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THE EVOLUTION OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE

THE PRESENT, THE FUTURE, AND THE GENDER ROLES IN BETWEEN.



**4 DAY WEEK:
A UTOPIA WORTH
FIGHTING FOR**



**BALANCING ACT:
WOMEN IN
TRADE UNION**



**THE POWER
OF DISCONNECTING
AND ANNUAL LEAVE**



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BALANCING ACT : WOMEN REDEFINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN TRADE UNIONS

EDITORIAL



Welcome to the 90th edition of Agora. The theme of this edition is "The Evolution of Work-Life Balance". This theme is important, very actual, and all-encompassing. This is reflected by the length of this Agora, longer than usual, thanks to the numerous and enthusiastic contributors.

The quasi sacrality of work is embedded in the Western civilization. Since the advent of Christianity labor has been seen as a way to a better life and to elevate humanity to higher ideals. The reasons for this, besides the religious aspects, might have been the need to reevaluate work in the eyes of the masses, following the fall of the Roman empire, and its slave labor-based economy. However, work was not seen as an entity of its own, but as a part, a complement and a fulfilling element of life. With the advent of capitalism and industrialization in the 18th century, work became the engine of progress and was revered as such. It allowed to generate more products, money, prestige and power (at least for a few), but it did not necessarily bring a better life for the many. In the 20th century the importance of work was not only recognized in the capitalistic world, but by reflection, also in the socialistic world (e.g., "Stakhanovism"). The centrality of labor is still present today in our societies and is even stated in some constitutions (e.g., Italian Constitution, Article 1). Although work is without any doubts a fundamental pillar of our societies, it is not a goal in itself, but only a means to a better life, a better society and a better future.

The notion of work-life balance is relatively recent and can be traced back to the mid 19th century and the first unions and industrial actions. Before that time, the only work-life balance measures were inspired by religious precepts, when followed, like the 6 days week and the religious celebrations. From the mid of the 19th century till today the number of working hours per day and per week have decreased almost universally. Similarly concerning the annual leaves, the number of leave days have increased from nil up to the present 2 to 6 weeks of annual leave, depending on the country and other parameters. What is striking and less generally known is that the pressure to reduce the number of weekly working hours did not always come from unions and workers but often from the employers themselves for a better efficiency and productivity¹. In more recent times the advantages of shorter working weeks have

been recognized by studies, pilot programs and enterprises in many circumstances². It is worth noting that countries that have shorter working weeks, like Denmark and Norway score generally better in terms of efficiency and productivity than the other countries.

The reduction of working time is however not the only parameter to consider for a better work-life balance. The different articles of this Agora try to tackle and analyze work-life balance from various angles and perspectives as you will see. As a conclusion it could be added that a universal improvement of work-life balance of workers/employees would surely have a positive impact on the society and on the planet long-term sustainability.

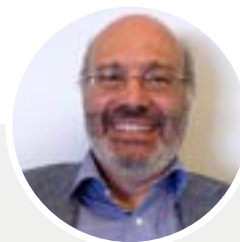
I would like to thank the authors, the contributors, and the editorial board. A particular thanks goes to Asmayani Kusri for her continuous dedication in preparing this Agora.

Have a nice reading,

Roberto Righetti

¹ e.g., Ford introducing a 5-days working week in 1926

² see e.g., https://www.ted.com/talks/juliet_schor_the_case_for_a_4_day_work_week



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FOUR-DAY WEEK: A UTOPIA WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Imagining the reduction of the working week is hard because it is so far from our reality. The last time there was such a significant change was too long ago for us to remember. But that distant parallel in history should help us understand what to expect.



**THE BIGGEST PROBLEM IS NOT
TO LET PEOPLE ACCEPT NEW IDEAS,
BUT TO LET THEM FORGET
THE OLD ONES.**

-- John Maynard Keynes

Can you imagine your life working four days a week? You'd have more time to play with your children or visit your parents more often without the pressure of everyday life, tackle your ever-growing to-do list, go to the gym, read that book that's been sitting on your bedside table for months, have coffee with the friend you haven't seen since her wedding, get serious about your hobby, go on three-day getaways, go to museums, go back to university, attending mass or play guitar. Time to live, or time to rest – to close your eyes and switch off from an increasingly frenetic world.

But what about businesses? What about the economy? If we only work four days, firms will produce less and the economy will sink even further. With all our economic problems – low productivity, inflation, debt, lack of workers – what sense does it make to reduce the working week? Our head crushes the idea with the terrible weight of reality.

These are the feelings that the four-day week arouses: a deep attraction and a natural scepticism of something that seems like fiction. That is why it is often described as a utopia, as sublime as unrealistic. Why waste time on utopias?

HAVE WE ALWAYS WORKED FIVE DAYS?

The working week is a social, political and economic construct. In the 19th century, people worked six days a week. The change started at the company level, with some small firms in the United States adopting the five-day working week in 1908 as a management practice. In 1926, the giant *Ford Motor Company* implemented it in its factories. Henry Ford, its founder, obsessed with productivity, had no doubts that he would produce more cars by organising work over five days. Only 12 years later, in 1938, the five-day week (40 hours) was imposed by law for large companies. It became widespread in the United States with successive expansions of the legislation during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, with the active role of trade unions.

Today's scepticism about reducing the working week was also felt in the 1930s. The five-day week was labelled a 'utopia', 'impractical' or a 'calamity for the economy'. But curiously



all those criticisms disappeared after it was implemented by legislation. No one wanted to go back to organising the economy around a six-day working week. In fact, visionaries of the four-day week quickly appeared - the first was Richard Nixon, the Republican vice-president of the US, who in 1956 claimed that it would arrive soon. More than a victory for the trade union movement, it turned out to be a better way of organising the economy in the 20th century, bringing mutual benefits for workers and businesses.

Entering the 21st century, everything has changed in society and the economy: the speed of communication, the technology available to us, the types of work we do, management practices, the structure of our families, the participation of women in the labour market, the longevity of our lives. But despite these profound structural changes, we continue to organise work in the same way. Because it is the best, or simply because of inertia? Given that everything has changed, is it an eccentricity to believe that the working week should also change?

A BUSINESS-LED MOVEMENT

Just as 100 years ago, the movement is being led, not by trade unions, but by companies reducing the working week as a management practice - because it improves their business. This gives strength to my view of the four-day week as a better way to organise the economy, not just as a dispute between workers and capitalists. Businesses leading the movement is a paradox to many minds, and it makes several institutions - trade unions, business associations, political parties - not know how to position themselves on the issue.

If the four-day week can be a way to benefit workers without harming, or even strengthening, companies and the economy, the least we should do is to study the constraints and consequences of its application. One way to do it is to encourage companies to try this management practice. This was the route chosen by the Portuguese Government when, in 2022, decided to organize a pilot-project, inviting me to coordinate it.

Our goal is not to 'implement the four-day week', but to test the management practice in the context of the Portuguese economy and evaluate its impacts on workers and companies. This is a first step, taken with enthusiasm but with caution. We decided that the test should start in the private sector, which concentrates more than 80% of employment, is less

complex to evaluate, more agile to execute, and less politicised. We defined the principles: it cannot involve any pay cut, it must entail a reduction of weekly hours, from 40 to 32, 34 or 36 hours, and it is voluntary and reversible for companies.

Finally, we decided to offer companies technical support and research expertise, but no financial support. I am convinced that this was our best decision. Without a subsidy, we do not distort the evaluation, and we are able to ensure the participation of companies with a genuine interest in this management practice rather than companies used to attracting public funds. Furthermore, a subsidy would make the process legally complex, bureaucratic and expensive. With a maximum budget of €350,000, in 10 months we managed to get companies trialling the four-day week.

