

How to use this tool

Rate each statement 1–5

1 = Not true

3 = Sometimes true

5 = Consistently true in practice

Reflect honestly on lived practice in your workplace.

1. Understanding violence ■

We are familiar with the non-physical forms of IPV	/5
We understand that many forms of IPV are ongoing/constant and follow the survivor to work	/5
We recognize how external, structural inequities shape safety and choices	/5
We understand how intersecting human rights grounds influence risk	/5
We understand the impact of IPV on behaviour and memory, which may also give rise to disability/ies within the meaning of human rights legislation	/5
Subtotal	/25



Understanding structural violence is an essential part of TVI support

Did you know?

Employment and H&S legislation in Canada refer to IPV variously as domestic violence, family violence, and interpersonal violence. They recognize many non-physical forms of harm, including:

- Emotional/psychological abuse, including coercive control

- Damage to property and pets
- Forced confinement
- Deprivation of basic necessities
- Stalking/harassment
- Financial abuse
- Human trafficking

2. Creating cultural safety

We have an IPV policy and program that demonstrate our understanding of IPV and tell employees what they can expect if they disclose	/5
We regularly train employees on the policy and procedures	/5
Employees are trained on how to safely check in with colleagues they're concerned about	/5
We communicate regularly about IPV, reducing stigma and normalizing help-seeking	/5
To mitigate the risk of burnout and vicarious trauma for managers and HR, we facilitate team-based debriefing, tap-in/out protocols, and other supports	/5
Subtotal	/25

TVI work is hard work

In order to have a sustainable TVI practice within your workplace, your managers and HR staff who are doing the work need support, too. That can look like:

- Regular debriefing to discuss challenges & lessons learned
- Team-based walk-throughs to identify potential trauma triggers
- Tap-in/out protocol with a buddy for when the work gets too hard
- Sufficient EAP/group benefits coverage



Regular debriefing can improve the survivors and managers' experience

3. Co-creating real choices ■

We build safety and accommodation plans with employee input, as opposed to imposing the plans on them	/5
Before finalizing plans, we “walk through” them with the employee to identify barriers	/5
Before substantive discussions, we remind employees what to expect going forward	/5
Before substantive discussions, we remind employees of the limits of confidentiality and our legal duty to report child abuse/neglect	/5
If an employee declines to participate, we recognize when health and safety legislation requires us to proceed – and we explain clearly what will happen, provide updates, and welcome re-engagement at any time	/5
Subtotal	/25



Pressure test choices to ensure they're real and accessible

Did you know?

Your legal duty to assess and reduce workplace risk doesn't depend on survivor participation. It's not uncommon for someone to hesitate, decline, or disengage – often for very real safety, financial, cultural, immigration, or family reasons.

A TVI approach means continuing your workplace responsibilities without closing the relationship, staying transparent, reducing harm, and letting the employee know they're welcome to re-engage when they're able.

4. Providing strengths-based support

We do not treat survivors as safety liabilities	/5
We do not present our response as charity, pity, or a personal favour	/5
We expressly acknowledge the strength it takes to survive and disclose IPV	/5
We recognize that coping mechanisms, such as substance use, often reflect the survivor's attempt to protect themselves in the best way they can, rather than a moral failing	/5
We ask the survivor how they have kept themselves safe and use that information as the foundation for safety planning	/5
Subtotal	/25

Try this

“You’ve shown a lot of strength in how you’ve managed this so far. We can build from that to create a safety plan together. We’ll move at a pace and approach that feels safe for you.”



Focusing on the survivor’s strengths can encourage ongoing co-creation of a safety plan

Interpreting your total score

75 - 100

Strong TVI Practice

Your organization meaningfully integrates TVI into how people are supported and how decisions are made, not just in policy statements. You're likely seeing benefits in the form of regular disclosures and requests for support, risks caught further upstream, and easier post-investigation resolutions.

Keep up the good work by taking steps to protect what you have. Schedule and track regular refresher training, debrief systems, and periodic review of your policy and procedures. Consider deepening capability in complex areas, such as supporting employees facing technology-facilitated abuse or intersecting human rights issues such as substance use disorders.

50 - 75

Growing & Improving

You're doing many things well. The philosophy is present. Your workers may already experience greater trust and stability than in most workplaces, but practice may still feel uneven.

Focus on strengthening consistency. Identify where gaps exist, like inconsistency among managers, locations, or departments. Support managers and HR with ready-to-apply guidance using examples that commonly arise in your workplace. Support and structure will move you from "we're doing well" to "this is embedded and reliable."

