

Survey: EPO working conditions continue to deteriorate

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Less than one out of three employees at the EPO are satisfied with their working life, according to a survey on psychosocial risks which was carried out for the Staff Union of the EPO. 66% of the respondents in the survey said their working conditions have deteriorated over the last 3 years, and 63% perceive a negative impact of work on their health.

According to the [results of the survey](#), carried out by the French group Technologia, the situation at the EPO is deteriorating for various reasons, partly depending on the site, Job Group or Directorate General, but the lack of time is increasingly mentioned. 72% of respondents mentioned this as, against 43% in the 2016 edition of the survey. Other factors are decisions of management (83%), poor atmosphere (58%), lack of consideration (51%), difficulty of the work (16%), ergonomics of the workplace (12%).



"As a result, the quality of the work is greatly affected. The impossibility of carrying out one's tasks and doing quality work also impacts on the health of employees, particularly in terms of psychological distress", according to a summary of the results.

Some other responses to the survey:

- "I consider that the roadmap defined by the 'Strategic Plan 2023' is important and necessary for the future of the EPO": 44% totally or tends to disagree, 36% is neutral, 19% tends to or totally agrees.
- "I consider the following measures important and necessary for the future of the EPO": Giving more time to staff to provide quality work 88%, Moving from an HR policy based on production pressure and fear for punishment to an HR policy that focuses... 84%, Making the new career (allocation of "rewards") fairer and more transparent (74%), Improving IT tools (73%).
- "The information I receive from Staff Representation is relevant for my work and to me personally": 48% tends to agree, 29% totally agrees.
- "Do you consider that the introduction of a performance-related bonus at the level of the individual employee is a good thing for the quality of the work produced by the European Patent Office?": 68% totally disagrees, 25% tends to disagree, 8% tends to or totally agrees.
- "I would recommend the EPO as an employer to a friend": 35% totally disagrees, 31% tends to disagree, 21% is neutral, 11% tends to agree, 2% totally agrees.

In several responses it becomes clear that the harshest confrontations and deepest divisions between management and staff, from the period of former EPO president Benoit Battistelli, have decreased. In the 2016 version of the Technologia survey, 68% of respondents disagreed they totally disagreed and 22% tended to disagree (together 90%! with the statement "I support the strategy of the EPO set out by top management". In 2020, these numbers are 35% and 32%. Still, only 9% tended to or totally agreed in 2020. The results below show that, also under the leadership of EPO president António Campinos, the relations are still far from healthy.

- "The actions of the EPO's top management show that they are fully aware of the strategic importance of employees' skills (...)": 42% totally disagrees (65% in 2016), 36% tends to disagree (25%).
- "Our current top management has shown that they are interested in an honest and constructive dialogue with the staff representation about important issues that concern staff": 44% totally disagrees (90% in 2016), 33% tends to disagree (9%), 15% is neutral (1%), 8% tends to agree (0%) and 1% totally agrees (0%).
- "In my view, the actions of top management and the strategy adopted have departed considerably from the role that the EPO should be playing in the European patent system": 31% tends to agree (22% in 2016), 34% totally agrees (49%).

Some responses to questions about workload, moreover, were more negative in 2020 than in 2016:

- "I am required to work very fast": 36% tends to agree (43% in 2016), 57% totally agrees (47%).
- "My workload is excessive": 36% tends to agree (37% in 2016), 42% totally agrees (31%).

The survey was carried out in February and March 2020. "Of the Office's 6.545 staff members, 3.124 were invited to answer the questionnaire, and 1,759 participated. The participation rate is therefore 56.3% of those invited, and 26.9% of EPO staff." SUEPO wasn't allowed to use the epo mail addresses of staff members for the survey, so it had to gather private mail addresses.

The questions of the survey were almost identical to those in 2010, 2013 and 2016 editions. According to the report, "the participation rate was negatively impacted by the period of the Covid 19 health crisis in Europe and the lockdown periods implemented in various countries." According to SUEPO, it sent the survey to EPO president Campinos and the Administrative Council, but there was no reaction. In answer to a query by Kluwer IP Law, an EPO spokesman said the EPO didn't wish to comment on the survey.

When António Campinos took office over two years ago, it was hoped he would normalize social relations at the EPO after the Battistelli years. The survey shows that is not the case, and in the last months there have been signs of rising tensions. Last December, for the first time under the presidency of Campinos, a strike was held. The SUEPO wrote to its members it would be the start of a year of social conflict.