The risk of the decision was clear: in a difficult year for the economy, would businesses see a reason to experiment the four-day week? To do so, good arguments were needed.

WHAT ARGUMENTS CONVINCE COMPANIES TO TRY IT?

The huge benefit for workers has a positive impact on companies themselves. More rested workers will naturally work better on the other days, with more commitment and concentration, making fewer errors. Errors in the production process lead to wasted materials, customer complaints or litigation, which involve additional costs. In manual occupations, physical fatigue from long working hours causes accidents. The four-day working week substantially reduces absenteeism rates, both because it improves workers' physical and mental health and because they do not have to miss work to go to the doctor or to renew their passport. Absenteeism forces companies to pay overtime or hire the services of temporary labour agencies - paid at a much higher hourly rate to cover shifts, which represents additional costs. Reducing intermediate costs for companies increases their value added.

In parallel, it also decreases the turnover of workers that destabilises any company and involves recruitment and training costs. The four-day week is a tangible benefit, and should be seen as an alternative to pay rises to value the firms' human resources. No company that offers it has trouble recruiting. Staff stay for longer, bringing stability and sustainability to their workforce.

Finally, there is a secret ingredient to the success of the four-day week as a management practice. Companies use it to change internal processes that increase productivity per hour. These changes depend on the sector and can be as simple as reducing the number and duration of meetings, as well as the number of people involved; or creating blocks of time for responding to emails, for collective work, or for individual work where no one can be interrupted to facilitate concentration. It also involves adopting new technologies or software to facilitate teamwork; automating processes that are typically manual; improving communication; optimising shifts; analysing the flow of customers or work during the week, month or year such that the extra days off have a minimal impact. In other words, the four-day week is not about working the same way, one day

less. Keeping the company competitive requires everyone to work better.

The company leader defines the principles of implementation, but it is the teams that seek the productivity gains from changes in processes. The four-day week as a management practice is a social contract that obliges workers to make it work. The success of the measure lies in unleashing the power of collective action within the company to change the culture with a simple principle: if we can improve the way we work, we will have more days off. Some business leaders realise this secret ingredient and recognise that there are advantages in going first, because they will go on their own terms, in the way that suits their company - not on terms set by other companies, by unions or by the state.

Our biggest surprise was to find several companies in Portugal that had already adopted the four-day week in different formats. In total, 12 such companies got involved in the project, bringing their testimonies. Of the 100 companies that showed interest in the project, 46 decided to prepare a test. The most important phase took place between March and May 2023, with several training sessions in partnership with *4 Day Week Global*, an international non-profit organisation set up to support companies to test the four-day week. *4 Day Week Global* has organised several international trials and was listed as one of Time's 100 Most Influential Companies of 2023. But if it is *4 Day Week Global* that has the know-how, it is the participating companies that are adapting it to the Portuguese reality. Over the course of three months,

they decided the format of the four-day week, how to measure and evaluate the success of the test, how to communicate to customers and employees, and designed the process changes they would test.

Of these 46 companies, 27 started a 6-month trial in June, joining the 12 firms already doing it, for a total of 39 companies. Eleven firms postponed the test because they did not feel ready, and four subsidiaries of multinationals did not get the green light from the parent company to proceed. As the process unfolded, we found it difficult to convince large companies to participate, which is significant given that they could easily do a partial test, in one establishment or department, without any financial risk.

More important than the number of participants is their diversity: a kindergarten, a social centre, a research centre, a stem cell bank, entities from the social sector, industry, and many training and management consulting companies. They all adopted the philosophy of the project, but the concrete solutions found were different. Many companies opted for a nine-day fortnight, making an average of 36 hours per week. Some companies close on Fridays, but many continued to operate five days a week with workers rotating the day off. Only one company has opted for a four-day week with an increase in daily hours to nine. Larger firms had to adopt different solutions for various functions or departments.

With this project we want to demystify a four-day week test and encourage companies to try it out. Experimentation is



part of the DNA of the best companies. It is so natural for them to test new products, different advertising techniques, or variations in pricing, often at financial risk. Why this resistance to experimenting with a different way of organising work?

GENERALISATION TO THE WHOLE ECONOMY

Should we go further? The argument that the four-day week increases productivity per hour alone is not a strong argument for advocating it as a public policy goal. If anything, it is an argument to incentivise companies to experiment. Moreover, these pioneering firms are not representative of a typical firm, and it is not because it is successful in these firms that the effects would be similar if it were extended to all firms in the economy.

The arguments for a more active involvement of the government, unions or employer associations have to be different, they have to be centred on the wider effects that more free time can have on society, environment or economy that are not considered by companies and workers. Generalising the four-day week would have profound ramifications.

Traditionally, the political argument most often used to defend the four-day week as a public policy objective is that of well-being. The slogan 'we should work to live, not live to work' is well understood by people, but it turns out to be subjective. After all, many of us like our jobs and value our

work. Another argument often made is that it has a lower environmental impact, as it means less travelling to work and more time for typically less carbon-intensive activities. This is a strong argument, but only for the ones truly worried about climate change.

But there are stronger social arguments, relating to gender equality, promoting family and birth rates, and preventing work-related mental illness. The four-day week can promote gender balance in the labour market, alleviate the pressure felt by women, and give men time to participate more in family tasks. Indeed, in the pilot conducted in 61 UK companies, men's time spent with their children more than doubled during the trial.

It is no coincidence that in 60% of the companies interested in the pilot project, the person who contacted us was a woman (when women represent only 27% of leadership positions in Portuguese companies). In several surveys about the four-day week, women show more openness to the idea because they feel more time pressure. In a survey on time use in Portugal, 55% of women aged 25-44 felt they did not have enough time to do everything they wanted to do in their daily lives, compared to 44% of men. In addition to hours at work, women accumulate hours of unpaid labour - one hour more per day than men in domestic activities such as cleaning the house, shopping, doing the laundry or preparing meals - and it is on them that the responsibility of caring for children and looking after parents falls.





Like in most countries, female participation in Portugal has increased dramatically. Fifty years ago, only 25% of women over the age of 16 participated in the labour market, compared to 90% of men. Women worked mainly in the domestic sphere. Men could work long hours, but when they returned home, everything was done. Time at home was time off for the whole family. Now, the participation rate is 50 per cent for women and 57 per cent for men. Most women work like men, in jobs increasingly intensified by technology, with the same workload and the same ambitions. When they return home, there is no time for rest, let alone leisure.

We have no time for anything! It is a problem that affects all of us, and has two other consequences. On the one hand, lack of time erodes the family itself, a core institution of our society. Does anyone doubt that the lack of time for 'us' and 'me' contributes to a higher level of divorces and the low birth rate? On the other hand, lack of time contributes to stress and burnout, the labour diseases of the 21st century. In richer countries, couples escape this curse, by having the women moving to part-time, with the consequent loss of income and of career opportunities, and gender imbalance. In southern European countries most couples cannot live with the loss of income, so the impacts are more social and demographic.

Some of these social arguments - especially the one about valuing the family and promoting birth rates - cross ideological barriers and appeal to conservatives who see the family as the fundamental building block of society. The arguments of gender equality and mental health, on the other hand, don't seem to convince the men in suits and ties who run the economy but don't have to cook dinner every day. Explaining to them has no effect: that mental illness costs the economy 4% of GDP in loss of productivity and employment, and costs to the health

system and social security according to a report by OECD, or that eliminating gender inequalities would increase world GDP by 35%, according to the International Monetary Fund.