25 - 50

Developing

Your managers are generally aware of TVI principles, but your practice is likely still forming. For example, your leaders may want to help but not always know how, or your written policies may not be consistently translating into lived experience. This is where many thoughtful organizations are. This does not mean failure.

For next steps, consider prioritizing building confidence and skills in people managers and HR and providing them with the necessary supports to avoid burnout. Pair this with openly talking about IPV and other stigmatized issues to create environments where employees feel safe to seek support.

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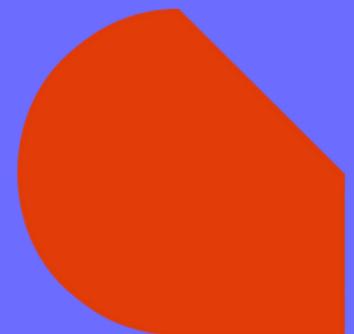
Early Stage

You may have policies or values that signal the right intentions, but TVI is not yet shaping real-world decisions. Employees may feel unsure if it's safe to disclose IPV or other stigmatized harm. There may be an unspoken reliance on individual goodwill rather than reliable systems or structures that guide managers in applying a TVI lens to their work.

This is not unusual, and it doesn't mean your organization doesn't care. It means you haven't yet built structures, capability, and confidence to show care well.

Get started with learning about the external reasons why violence is happening to a person, shifting away from wondering what's wrong with this person. Really understanding violence, especially structural violence, will lay the foundation for creating cultural safety, real choices, and strengths-based support.

Workplace IPV and Employment Law



Why this tool exists

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is often viewed as a private, personal matter. But when it intersects with work, it becomes a workplace issue and engages multiple areas of law.

IPV can affect how employment standards, health and safety, human rights, privacy, and child protection laws apply. It can also influence real-world decision-making, like where an instinctively “hard line” response may unintentionally increase harm or risk.

This self-assessment is designed as an educational awareness tool. It helps organizations reflect on two foundational governance questions:

1. Which legal duties may be engaged when IPV intersects with work?
2. How might discretion be exercised in these contexts so responses are safe, proportionate, and credible?

A strong workplace approach to IPV is legally grounded, operationally realistic, and informed by trauma- and violence-informed practice.

Because laws vary across Canada, this tool reflects widely recognized principles rather than jurisdiction-specific requirements. Organizations should ensure compliance with the laws that apply to them.

How to use this tool

Rate each statement 1–5

- 1 = Not true
- 3 = Sometimes true
- 5 = Consistently true in practice

Reflect honestly on lived practice in your workplace.

1. Employment standards ■

Policies clearly inform employees about paid and unpaid domestic violence leave and how to access it	/5
Managers and HR remind employees of the availability of domestic violence leave after disclosure or otherwise learning of IPV	/5
We understand that proof of eligibility for domestic violence leave (e.g. moving to a new address) may not always be available, and we know when to exercise discretion to waive proof requirements	/5
We understand that advance notice of domestic violence leave may not always be possible, and we know when to waive notice requirements	/5
We understand that proof of abuse is not a condition of eligibility for domestic violence leave, and we do not require proof of abuse	/5
Subtotal	/25



Moving to a safe home sometimes happens without advance notice

Did you know?

When administered well, domestic/family violence leave can stabilize finances and employment while meaningfully reducing safety risk. But many survivors don't access leave because they don't know it exists, are afraid to ask, or fear disbelief.

Research shows employers change outcomes simply by communicating clearly, applying discretion thoughtfully, and treating leave as a safety-support tool, not a grudging minimum obligation.

2. Occupational health & safety

IPV is addressed in our workplace violence & harassment programs	/5
We have completed an IPV risk assessment of our workforce that considers geography, demographics, privacy, and community context	/5
We recognize that many non-physical forms of IPV follow survivors to the workplace and may constitute "workplace harassment"	/5
We are familiar with escalating and lethal IPV risk factors, and we are comfortable with creating safety plans and emergency response	/5
We have a clear process to determine who, if anyone, needs to know the identity of a person causing harm and how to communicate this	/5
Subtotal	/25

Did you know?

IPV risk can be shaped by workforce demographics. For example, if you have many recent newcomers, unique vulnerabilities may include language barriers, limited access to community supports, and situations where immigration status is used as a tool of control.

This isn't about stereotyping but rather recognizing where risks may exist, so you can plan thoughtfully, reduce barriers, and be ready to respond when someone needs support.



