

ELECTRONIC SIGNATURES IN BELGIUM

WHAT IT MEANS FOR HR?



What is an electronic signature?

- ▶ An electronic signature is a technical process logically associated with a document in which two (or more) individuals or organizations (the signatories) agree to rely on in order to express their intent to sign.
- ▶ Three components are necessary: a document, a signatory and an e-signature tool. While the tool most commonly used for handwritten signatures is a simple pen, electronic signature tools are more complex.
- ▶ The term "electronic signature" is a broad category that encompasses many types (or levels) of electronic signatures. Depending on the country it is used in, there are differences in purpose, technical implementation, legal and cultural acceptance of electronic signatures.
- ▶ Most civil law countries (including the EU and most countries in South America and Asia) support a "tiered" approach with higher levels of signature called digital or qualified electronic signatures.
- ▶ Most common law jurisdictions (US, Canada, Australia, etc.) are typically more technology-neutral.
- ▶ In addition, specific industries (e.g. healthcare or banking) or specific documents (e.g. marriage or adoption contracts) often require a higher level of e-signature or handwritten signature.



What are the laws and regulations in Belgium?

On July 1, 2016, Regulation (EU) No 910/2014 on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market (the "eIDAS Regulation") came into force and replaced the former EU Directive on electronic signatures (1999/93/EC). The eIDAS Regulation, directly applicable in the member countries of the European Union, brought uniformity - and much needed clarity - among the EU member states' local legislation on electronic signatures.

In Belgium, most employment contracts are not required to be in writing and can be signed electronically. When an electronic signature is used, both the employer and employee must agree to execute the signature electronically (Law on employment contracts, 3 July, 1978, Art. 3).

Note: There are a few cases where it may be more practical to use an ink signature at this time. Student contracts and employment contracts of a specific duration are both required to be in writing by law, and only electronic signatures which are created by the electronic identity card will have the same validity as the handwritten agreement. In practice, a scanned version of a hand-signed document is often provided by employers during inspections or legal proceedings in these cases, and the validity is rarely contested.

Belgium's rules are expected to be updated to better align with the eIDAS regulation in the future (a Royal Decree with specified security conditions is expected).



Are electronic signatures valid?

Yes! Not only e-signatures are valid ...



Under eIDAS, a valid electronic signature may be **simple**, **advanced** or **qualified**.

All three levels of signature are legally **valid** and defensible in court.

However, the **probative value** (ie. how easily the validity of the signature can be proven in court) will vary depending on the type (or level) of electronic signature as illustrated by the graph.

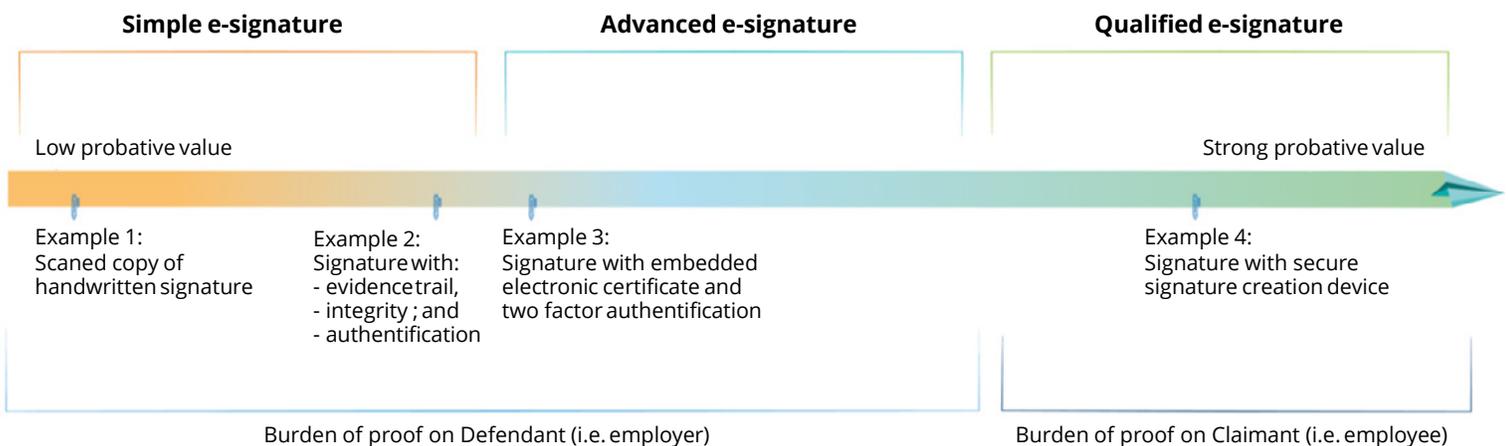
... But they are actually more secure

E-signatures almost always offer higher guaranties than handwritten signatures, regardless of the level of the e-signature being used:

-the **evidence trail** associated with superior electronic signature tools will allow defendant to prove the validity of the signature.

-the use of time-stamping and encryption technologies will provide a much higher level of confidence in the **integrity** of an electronically-signed document compared to the limited level of protection provided by a handwritten original (unless notarized).

Probative value scale



For **simple and advanced electronic signatures**, it is the employer's responsibility to bring evidence of the validity of the signature if an employee challenges the document.

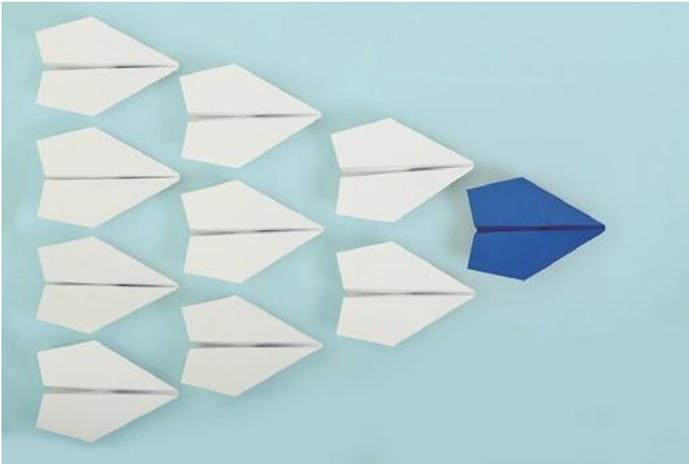
Advanced signature solutions typically offer a more robust evidence file in that regard than simple e-signatures solutions.

Qualified electronic signatures offer the same probative value as a handwritten signature ► it is the responsibility of the party challenging the validity of the signature (most likely the employee) to bring evidence of the signature's invalidity.

What level of e-signature is recommended for HR documents?

The vast majority of HR-related documents are suitable for simple or advanced electronic signatures. Simple and advanced electronic signature are recommended for documents with a risk factor ranging from low to medium. These are often external documents with limited risk and typically include employment agreements, company policies, employee handbook, performance reviews, expense report, etc.

Qualified electronic signatures or handwritten signatures would only be justified in limited cases for very sensitive documents such as credit or life insurance agreements or when specifically required by law (e.g. specific healthcare documents).



HR Best Practices

Many employers elect to use different electronic signature solutions depending on the type of document being signed.

In Europe, customers typically use an advanced electronic signature for employment agreements as well as other HR-related agreements, and rely on a strong simple e-signature solution for other less sensitive HR documents such as policies and performance reviews.

However, this decision also depends on an employer's internal culture and its level of risk-adversity.



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