It was to convince them that I articulated the economic arguments in the book *Friday is the New Saturday*. Most economists see hours of work as contributing to production and leisure as time outside the economy - a waste. But what we do in our free time contributes, directly or indirectly, to the economy. In the words of Nobel economist James Tobin, 'every leisure act has an economic payoff to someone'. With more free time, people could rest more, which would increase their efficiency during their four-day working week. They could enjoy leisure activities that involve spending, which would stimulate leisure, entertainment, culture, restaurant or tourism industries. They could use the day to train and acquire new skills to help them move into a more promising occupation, particularly important in a period of great and rapid technological change. They could devote their time to their passion and perhaps invent the innovations of the future or start a business. It was through this *hybrid entrepreneurship* that companies like *Ford*, *Apple* or *Nike* were born. We are not only workers, we are also consumers, potential entrepreneurs, inventors, educators, students, tourists... humans.

But improving the economy is also about protecting it from risks, and the biggest risks facing Western economies are populist movements. Even if the economic benefits were not enough to outweigh the costs of implementing them, it would certainly be worth it if it allowed us to avoid such disastrous economic policies as Brexit or the loss of political freedom we are already seeing at the heart of the European Union. While populists bet on division - the people against the elite, men against women, natives against immigrants - the four-day

week can unite. In various surveys, 70 to 90 per cent of people say they would like a four-day week. People might be scared of its impacts in the economy, but as a goal, as an objective for society, the idea is not divisive. This figure is indicative of an idea that unites society beyond the trenches that populisms help to dig. After all, in today's polarized society what do rich and poor, men and women, young and old, Muslim, Jewish or Christian, have in common? Everyone enjoys a bank holiday weekend!

BRINGING THE TRADE UNIONS TO THE FIGHT

The four-day week will be the future - no doubt about it. The question is, how should we get there? Just counting on companies to make the switch is wishful thinking. Large companies are averse to big changes, and despite all the buzz around the four-day week, they don't even experiment it. Plus, we should not expect that they foresee all the other benefits for the economy, society and environment. Three years after Henry Ford proved the five-day week was a successful management practice, only 2.6 percent of US wage earners were working five days.

The generalization to the whole economy has to be coordinated, and for that the trade unions have a vital role to play. What is preventing trade unions from picking up this fight?

First is the argument that people prefer wage increases to reduction of the working week, especially now when inflation is squeezing real incomes. Pushing for higher wages should be the priority of unions, not the reduction of working time. We should recognize that people might have different preferences regarding more income or more leisure time. The question should be what is the best compromise? The existence of the weekend does not prevent anyone from working. People can moonlight with a second job or use the Gig economy to complement their income. In other words, it would be easier to monetarize the free time with a four-day week, than it is to transform income in free time under a five-day week

There is another crucial difference between the fight for wage increases and the reductions of working time. The first one is much more temporary than the second. Wage increases bought by difficult negotiations, can quickly evaporate with one year of high inflation or a recession. Reductions of working time, on the other hand, are a much more permanent achievement. Furthermore, a four-day week might change the future conditions for wage negotiations. By reducing the supply of hours, together with the potential increasing demand for workers due to higher productivity per hour and higher demand for the leisure industries, will create the market conditions for increasing wages. The three decades during the generalization of the 40-hour week in the US, saw real wages increase by close to 30% a decade. Since the 1970s wages have never grown much past 10% in any one decade. Sacrificing wage increases for a four-day week is a strategic move that will place the unions in better conditions in the future.

The second doubt is whether to fight for a four-day week or a reduction of the working week to 35 hours, with a 7-hour day. The difference between the two is essentially the coordination

of the reduction of working time, in 'days off' rather than 'shorter days'. The four-day week is a better objective than the 35-hour week, because it is transformative. One less hour per day, does not change anyone's life. It does not even give you time to go to the gym. In France, it is more common to keep working 8 hours and accumulate the extra hours in extra vacations days, that many workers end up not using. On the other hand, workers whose companies adopted the four-day week, talk about it almost as a religious experience. That extra day every week gives them time to live. That is why, the four-day week attracted much more attention than the 35-hour week ever did, and could be a great objective to rekindle worker's movements. The 35-hour is also not transformative for firms, while the four-day week, by forcing big changes, potentiates the productivity gains.

If a sector or a country is not ready for a four-day, 32-hour week, there are intermediate steps possible. A nine-day fortnight or a four-day week with 9-hour days, reduces the average week to 36 hours. A 34-hour week could be achieved with 8-hour days, four days a week, with 2 hours accumulated in an hours bank (essentially a worker would work one week of five days, every month). Countries could also use their bank holidays to facilitate the transition.

The third factor that is blocking trade unions that the four-day week will imply changes in the way we work, which scares unions and workers themselves. The firms that decide to trial a four-day week often describe the moment they communicate the decision to their workers as 'not going according to expected'. Instead of cheers and excitement, they often get silence and a bit of apprehension. 'Will we be able to do the same work in four days?', 'To do this, things will have to change for us'. It is more comfortable to keep doing things as we have always done, but if we want the best for workers, we must be willing to be part of the change.

Unions should not be afraid of it, and should pick up the four-day week as their main cause, bringing it into the negotiation table, and be able to make concessions for it. In a fight for better conditions for workers, the four-day week is more than that. It is a fight for a better way to organize the economy in the 21st century.



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TRADUIRE /
TRANSLATE





RÉDUCTION DU TEMPS DE TRAVAIL ?

🚫 ACCÈS INTERDIT !

Depuis la révolution industrielle, la réduction de la durée du travail est devenue synonyme de progrès social. La limitation du temps d'activité des salariés a été une revendication constante des syndicats. Elle s'inscrit dans une **évolution historique continue** : d'un *maximum* de 48 heures fixé dans la Convention N° 1 de l'OIT (1919) à une *durée légale* hebdomadaire du travail à 35 heures en France (1998).

Si pour les salariés il s'agit d'assurer par là un meilleur équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie personnelle, la limitation du temps de travail est aussi dans l'intérêt bien compris de l'employeur, pour préserver le rendement et l'efficacité des travailleurs. En outre, elle peut bien s'inscrire dans l'objectif de **combattre le chômage par un partage du travail** (« Travailler moins pour travailler tous »).

EUROPE : LE TEMPS RÉVOLU DU PROGRÈS SOCIAL

La directive européenne 93/104/CE, fondée sur le traité CE, qui affichait l'objectif « *de promouvoir l'amélioration des conditions de vie et de travail de la main-d'œuvre permettant leur égalisation dans le progrès* » (article 117 du traité CE, voir actuellement l'article 151 du TFUE), fixe des **prescriptions minimales**, comme suit (article 15) :

« La présente directive **ne porte pas atteinte à la faculté des États membres d'appliquer ou d'introduire des dispositions législatives, réglementaires ou administratives plus favorables** à la protection de la sécurité et de la santé des travailleurs ou de favoriser ou de permettre l'application de conventions collectives ou d'accords conclus entre partenaires sociaux *plus favorables à la protection de la sécurité et de la santé des travailleurs* ».

LA DURÉE DU TRAVAIL DANS LES INSTITUTIONS EUROPÉENNES

En matière de politique sociale, des instruments juridiques de rang supérieur dans la hiérarchie des normes fixent « des prescriptions **minimales** » (et la durée **maximale** du travail en est une), en permettant à des instruments de rang inférieur de préciser les règles applicables dans un sens plus favorable.

C'est ainsi que le premier statut des fonctionnaires des institutions (adopté en 1961) se bornait à fixer un **maximum** hebdomadaire de 45 heures. Dans cette limite, le statut laissait à chaque institution le soin de fixer la durée de travail applicable.