Rural locations have unique risk factors including isolation, lack of resources, and more

3. Human rights & other supports ■

We recognize that siloed responses to IPV and intersecting human rights issues (e.g. disability or substance use disorder) are rarely effective, and we aim to respond in an integrated way where appropriate	/5
We understand that IPV may engage the protected ground of disability (e.g. concussion, other injury, PTSD, substance use disorder, etc.)	/5
We understand that IPV survivorship may be subsumed under the protected grounds of sex/gender, marital status, and/or family status	/5
Clear, responsible pathways exist to support employees who may be causing harm, alongside appropriate accountability structures	/5
We understand that terminating the person causing harm may increase financial hardship and violence at home, and we consider alternatives (e.g. last-chance agreements with referrals) where appropriate	/5
Subtotal	/25



Research shows a siloed approach to IPV and related disabilities are ineffective

Balancing empathy & accountability

Supporting an employee who may be causing harm is an essential part of catching IPV risk upstream. It's a fine (but often challenging) balance to strike between empathy without collusion and clear accountability.

Many people who use violence are navigating trauma, mental health challenges, substance use, or deeply ingrained beliefs about entitlement. Few seek help on their own, but many will accept it when offered.

4. Privacy, reporting & criminal justice

We have a clear process that limits sharing IPV-related information to only those who need to know, supported by privacy & security controls	/5
We understand that privacy laws generally permit the disclosure of personal information if there is a risk of serious harm to health or safety and disclosure is reasonably necessary to reduce/eliminate risk	/5
We understand that exposing a child to IPV is itself a form of family violence and may trigger a legal duty to report to a children's aid society	/5
Our policies explain the duty to report child risk, and we provide reminders before substantive discussions to support informed choices	/5
We align safety planning with any concurrent criminal procedures (e.g. investigations, peace bonds) while understanding our role & boundaries	/5
Subtotal	/25

The confidentiality myth

Employees trust organizations that are honest about limits, not those who promise confidentiality they can't legally provide. Breaches of trust and safety failures arise because managers overpromise privacy or avoid action out of fear of "sharing too much."

Good practice means being clear in advance, limiting information to those who truly need to know, acting proportionately, and framing decisions around safety, as opposed to secrecy.



Decision trees facilitate quick and safe responses while controlling privacy risks

Interpreting your total score

75 - 100

Strong Legal Awareness

Your organization has a strong understanding of how IPV intersects with employment laws. Decisions likely demonstrate an appreciation for how discretion operates in complex, high-risk situations, including when rigid application of a rule may create greater risk than it resolves.

Next steps: protect and refine this maturity. Deepen shared understanding among HR, Legal, and Health & Safety of how discretion, proportionality, and documentation support defensibility in edge-case situations (e.g. privacy in emergencies or balancing accountability with human rights obligations).

50 - 75

Developing Legal Awareness

You have a solid grasp of the relevant legal landscape, and your organization is generally oriented toward lawful, well-intentioned responses. Some uncertainty or inconsistency may remain, often around when and how to exercise discretion, how far privacy protections extend, or how different laws interact.

Next steps: strengthen confidence and consistency. Focus on building shared understanding of how to apply the law and exercise discretion in ways that are proportionate, risk-informed, and defensible. You might consult your lawyer to review assumptions, clarify gray areas, and align decision-making frameworks.

25 - 50

Emerging Legal Awareness

Your organization is aware that legal obligations exist, but translating that awareness into confident, repeatable practice may still be developing. Leaders may apply policies too rigidly, rely on ad hoc judgment, or hesitate out of concern about “getting it wrong,” which can inadvertently increase legal or reputational risk.

Next steps: prioritize legal clarity. Focus on understanding how employment standards, health and safety, human rights, and privacy laws intersect when IPV is involved, and where and how discretion may function within those frameworks. This foundation supports safer, more consistent decision-making.

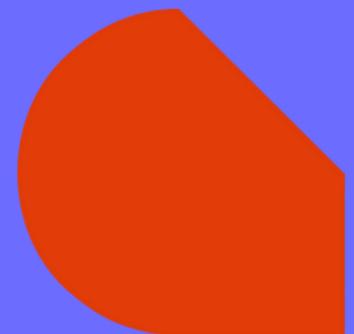
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Early Awareness Stage

Many organizations fall into this range, particularly if IPV has not previously been understood as a workplace issue with legal implications. But interest in this self-assessment is a positive sign of advancement. In practice, organizations at this early stage may face uncertainty or rely too heavily on policies that were not designed for IPV-related situations, which may increase risk or undermine trust.

Next steps: begin by building foundational legal awareness. Your lawyer can help you identify the key legal duties that may be engaged when IPV shows up at work and clarify how they interact. From there, develop simple, practical processes that help leaders respond lawfully, proportionately, and with greater confidence in real situations.

