

EPO staff survey: concerns about quality, low confidence in management, lack of respect

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Only two thirds of EPO staff are proud to work at the European Patent Office. Four in ten say they face substantial obstacles to doing their job well. They have a very negative view of management effectiveness, with low confidence in senior management decisions, lack of clarity about direction, and insufficient contact between senior management and staff. Concerns are high about the Office's commitment to quality, and about its reputation and service focus. The majority of staff have autonomy to do their work, but far fewer think it is safe to speak up, or feel encouraged to contribute new ideas. There is little evidence of a 'continuous improvement culture' in the Office.

These are the most important conclusions of 'Your voice, our future: The EPO Staff Engagement Survey'. The results of the survey, carried out by [Willis Towers Watson](#), were published in a report which was distributed among staff last week.

The survey was held at the start of this year in order to 'establish a baseline to measure progress as the new EPO strategy is rolled out from summer 2019 onwards; give EPO staff a chance to have their say at an important time for the Office; compare results with relevant external benchmarks: WTW's Europe Norm [which comprises 360 companies and 2,028,911 employees, ed.] and Professional Services Norm [which comprises 23 companies and 187,296 employees].' 85% of employees (5675) took the opportunity to express their opinion, which is 'a strong response rate providing reliable and representative data'.



According to the report, 'staff recognise that their pay and benefits are competitive. Views are also positive about issues impacting staff well-being (e.g. work schedule flexibility, workload/staffing, manager care for staff well-being), but results are below external benchmarks on all other categories.'

Discontent

The report seems to be a strong confirmation of what has been communicated over the last nine months through various channels: despite the leadership change at the EPO - where the authoritarian president Benoit Battistelli was succeeded in July 2018 by António Campinos, chosen for his qualities as people's manager, among others - the social climate hasn't improved. Many employees don't trust the senior management at all.

Recently, there has been a lot of discontent among staff about a sudden surge in the number of negative performance reports received by examiners. Staff representatives have estimated several hundreds of examiners received such negative reports for no clear reason. In the past this figure was never higher than several dozens. There are also concerns about plans to change the pension system with no sufficient consultation and involvement of EPO staff.

Also, despite the encouragement of president Campinos to his staff to reach amicable settlements for old labour conflicts, there is no sign whatsoever that the EPO management is seriously looking for a solution for high-profile cases, of for instance former member of the Central Staff Committee and SUEPO leader Laurent Prunier, who was dismissed over three years ago. As the SUEPO wrote in a recent letter to its members (see [here](#)): 'So far the Office has not reconsidered Laurent's unlawful dismissal and the Tribunal [the Administrative Tribunal of the ILO] is unlikely to grant him relief before the end of 2019. Laurent is sick, remains unable to work, and thus without independent income.'

Major declines around quality, reputation, respect

In comparison with a similar survey in 2011, the report 'Your voice, our future: The EPO Staff Engagement Survey' signals 'major declines around quality, reputation, service focus, management/staff contact, and respect at work.' Earlier this year, only 30 percent (-35) of staff reacted favourably to the phrase: 'The Office's commitment to quality is apparent in what we do on a day-to-day basis'; 'There is sufficient contact between senior management (PD and above) of my DG /BoA Unit and staff: 19 percent (-24) (Europe norm 57 percent).

Some other striking results:

'I have confidence in the decisions made by senior management (PD and above).' 16 percent favourable (Europe norm 66 percent)

'Senior management (PD and above) communicates the reasons for important decisions effectively.' 13 percent favourable (Europe norm 56 percent)

'Sufficient effort is made to get the opinions of staff in the Office.' 21 percent favourable (Europe norm 59 percent)

'It is safe to speak up at work.' 27 percent favourable (Europe norm 66 percent)

'The Office has established a good reputation for the quality of its services.' 61 percent favourable. In 2011 it was 87 percent. (Europe norm 82 percent)

'All staff are treated with respect here.' 39 percent favourable (Europe norm 75 percent), 49 percent unfavourable.

'The Office is effective in identifying the changes that are necessary for our long-term success.' 20 percent favourable. (Europe norm 56 percent)

'Aspects of the EPO culture support well-being, but nearly 50% do not think that all staff are treated with respect. Further investigation is advisable on what lies behind this result, as it is also the most frequently mentioned topic in the comments about what would make the biggest difference to the Office as a place to work', according to the survey.

The report recommends the EPO to build greater confidence in senior management by creating 'regular channels/forums for upward feedback (...) (in particular among the Examiner population)', to focus on personal development, empowerment and external reputation and to 'create a culture of continuous improvement by creating opportunities for staff to speak up and to contribute to innovation.'

The results of the report will be discussed at all levels at the EPO in April and May, which should lead to the launch of a strategic plan and initiatives in June and, from July onwards, to the 'integration of actions into yearly goals, implementation, monitoring and communication of progress'. In 2021 a new survey will be held.