En 1972, le **maximum** prévu par le statut (Article 55) a été revu à la baisse, à **42 heures**. En **1988**, les institutions européennes ont toutes réduit, par voie de décisions internes, la durée hebdomadaire de travail, qui est passée de 38h30 à **37h30** ; depuis, cet horaire s'était gravé dans l'esprit de tous comme constituant un acquis. Nous n'avons jamais imaginé que cet acquis aurait été renversé.

EUROPE : LE TEMPS DE LA RÉGRESSION SOCIALE

Cependant, cet 'acquis' n'était pas destiné à durer. La crise financière déclenchée par les banques et les marchés financiers depuis 2008 a été traduite par une attaque contre les salariés, les pensionnés et de larges couches de la population.

Quelques années après la grande réforme du statut (entrée en vigueur le 1-5-2004), un nouveau processus de réforme a été lancé, en juin 2011. Cette fois-ci, une cure d'austérité a été

fièrement présentée comme l'expression de 'solidarité' de l'UE avec ses États membres, qui étaient, eux aussi, touchés par cette crise.

LA DURÉE DU TRAVAIL AUGMENTÉE

La Commission a lancé son attaque (2011) en annonçant son intention d'augmenter l'horaire hebdomadaire de travail.

Le raisonnement sinueux de cette augmentation est exposé au considérant 22 du règlement 1023/2013 modifiant le statut, comme suit :

« Les horaires de travail dans les institutions devraient être alignés sur ceux en vigueur dans certains¹ États membres de l'Union européenne afin de **compenser la réduction du personnel** de ces institutions. Cet alignement devrait prendre en compte les horaires de travail en vigueur dans les fonctions publiques des États membres. **L'instauration d'un horaire minimal de travail hebdomadaire** garantira la capacité du personnel employé par les institutions d'assumer la charge de travail résultant des objectifs politiques de l'Union européenne et, dans le même temps, l'harmonisation des conditions de travail dans les institutions, **dans l'intérêt de la solidarité** dans l'ensemble de la fonction publique de l'Union » (considérant 22).



**LA DURÉE NORMALE
DU TRAVAIL VARIE ENTRE
40 ET 42 HEURES PAR SEMAINE,
LES HORAIRES DE TRAVAIL ÉTANT
ÉTABLIS PAR L'AUTORITÉ INVESTIE
DU POUVOIR DE NOMINATION.**



¹ En réalité, selon les données 2022 recueillies par Eurostat, les fonctionnaires dans 13 pays UE travaillent 40 heures par semaine. Dans un pays (DE), ils travaillent 40,5 heures. Dans 13 pays, ils travaillent moins de 40. La moyenne d'heures hebdomadaires fixées dans l'UE27 est 38,5.

Mais, à part ces calculs d'épiciers, ce qui ternit notre statut des fonctionnaires est le fait même de fixer un **horaire minimum** (article 55, paragraphe 2, du statut) :

L'établissement d'un horaire **minimum** va à l'encontre de la pratique établie en matière de politique sociale. Le mot 'progrès', toujours inscrit dans le traité, restera vide de sens, alors que le statut des fonctionnaires fige la régression sociale.

Dans ces conditions, tout débat sur la réduction et l'aménagement du temps de travail n'aura qu'une valeur purement théorique. Aucun progrès social n'est envisageable aussi longtemps que la durée hebdomadaire minimale n'est biffée du texte du statut. Ce qui suppose assumer le grand risque d'une réforme du statut.

RÉDUIRE LES JOURS DE TRAVAIL ?

La question de concentrer le travail hebdomadaire sur quatre jours est largement débattue. Tout en notant que, pour un avenir prévisible, la discussion n'aura qu'une valeur purement théorique, nous pouvons ici formuler quelques réflexions.

L'article 2 de la Convention N° 1 de l'OIT (1919) fixe une durée maximale non seulement par semaine, mais aussi par jour : « *Dans tous les établissements industriels, publics ou privés, [...] la durée du travail du personnel ne pourra excéder huit heures par jour et quarante-huit heures par semaine* ».

Cette norme maintient sa pleine valeur. Travailler de longues heures par jour entraîne la fatigue, la perte de concentration et une chute de productivité.

En outre, nombreux sont des collègues, surtout des femmes, qui travaillent à **temps partiel** (et à rémunération réduite) pour faire face à leurs obligations familiales au quotidien (déposer et récupérer les enfants, etc.). Ces personnes, soumises à des contraintes inélastiques, que feraient-elles si l'horaire journalier était rallongé ? Elles demanderaient une réduction ultérieure de leur horaire en renonçant à encore une tranche de leur rémunération.

Le travail à quatre jours par semaine ne serait défendable que si la durée hebdomadaire était réduite à 32 heures.



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**TRADUIRE /
TRANSLATE**





UNVEILING THE POWER OF DISCONNECTING AND ANNUAL LEAVE FOR EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

Trends and policies regarding annual leave in different countries.

INTRODUCTION

In the fast-paced and hyperconnected world we live in, achieving a harmonious work-life balance has become an elusive challenge. As technology blurs the boundaries between work and personal life, individuals find themselves constantly connected, often struggling to disconnect from work-related responsibilities and obligations. In response to this growing concern, countries and organizations around the world have begun recognizing the importance of prioritizing employee well-being by embracing the concept of the "Right to Disconnect"¹. This right emphasizes the need for individuals to have the freedom and autonomy to disengage from work during non-working hours, allowing them to fully rejuvenate and recharge.

This article aims to explore the trends and policies regarding annual leave, shedding light on how various nations but

also the EU have recognized its importance in promoting employee well-being. Additionally, it delves into the potential consequences that arise when annual leave is insufficient or underutilized. By examining these aspects, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the value and impact of annual leave on individual well-being and overall productivity. Through the lens of the EU Staff Regulations, which provide guidelines for EU institutions and agencies, we will uncover the foresight and emphasis placed on the Right to Disconnect and annual leave.

By understanding the significance of the Right to Disconnect and the advantage of annual leave, we can uncover strategies and best practices that foster employee well-being and unlock productivity. Furthermore, we can cultivate workplace cultures that prioritize work-life balance and acknowledge the importance of personal time for employees' holistic development and satisfaction.

¹ Eurofound, [2021], Right to disconnect, last accessed July 2023, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/right-to-disconnect>

ANNUAL LEAVE: UNLEASHING WELL-BEING AND PRODUCTIVITY POWER

Employee well-being is a critical factor in maintaining a healthy and productive workforce. Annual leave² serves as a valuable tool in promoting employee well-being by allowing individuals to take a break from work-related responsibilities and recharge both physically and mentally.

Taking regular time off through annual leave enables employees to rejuvenate and recuperate from the demands of their work. It provides an opportunity to relax, unwind, and engage in activities that promote physical health, such as exercise, leisurely pursuits, and adequate rest. Physical well-being is closely linked to mental well-being, and the time away from work allows employees to focus on self-care and address any stress or physical ailments they may be experiencing.

Moreover, annual leave plays a crucial role in preventing burnout, a state of chronic exhaustion and mental fatigue caused by prolonged work-related stress. By taking regular breaks, employees can mitigate the risk of burnout and maintain a healthier work-life balance. This, in turn, contributes to improved job satisfaction and reduces the likelihood of turnover, as employees feel more fulfilled and satisfied with their work.

Annual leave also provides employees with the opportunity to spend quality time with their loved ones, fostering stronger personal relationships and enhancing overall happiness. Relationships with family and friends are important contributors to overall well-being, and having dedicated time away from work allows individuals to nurture these connections and create lasting memories. Additionally, engaging in hobbies and pursuing personal interests during annual leave contributes to a sense of fulfilment and self-actualization, further enhancing overall life satisfaction.