Building a Workplace DV Program That Works



Why this roadmap exists

Most organizations care deeply about safety, but many do not yet have a functioning, trusted workplace response to intimate partner violence (IPV). Policies may exist, but consistency, confidence, coordination, and legal clarity often do not. The result is that leaders worry about “getting it wrong,” employees feel unsure what will actually happen if they disclose, and organizations are left improvising in high-risk moments.

This roadmap helps organizations take meaningful, realistic steps in their first 90 days. It’s not about doing everything but rather building:

- **legitimacy** – IPV is recognized as a real workplace responsibility
- **clarity** – people understand what will happen and why
- **capability** – the organization knows how to respond without panic
- **trust** – employees believe disclosure will not cause harm
- **sustainable practice** – systems carry the work (relying exclusively on “heroic” individuals often ends in burnout)

A credible workplace IPV approach recognizes that harm is often ongoing, that safety and choice are shaped by structural (external) inequity and power, and that workplaces have important responsibilities without becoming substitutes for community expertise or support services. It also recognizes that responses grounded in trauma- and violence-informed practice strengthen fairness, evidence quality, legal defensibility, and decision-making.

How to use this tool

Move roughly in order.

Adapt to your organization.

Aim for meaningful, achievable progress.

Resist perfection-driven inertia.

Every step can be right-sized for your organization’s scale, risk profile, and resources.

Phase 1: Days 1-30 ■

This phase is about building legitimacy, leadership clarity, and structure. The **goal** is to move IPV readiness beyond good intentions towards real organizational work.



Step 1 - Secure visible leadership commitment

Outcome: IPV is recognized as a legitimate workplace responsibility and a business priority.

Core Actions:

- Brief senior leadership on legal duties, organizational risk, cultural impact, and business case
- Identify an executive sponsor
- Clarify where this work lives

What “Good” Looks Like: A senior leader says something like, “This matters. This is part of how we keep people safe and run a responsible organization. We will resource this work.”

C Suite buy-in is critical to the success of a workplace IPV program

Step 2 - Establish a cross-functional implementation group

Outcome: IPV is not “HR’s problem.”

Core Participants (adapt to size & context as appropriate):

- HR
- Health & Safety
- Legal
- Security
- Facilities
- IT
- Comms
- Operations
- Union

Key Deliverables:

- Named members
- Clear responsibilities
- Meeting schedule
- Escalation pathways

What “Good” Looks Like:

- The right people are in the room
- Emotional & structural load is shared across the team
- People know what to do when a report of IPV comes in anywhere



A multi-disciplinary team facilitates timely, safe responses

Phase 2: Days 31-60 ■

This phase is about building trust, policy infrastructure, and cultural safety. The **goal** is for people to know that your IPV program is real, support exists, and disclosure won't cause harm.



Step 4 - Develop or strengthen your IPV policy

Outcome: Employees believe it's safe to disclose.

Your policy should:

- Name IPV explicitly, either in your existing workplace violence policy or in a standalone IPV policy
- Explain what happens if someone discloses
- Clarify confidentiality and legal boundaries
- Align with employment standards, workplace violence/harassment requirements, human rights obligations, and privacy expectations

What "Good" Looks Like: A manager can say to an employee, "Here's what you can expect for next steps. Here's what I can and cannot keep confidential. We will do this with you."

Trust leads to less resistance, which leads to faster, safer responses

Step 5 - Build awareness & normalize conversation

Outcome: Silence doesn't undermine safety

Core Actions:

- Communicate clearly and regularly about IPV
- Name IPV as a workplace concern
- Identify safe points of contact
- Train employees on the contents of the IPV policy and how to check in with each other

What "Good" Looks Like:

- This isn't whispered about, sensationalized, or shame/charity-based
- Employees feel comfortable approaching a colleague with care when abuse is suspected/witnessed
- Employees see that management understands IPV and will take meaningful mitigative/responsive action



You don't need to wait for October (or for a certain telecom company) to start an awareness campaign at work.

Step 6 - Prepare for the first conversation

Outcome: The first conversation opens the door to a viable mitigation/response strategy.

Core Actions:

- Prepare managers and HR for intake conversations, grounded in trauma- and violence-informed practice
- Clarify tone, expectations, and boundaries
- Build basic conversation guides

What “Good” Looks Like:

- No one panics or freezes
- Employees are met with steadiness, clarity, and dignity
- Employees are willing to participate in a risk assessment and to co-create a safety plan
- Where employees are not willing, leaders can confidently share next steps with them and invite re-engagement at any time



The goal of the first conversation is to open the door and keep it open.

