

Is there a difference in meaning between ‘(a type of) processing’, ‘processing operation’ and ‘processing activity’? And if so, what are the implications thereof for the scope of the DPIA in the EDPB’s DPIA Template?

The EDPB DPIA Guidelines¹ and article 35 of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) state (mostly) that a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) addresses a *processing (operation)*. However, the EDPB DPIA Template (publication date: 14 April 2026) speaks about ‘processing activity’ in the paragraph where one can choose and explain the reason to conduct the DPIA (pages 5 and 6 of the Word-document). But in the following pages the template asks for a description of ‘the processing’ (page 7 and further). It seems that the DPIA Template sees ‘(a type of) processing’, ‘processing operation’ and ‘processing activity’ as synonyms, whereas in the earlier mentioned EDPB DPIA Guidelines and the GDPR (and Directive 2016/680, the Law Enforcement Directive) itself it seems that these wordings (‘processing’, ‘processing operation’, ‘processing activity’) have a slightly different meaning, although it must be said that the (presumed) difference may be very subtle. The phrase ‘processing activity’, however, is mostly used regarding the register of processing activities as meant in article 30 GDPR.

Our questions are therefore as follows:

- Is there a difference in meaning regarding the concepts of ‘(a type of) processing’, ‘processing operation’ and ‘processing activity’? Consequently: what is the exact scope of ‘a processing’, regarding the definition in article 4(2) GDPR, and what should then be the scope of the DPIA?
- Should a DPIA (only) address the processing (operation) which is likely to result in a high risk to the rights and freedoms of natural persons? Or should a DPIA be conducted regarding the processing activity wherein a specific processing (operation) is likely to result in a high risk to the rights and freedoms of natural persons?

An example to clarify our above questions:

A supermarket chain has a simple recruitment process. Job vacancies are posted on their website, and candidates can apply online by uploading a cover letter and a CV and indicating their current salary. When the supermarket chain wants to hire a candidate, an HR advisor makes a salary offer to the candidate based on a manual analysis of the candidate’s work experience, the candidate’s current salary, the salaries of employees in the team the candidate will join, and the state of the labour market. The entire recruitment process is recorded as a single processing activity in the register of processing activities, with the processing purpose of recruiting candidates.

At some point the supermarket chain acquires an AI tool. When the supermarket chain wants to hire a candidate, this AI tool will now make a proposal for an appropriate salary based on an automated analysis of the candidate’s work experience, the candidate’s current salary, the salaries of employees in the team that the candidate would join, and the state of the labour market. The privacy officer of this supermarket chain believes that, because of the automated profiling of candidates, a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) must be carried out. The privacy officer recommends using the EDPB’s DPIA template.

The supermarket chain wonders what the scope should be of the ‘processing’ that is to be described in the EDPB’s DPIA template. One of the privacy officers thinks that only the processing operations that are likely to result in a high risk to the rights and freedoms of natural persons, which is the processing of personal data via the AI tool (including the origin of the input and the use of the output), should be described. Another privacy officer thinks that the whole processing activity relating to the recruitment process in which the AI tool is used should be described, which also includes the candidate’s application on the website, the manual review of cover letters and CVs, the email communication with the candidate regarding the application process and the hiring or rejection decision, etcetera, even though these processing operations are not likely to result in a high risk to the rights and freedoms of natural persons.

We would very much like to see this clarified in the EDPB Template and/or other guidance of the EDPB.

Kind regards,
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¹ wp 248 rev.01, last revised and adopted on 4 october 2017.