From an organizational perspective, supporting employee well-being through the use of annual leave has a direct impact on productivity. Employees who are well-rested and have had the opportunity to recharge during their time off are more likely to bring their best selves to work. They are more focused,

energized, and motivated, leading to increased productivity and better overall performance. Furthermore, organizations that prioritize employee well-being and provide sufficient annual leave demonstrate their commitment to creating a healthy work environment, which can boost employee morale and loyalty.

However, it is important to note that the potential consequences of insufficient or underutilized annual leave can be significant. When employees do not take adequate time off, they are more susceptible to experiencing high levels of stress, fatigue, and decreased job satisfaction. This can lead to decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and even long-term negative health effects. Organizations that fail to recognize and prioritize the importance of annual leave may face higher turnover rates, reduced employee engagement, and decreased overall organizational performance.

Annual leave is a vital component of employee well-being and productivity. It provides employees with the necessary time to rest, rejuvenate, and engage in activities that contribute to their overall physical and mental health. By embracing annual leave, organizations can foster a healthier and more productive workforce, leading to increased job satisfaction, higher employee retention rates, and improved organizational outcomes. Recognizing the value of annual leave and encouraging its utilization is a win-win situation for both employees and organizations.

THE EU STAFF REGULATIONS AND THE RIGHT TO DISCONNECT

The EU Staff Regulations³ stand as a progressive and forward-thinking framework that addresses the evolving challenges of the modern work environment. Recognizing the detrimental effects of constant connectivity and the blurring boundaries between work and personal life, the EU has taken a proactive approach to safeguarding the Right to Disconnect for its employees.

Within the EU Staff Regulations, clear guidelines are established regarding working hours, rest periods, and annual leave for EU staff. These guidelines set limits on the maximum number of working hours per week, ensuring that employees are not excessively burdened by work responsibilities. By setting these boundaries, the regulations aim to prevent work-related stress and burnout, promoting a healthier and more sustainable work-life balance.

However, it is essential to take a critical approach and examine potential challenges and limitations associated with these regulations. While the EU Staff Regulations provide guidelines on working hours, rest periods, and annual leave, the actual implementation and enforcement of these regulations can vary across different EU institutions and agencies. In some cases, employees may still face pressure to work long hours or remain connected to work outside of designated working



² Eurofound (2019), Annual leave, last accessed July 2023, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/annual-leave>

³ European Commission, "EU Staff Regulations," accessed July 2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A01962R0031-20140501>



hours, despite the regulations in place. This discrepancy between policy and practice can undermine the intended benefits of the Right to Disconnect and annual leave.

Furthermore, the EU Staff Regulations apply specifically to EU institutions and agencies, leaving employees in other sectors and industries without the same level of protection and support. This discrepancy raises questions about fairness and equity, as individuals outside the EU institutions may face challenges in exercising their Right to Disconnect and accessing adequate annual leave.

In addition, the regulations may not fully address the complexities of the modern work environment. With advancements in technology, teleworking, or other hybrid forms, many employees are expected to be available and responsive beyond traditional working hours. The regulations may struggle to keep up with these evolving expectations, leaving employees in a constant state of connectivity and reducing their ability to fully disconnect and recharge during their time off.

Moreover, the regulations may not address the cultural and organizational factors that perpetuate a workaholic mentality or discourage employees from taking their entitled annual leave. Workplace cultures that prioritize long hours and constant availability can undermine the intent of the regulations, leading employees to underuse their annual leave or feel guilty for disconnecting from work.

To maximize the benefits of the Right to Disconnect and annual leave, it is crucial to ensure effective implementation, enforcement, and awareness. Employers must actively promote a culture that values work-life balance and respects employees' need for rest and personal time. Training and education initiatives can also play a significant role in raising awareness about the importance of disconnecting from work and using annual leave for well-being and productivity.

TRENDS AND POLICIES REGARDING ANNUAL LEAVE

Countries worldwide have recognized the importance of annual leave and have implemented various policies to ensure employees can enjoy their entitlements. These policies reflect the commitment of governments and organizations to prioritize employee well-being, work-life balance, and overall productivity. Let's explore some notable trends and policies in different regions:

The European Commission, as one of the institutions of the European Union, upholds the importance of annual leave as outlined in the EU Staff Regulations. These regulations set the framework for annual leave entitlements for employees working within the EU institutions and agencies, including the European Commission.

According to the EU Staff Regulations, employees of the European Commission are entitled to a minimum of 24 days of annual leave per year. This minimum requirement ensures that employees have a substantial amount of time to disconnect from work, recharge, and engage in activities that promote their well-being.

Moreover, the EU Staff Regulations go beyond the minimum requirement of annual leave by allowing for additional leave entitlements based on various factors. For instance, employees may be granted additional leave based on their age, length of service, or other specific circumstances. This recognition of additional leave entitlements reflects the understanding that different employees may have unique needs and circumstances that warrant additional time off.

The digital transformation and the rise of telework have created challenges in defining and regulating the right to disconnect. While there is no EU legal framework specifically addressing this right, certain regulations indirectly relate to it, such as the Working Time Directive⁴. Recent European

⁴ European Union [2003], Official Journal L 299 , 18/11/2003 P. 0009 – 0019, Directive 2003/88/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 November 2003 concerning certain aspects of the organisation of working time, accessed July 2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A32003L0088>

initiatives, like the European Pillar of Social Rights, prioritize work-life balance without explicitly mentioning the right to disconnect. The European Parliament has taken steps to protect this right⁵, and the European Commission supports social partners in developing tailor-made solutions. The Commission also plans to analyse telework's implications and work towards ensuring decent working conditions. The Council calls for national strategies and policies on telework and strengthened labour inspection. While the Commission has announced a comprehensive approach to mental health, it does not specifically mention the right to disconnect. However, ongoing social dialogue and negotiations are taking place, and the Commission is committed to following up on the Parliament's resolution⁶.

As mentioned before, while the EU Staff Regulations establish a framework for annual leave, the actual implementation and practice may vary across different EU institutions and agencies. Factors such as workload, organizational culture, and individual work units can influence how annual leave is utilized and respected within the European Commission. Therefore, ongoing efforts to ensure effective implementation, awareness, and adherence to the annual leave provisions are

essential to maximize their impact on employee well-being and productivity.

European Countries: European countries, heavily influenced by the EU regulations, have established generous annual leave entitlements. For example, France grants employees a minimum of five weeks (or 25 days) of annual leave, ensuring ample time for rest, relaxation, and personal pursuits. Similarly, Germany mandates a minimum of four weeks (or 20 days) of annual leave⁷. These policies acknowledge the importance of providing employees with sufficient time off to rejuvenate and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Below, we have cases from EU countries, around the world, but also from specific companies:

France: In France, annual leave is highly valued and protected by law⁸. The country has a legal minimum of five weeks of annual leave for all employees, ensuring that individuals have an extended period to disconnect from work and enjoy personal time. This emphasis on annual leave promotes a culture of work-life balance, leading to higher employee satisfaction and overall well-being.

5 European Parliament (2023), "Resolution on the right to disconnect," accessed July 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-europe-fit-for-the-digital-age/file-al-legislative-proposal-to-the-commission-on-the-right-to-disconnect>

6 European Parliament (2021), The right to disconnect, accessed July 2023, <https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/summary.do?id=1648076&t=e&l=en>

7 OECD, "Better Life Index - Work-Life Balance," accessed September 2021, <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/work-life-balance/>

8 Légifrance, Code du travail, Article L3141-3, https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000033020826



Netherlands: In the Netherlands, the annual leave entitlement is set at a minimum of four times the number of days an employee works per week. For example, if an employee works five days a week, they would be entitled to a minimum of 20 days of annual leave per year⁹. This approach ensures that employees have sufficient time off to recharge and enjoy personal pursuits outside of work.