Phase 3: Days 61-90 ■

This phase is about building capability and a sustainable, safety-responsive practice. The **goal** is for your organization to move from intention to safe, coordinated action.



Step 7 - Build capability for risk assessment & safety planning

Outcome: You can respond meaningfully without delay.

Core priorities:

- Leaders are comfortable with conducting their own, initial risk assessment
- Safety planning evolves over time, in keeping with dynamic risk factors
- Clarity about leaders' roles, limits, and when external expertise or authorities need to be engaged

What "Good" Looks Like:

- No guesswork
- Realistic planning
- Understanding that safety may change day to day

Some IPV risk factors are dynamic and require adjustments to safety planning.

Step 8 - Extend safety beyond the office walls

Outcome: Safety isn't limited to the employer's physical premises.

Consider:

- Commuting
- Remote work
- Digital security risks
- Facility access
- Coordination with external service providers (e.g. shelter, transportation provider)

What "Good" Looks Like:

- The organization doesn't protect someone only at their desk
- Planning reflects the real world, ensuring continuity with external service providers or touchpoints



Stalking is a common and high-risk form of IPV that shows up at work, leaving survivors vulnerable when going to/from the workplace.

Step 9 - Sustain the work

Outcome: The program doesn't fade after launch

Core Actions:

- Build review cycles
- Create debrief processes
- Support those doing the work (e.g. tap in/out protocols, buddy systems, EAP/benefits access)
- Maintain leadership attention

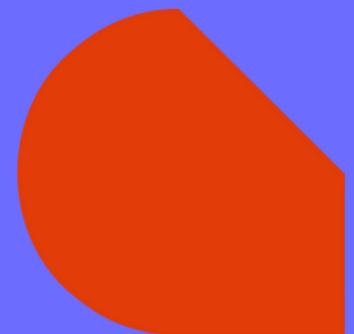
What "Good" Looks Like:

- The work remains resourced
- Communications are consistent and ongoing
- Learning strengthens practice
- Systems (not individuals) carry the work



The long-term objective is for your workplace IPV program to be embedded in your ecosystem.

Closing



Next steps

Creating a meaningful workplace IPV program is an ongoing, iterative process. It works best when you go at a pace that's sustainable, given the resources available. Depending on where you are in your journey, you might consider one of the following next steps.

1. Deepen understanding using trusted public resources

In addition to the tools in this document, many organizations find it helpful to draw on well-established, evidence-informed public resources.

Two particularly strong (and free) Canadian resources include:

- **dvatwork.ca**, developed by the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children at Western University, the Canadian Labour Congress, and FETCO. It offers organizational readiness tools, workplace IPV policy templates, and risk assessment and safety planning resources.
- **EQUIP Health Care's** free online training on trauma- and violence-informed care, developed in collaboration with Western University, UBC, and the University of Northern British Columbia. Although healthcare-focused, the principles translate well to workplace contexts and are often grounding for leadership and HR teams.

Because many public resources are drafted from a federal or sector-specific perspective, organizations should still consider how IPV-related obligations apply within their own jurisdiction and integrate with existing workplace violence, accommodation, privacy, and reporting processes.

2. Engage structured support when you're ready to move beyond reflection

For organizations ready to move beyond reflection into structured action, I support leadership teams in building approaches that actually work in real workplaces.

A typical starting point is an **IPV Legal & Organizational Readiness Alignment Session**. This is a practical, working session designed for HR, Health & Safety, legal, and senior leadership.

This session helps your organization:

- clarify your legal duties across employment standards, OHS, human rights, privacy, and reporting considerations
- understand how legal judgment and discretion might operate differently when IPV is involved
- assess where your current policies, systems, and lived practice align and where real gaps and risks exist
- build a shared language and coordinated approach across functions
- leave with a clear, prioritized roadmap for the next stage of capacity building

About the author



I'm Rika Sawatsky (she/her), a Toronto-based employment lawyer and workplace investigator.

A core focus of my practice is helping employers respond to IPV as a workplace issue. I regularly speak and teach on workplace sexual harassment, IPV, and trauma- and violence-informed practice, including delivering national webinars for Western University's Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children (CREVAWC).

My broader practice sits at the intersection of employment law, human rights, behavioural science, and workplace systems design. I work with organizations that want their approach to fairness to be legally sound, operationally realistic, and capable of holding up under pressure.

I support employers across Canada through:

- employment law advice
- neutral, trauma- and violence-informed fair workplace investigations
- training grounded in adult learning principles and workplace-specific context
- inclusive workplace and systems design, including IPV readiness work

Services are provided remotely across Canada.

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