Finland: In Finland, employees are entitled to a minimum of 30 days of annual leave per year¹⁰. This generous provision allows employees to have an extended period of rest and recreation, supporting their overall well-being and work-life balance.

Sweden: In Sweden, the concept of "Allmansrätt" or "freedom to roam" is highly valued. This cultural practice, protected by law¹¹, combined with generous annual leave policies, encourages individuals to take time off work to explore nature and engage in outdoor activities. This focus on leisure and connection with nature contributes to employee well-being and mental rejuvenation.

New Zealand: In New Zealand, the concept of "Annual Closedown"¹² is widely practiced in various industries, particularly during the Christmas and New Year periods. Many businesses shut down for a few weeks, allowing employees to enjoy an extended break and spend time with their families. This practice not only promotes employee well-being but also contributes to a more inclusive and family-friendly work environment.

United States: In contrast to European countries, the United States does not have federal laws mandating annual leave. However, some states have taken steps to address this issue. For instance, California has implemented its own regulations¹³, such as the California Paid Sick Leave law, which requires employers to provide a minimum of three days of paid annual leave after an employee's first year of service. While such state-level initiatives are positive steps towards recognizing the value of annual leave, the overall absence of federal regulations in the United States leaves many employees with limited or no guaranteed annual leave entitlements.

Japan: Japan has recently introduced¹⁴ the "Premium Friday" initiative, aimed at promoting work-life balance and increasing employee well-being. Under this initiative, employees are encouraged to leave work early on the last Friday of every month. The goal is to create opportunities for employees to engage in personal activities, spend time with family, and pursue leisure interests. While "Premium Friday" is not a full day of annual leave, it reflects a growing recognition of the importance of time away from work and the need for greater work-life balance in a country known for its strong work culture.

Buffer: Buffer, a social media management company, implemented a policy called "Unlimited Vacation Time."¹⁵ This policy allows employees to take as much annual leave as they need, as long as their work responsibilities are met. By providing such flexibility, Buffer recognizes the importance of autonomy and trust in fostering a healthy work-life balance. This approach has resulted in increased employee satisfaction, improved productivity, and reduced turnover.

Volkswagen: The German automobile manufacturer Volkswagen implemented a policy known as "Email-Free Fridays" to encourage work-life balance and the Right to Disconnect. On Fridays, employees are discouraged from sending work-related emails outside of their working hours, allowing them to fully disconnect and enjoy their personal time¹⁶. This initiative aims to reduce burnout, improve well-being, and enhance productivity by promoting a healthy separation between work and personal life.

These examples demonstrate how different countries, institutions and companies have recognized the importance of annual leave in promoting employee well-being and productivity. By implementing policies and practices that encourage the utilization of annual leave, organizations can create environments where employees feel supported, valued, and able to achieve a healthy work-life balance, higher employee satisfaction, improved productivity, and overall organizational success.

It is worth noting that annual leave policies can vary not only between countries but also within industries, sectors, and organizations. While legislative requirements provide a baseline, many employers choose to exceed these minimums to attract and retain talent, create positive work environments, and support employee well-being. Striking a balance between legislative regulations and voluntary employer initiatives is crucial to fostering a culture that values and respects the importance of annual leave for employees.

In conclusion, global trends and policies regarding annual leave reflect an evolving understanding of the significance of work-life balance and employee well-being. While some countries have established comprehensive regulations guaranteeing generous annual leave entitlements, others are in the process of developing initiatives to promote a healthier work culture. By recognizing the importance of annual leave and implementing supportive policies, countries and organizations can create environments that prioritize employee well-being, foster productivity, and contribute to a more balanced and fulfilling work-life experience.

9 Government of the Netherlands (2021), Taking holiday hours, accessed July 2023, <https://www.government.nl/topics/working-hours/taking-holiday-hours>

10 Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (n.d.), Annual holiday, accessed July 2023, <https://tem.fi/en/annual-holiday>

11 Visitsweden (2023), The Right of Public Access – Swedish freedom to roam, accessed July 2023, <https://visitsweden.com/what-to-do/nature-outdoors/nature/sustainable-and-rural-tourism/the-right-of-public-access/>

12 Employment New Zealand (n.d.), Annual closedowns, accessed July 2023, <https://www.employment.govt.nz/leave-and-holidays/annual-holidays/annual-closedowns/>

13 California Department of Industrial Relations. (n.d.). Vacation, accessed July 2023, https://www.dir.ca.gov/dlse/faq_vacation.htm

14 Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) (n.d.), Premium Friday, accessed July 2023, https://www.meti.go.jp/policy/mono_info_service/service/premium-friday/index.html, BBC, Is Japan's culture of overwork finally changing?, accessed July 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38465617>

15 Buffer (2019), How We Think About Time Off As a Global Team, accessed July 2023, <https://buffer.com/resources/time-off-global-team/#:-:text=Through%20Buffer's%20current%20flexible%20time,or%20used%20under%20this%20policy>

16 The Washington Post (2011), Volkswagen silences work e-mail after hours, accessed July 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/volkswagen-silences-work-e-mail-after-hours/2011/12/23/gIQAz4HRDP_story.html



The potential consequences of insufficient or underutilised annual leave.

ALWAYS ON THE ALLURE OF 24/7 CONNECTIVITY

The phenomenon of employees voluntarily choosing not to disconnect from work outside of working hours due to silent competition or the pressure to prove their availability can have significant impacts on their well-being and work-life balance. In some workplaces, there may be an unspoken expectation for employees to constantly be connected and responsive, creating an environment where individuals feel the need to compete with their colleagues in terms of availability and responsiveness.

For example, in a fast-paced consulting firm, employees may engage in a silent competition to demonstrate their commitment by consistently being available to respond to client requests, even during evenings and weekends. They may fear that disconnecting would result in missed opportunities or being perceived as less dedicated compared to their colleagues who remain constantly accessible.

Similarly, in industries such as media or technology, where innovation and quick responses are highly valued, employees may feel compelled to be continuously plugged into work. They may feel that by being constantly available, they can stay ahead of their peers and prove their value to their managers and the organization.

An example within the context of EU staff can be seen among employees working in the European Commission. Within the Commission, there is often a culture of high expectations and a strong commitment to work, driven by the importance of the tasks and responsibilities involved in shaping and implementing EU policies. This culture can create an environment where employees feel the need to be constantly available and responsive, even outside of regular working hours¹⁷.

¹⁷ Eurofound (2022), Do we really have the right to disconnect?, accessed July 2023, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/do-we-really-have-the-right-to-disconnect>

For instance, EU staff members may feel the pressure to demonstrate their dedication and prove their availability to superiors and colleagues. They may voluntarily choose not to disconnect from work-related communication outside of working hours, fearing that disconnecting might hinder their opportunities for career advancement or be perceived as a lack of commitment to their roles.

This behaviour can lead to a cycle of constant connectivity, with employees feeling compelled to check emails, respond to messages, or engage in work-related discussions during evenings, weekends, or vacation periods. As a result, their personal time becomes increasingly intertwined with work, which can lead to high levels of stress, burnout, and difficulties in maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

To address this issue, organizations can take proactive steps to foster a culture that values work-life balance and encourages employees to disconnect from work. This can involve implementing policies and practices that promote clear communication of expectations regarding availability outside of working hours. For example, some companies have established email curfew policies that encourage employees not to send or respond to work-related emails during evenings and weekends unless it's urgent.

Managers also play a crucial role in setting the tone and modeling healthy work habits. By respecting boundaries and encouraging their team members to take time off and disconnect, managers can create an environment where employees feel supported in prioritizing their well-being.

Moreover, organizations can provide training and resources on time management, stress reduction, and the importance of work-life balance. This can help employees develop strategies for disconnecting and recharging, emphasizing the value of their personal time and the positive impact it has on their overall productivity and well-being.

BLURRED LINES: WHEN TELEWORK TAKES AWAY THE DISCONNECT BUTTON

Telework has revolutionized the way many individuals perform their jobs, providing flexibility and convenience. However, it has also introduced new challenges, particularly in relation to the right to disconnect. With the physical boundaries between work and personal life blurred, employees may find it increasingly difficult to disconnect from work-related tasks and demands. The absence of a clear separation between the workplace and the home environment can lead to a constant presence of work, causing employees to feel pressured to be perpetually available.

The convenience of technology and the ability to work remotely can inadvertently erode the boundaries that once existed, making it challenging for individuals to establish a healthy work-life balance. This continuous connectivity can result in heightened stress levels, reduced leisure time, and a sense of being constantly "on-call," ultimately impacting employee well-being and potentially leading to burnout. It is crucial for organizations to acknowledge these negative impacts and

establish policies and practices that support employees in disconnecting from work during non-working hours, allowing them to recharge and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

To avoid the negative impact of telework on the right to disconnect, organizations can implement several measures:

- **Clear Policies:** Establish clear and comprehensive policies that outline expectations regarding work hours, availability, and communication outside of regular working hours. These policies should emphasize the importance of work-life balance and explicitly state that employees are not expected to be available at all times.
- **Communication Guidelines:** Provide guidelines on appropriate communication practices, such as discouraging non-urgent emails or messages outside of working hours and encouraging respectful boundaries between work and personal time.
- **Training and Awareness:** Conduct training sessions or workshops to educate employees and managers on the importance of disconnecting from work, managing boundaries, and promoting work-life balance. Raise awareness about the potential negative consequences of constant connectivity and the benefits of taking regular breaks.
- **Lead by Example:** Managers and leaders should set a positive example by respecting boundaries and encouraging employees to disconnect. Avoid sending work-related emails or messages during non-working hours and foster a culture that values personal time and well-being.





- **Technology Guidelines:** Provide guidance on the responsible use of technology to avoid over-reliance on devices and establish designated periods for disengagement from work-related applications or platforms.
- **Encourage Time Off:** Actively encourage employees to utilize their annual leave and take regular breaks. Promote the benefits of rest and relaxation for overall well-being and productivity.
- **Support Systems:** Offer employee support systems, such as access to counseling services or employee assistance programs, to address stress, burnout, or work-related concerns.
- **Performance Evaluation:** Evaluate employees based on their quality of work, productivity, and accomplishments rather than their constant availability. Create performance evaluation criteria that prioritize outcomes rather than hours worked.
- **Foster a Positive Work Culture:** Develop a supportive work environment that values work-life balance, encourages open communication, and respects employees' personal time. Foster a culture where employees feel comfortable disconnecting without the fear of negative consequences.

By implementing these measures, organizations can help employees establish boundaries, promote a healthier work-life balance, and safeguard the right to disconnect in the context of telework.

As already mentioned, the European social partners (ETUC, Business Europe, SGI Europe and SME United) are continuing to negotiate a European framework agreement on hybrid work, the right to disconnect, organisation of work in particular the management of online workers and the link with working-time, health and safety, work life balance, surveillance, privacy, and data protection¹⁸. If accepted by the European institutions, it will be implemented by the European Directive which member states will be required to transpose into national law, in line with previous recommendations of the European Parliament made in early 2021. This is a key signal that the European social partners are committed to being key actors in shaping the future labour market functioning, and the first time such an agreement would be implemented as a Directive since 2010.¹⁹

¹⁸ IBEC for Irish Business [2023], European framework agreement on telework and the right to disconnect, accessed July 2023, <https://www.ibec.ie/employer-hub/latest-hr-and-ir-news/news/2023/05/25/european-framework-agreement-on-telework-and-the-right-to-disconnect>

¹⁹ European Trade Union Institute [2022], European social partners signed a joint Work Programme including negotiations on the right to disconnect, accessed July 2023, <https://www.etui.org/news/european-social-partners-signed-joint-work-programme-including-negotiations-right-disconnect>



Finally, a few European countries have taken steps to regulate teleworking:

Cyprus reviewed draft legislation in June 2023 on remote working, which regulates the rights and obligations of employers and employees. Specifically, it allows for voluntary teleworking upon agreement between the employer and the employee. The legislation also prohibits discrimination against teleworkers. Furthermore, the right to disconnect after working hours, meaning that the employee can fully disengage from work obligations outside working hours, is also regulated. However, this specific bill does not cover the Public Service, for which a separate framework is expected to be submitted to the Cabinet by the Ministry of Finance later in 2023.²⁰

Luxembourg, introduced in 2023 a new law that foresees a right to disconnect outside working hours into the Labour Code. In the case of non-compliance with the new regime by the

employer, the Director of the Inspectorate of Labour and Mines ("ITM") may impose administrative sanctions.²¹

THE HIDDEN TOLL OF UNDERUSED ANNUAL LEAVE

Insufficient or underutilized annual leave can have severe consequences for both employees and organizations. When employees do not take enough time off, it can lead to a

²⁰ In-cyprus (2023), Draft law aims to regulate teleworking in Cyprus, accessed July 2023, <https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/news/local/draft-law-aims-to-regulate-teleworking-in-cyprus/>

²¹ Mondaq (2023), Luxembourg: Respecting The Right To Disconnect : A New Legal Obligation For Employers, accessed July 2023, <https://www.mondaq.com/health--safety/1338748/respecting-the-right-to-disconnect--a-new-legal-obligation-for-employers>



range of negative outcomes that impact their well-being, job satisfaction, and overall productivity. Let's delve deeper into the potential consequences of insufficient or underutilized annual leave:

Increased Stress Levels: Continuous work without breaks can significantly elevate stress levels among employees. The absence of time to recharge and rejuvenate can result in chronic stress, which not only affects employees' mental and physical health but also hampers their ability to perform optimally. Elevated stress levels can lead to decreased concentration, reduced creativity, and impaired decision-making skills, ultimately impacting overall productivity.

Decreased Job Satisfaction: Employees who do not take sufficient annual leave may experience decreased job satisfaction. The absence of regular breaks can create a sense of monotony and feelings of being overwhelmed by

work responsibilities. This can lead to a decline in motivation, engagement, and enthusiasm for their roles, ultimately affecting their overall job satisfaction and loyalty to the organization.

Burnout and Mental Health Issues: Prolonged periods without adequate rest and time off can contribute to burnout, a state of chronic physical and emotional exhaustion. Burnout is often accompanied by feelings of cynicism, detachment, and reduced personal accomplishment. Additionally, the lack of opportunities to disconnect from work-related pressures can exacerbate mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. These conditions not only negatively impact individuals but can also have ripple effects on their colleagues and the overall workplace environment. In high-pressure work environments such as EU institutions, where employees often handle complex and demanding tasks, the risk of burnout can be elevated. Factors such as heavy workloads, long hours, tight deadlines, and high expectations can contribute to increased stress levels and exhaustion. Over time, this can lead to a decline in mental health, decreased job satisfaction, and reduced productivity²².

The decline in Overall Well-being: Insufficient or underutilized annual leave can take a toll on employees' overall well-being. Without regular breaks, individuals may struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance, neglect self-care routines, and experience a diminished sense of fulfillment and enjoyment outside of work. Neglecting personal relationships, hobbies, and leisure activities can lead to a sense of imbalance and dissatisfaction in life.

Higher Absenteeism Rates and Turnover: Organizations may face higher rates of absenteeism when employees are not granted or do not take sufficient annual leave. The accumulation of stress, burnout, and other health issues can lead to increased sick leave or the need for extended time off work to recover. Moreover, employees who feel overworked and undervalued due to a lack of adequate breaks may be more likely to seek employment elsewhere, resulting in higher turnover rates.

Reduced Employee Engagement: Insufficient or underutilized annual leave can also negatively impact employee engagement. When employees are constantly consumed by work without opportunities for rejuvenation, their motivation and commitment to the organization may wane. This can result in reduced productivity, decreased collaboration, and a decline in overall team morale.²³

Recognizing the consequences of insufficient or underutilized annual leave is crucial for both employees and organizations. Employers should prioritize and encourage their workforce to take regular breaks and utilize their annual leave entitlements to maintain a healthy work-life balance, preserve well-being,

²² World Health Organization. "Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International Classification of Diseases." accessed July 2023, <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>

²³ The Olson Group (2018), Why You Need to Make Your Employees Use Their Vacation Time, accessed July 2023, <https://theolsongroup.com/make-employees-use-vacation-time/>

and foster a productive work environment. Promoting a culture that values and supports the utilization of annual leave can lead to increased job satisfaction, improved employee retention, and higher levels of overall organizational performance.

Here are some examples of incidents that demonstrate the consequences of insufficient or underutilized annual leave:

Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster: In 1986 the Chernobyl disaster, one of the worst nuclear accidents in history, was partially attributed to a culture of long working hours and insufficient time off for employees in the nuclear power industry²⁴. Fatigue and stress caused by extended shifts and a lack of adequate breaks contributed to human errors that led to the catastrophic event, resulting in significant environmental and human consequences.

France Telecom (now Orange): In the late 2000s, France Telecom experienced a series of employee suicides that brought attention to the work-related stress and demanding work environment within the company. Reports indicated that the company's aggressive management style and pressure to meet performance targets led to a culture of overwork and



limited annual leave, contributing to employee burnout and psychological distress²⁵.

Airline Pilots: The aviation industry has faced incidents and accidents attributed to pilot fatigue. For example, the crash of Colgan Air Flight 3407 in 2009, which claimed the lives of 50 people, was partly attributed to pilot fatigue resulting from extended duty periods and inadequate rest time²⁶. This incident highlighted the importance of appropriate rest and scheduling practices to ensure pilot well-being and aviation safety.

Fukushima Nuclear Disaster: In 2011, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan was one of the most significant nuclear accidents in history. It revealed the importance of rest and time off for employees working in the nuclear industry. Reports indicated that the plant's workers were overworked and had limited time off, which potentially contributed to lapses in judgment and safety protocols, leading to the disaster.²⁷

Volkswagen Scandal: In 2015, one of the most notorious incidents in the automotive industry, Volkswagen was embroiled in a scandal involving the manipulation of emission tests. It was later revealed that a contributing factor to this unethical behaviour was a toxic work culture that discouraged employees from taking time off, resulting in high levels of stress and intense pressure to meet targets²⁸. The lack of work-life balance and the absence of opportunities for employees to recharge and reflect likely played a role in the breakdown of ethical standards within the organization.

Goldman Sachs: In 2015, a Goldman Sachs intern, Moritz Erhardt, tragically passed away after reportedly working excessive hours over several consecutive days²⁹. This incident shed light on the intense work culture prevalent in the investment banking industry and sparked discussions about the importance of work-life balance and the potential risks associated with long working hours without adequate rest.

Amazon Warehouse Workers: In 2021, reports have emerged regarding the working conditions and demands faced by Amazon warehouse workers, particularly during peak periods such as Prime Day or the holiday season. Employees have spoken out about long shifts, limited breaks, and a lack of sufficient annual leave, which can contribute to physical and mental strain, fatigue, and increased injury risks³⁰.

24 World Nuclear Association [2022], Chernobyl Accident 1986, accessed July 2023, <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/safety-of-plants/chernobyl-accident.aspx#:~:text=The%20Chernobyl%20accident%20in%201986,in%20many%20parts%20of%20Europe>

25 The New York Times [2019], 3 French Executives Convicted in Suicides of 35 Workers, accessed July 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/world/europe/france-telecom-suicides.html>

26 Aerotime Hub, How Flight 3407 Completely Changed Aviation Safety, accessed July 2023, <https://www.aerotime.aero/articles/23034-flight-completely-changed-aviation-safety>

27 World Nuclear Association [2023], Fukushima Daiichi Accident, accessed July 2023, <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/safety-of-plants/fukushima-daiichi-accident.aspx>

28 BBC [2015], Volkswagen: The scandal explained, accessed July 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-34324772>

29 The Guardian, Moritz Erhardt: the tragic death of a City intern, accessed July 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2013/oct/05/moritz-erhardt-internship-banking>

30 The Guardian, 14-hour days and no bathroom breaks: Amazon's overworked delivery drivers, accessed July 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/mar/11/amazon-delivery-drivers-bathroom-breaks-unions>

During Greece's economic crisis, the government implemented austerity measures aimed at reducing public spending and addressing the country's financial challenges. As part of these measures, companies in Greece sought to cut costs and increase productivity. One approach taken by some companies was to reduce annual leave entitlements and require employees to work longer hours without adequate compensation or time off. The consequences of these measures were significant.

Employees in Greece faced increased workloads, higher stress levels, and reduced opportunities for rest and recuperation. The limited availability of annual leave meant that employees had fewer opportunities to take breaks, recharge, and attend to personal and family commitments. The impact on employee well-being was profound. Reports highlighted a rise in stress-related health issues, including burnout, anxiety, and depression, among workers in Greece. The lack of sufficient annual leave and work-life balance contributed to a decline in overall mental and physical well-being. Moreover, the absence of regular breaks and time off resulted in decreased job satisfaction, reduced productivity, and a negative impact on the quality of work³¹.

The example from Greece's economic crisis serves as a reminder of the consequences that can arise when annual leave is insufficient or underutilized. It demonstrates the importance of ensuring that employees have access to adequate rest and time off to maintain their well-being and perform effectively in the workplace. The incident highlights the need for companies and policymakers to prioritize work-life balance and protect employees' rights to annual leave, even during challenging economic circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The Right to Disconnect and the utilization of annual leave are crucial for employee well-being and productivity. Recognizing their significance, organizations should ensure employees have sufficient time to rest, rejuvenate, and pursue personal interests. Adequate annual leave contributes to a healthier, happier workforce, enhancing productivity and reducing burnout. Implementing work-life balance policies allows employees to disconnect from work-related stressors, recharge their energy, and prioritize physical and mental well-being.

Conversely, insufficient or underutilized annual leave leads to increased stress, decreased job satisfaction, and reduced productivity. Organizations must actively promote and encourage annual leave to mitigate these consequences, fostering a supportive culture and setting clear policies. The EU Staff Regulations serve as a valuable guideline emphasizing annual leave's importance, inspiring other countries and organizations to prioritize employee well-being. Organizations cultivate a healthier workforce by respecting the Right to Disconnect and implementing adequate time off policies, improving productivity and job satisfaction.

³¹ Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy [2018], Antigonas Sochos, Posttraumatic Stress During the Greek Economic Crisis: Is There Evidence for Mass Traumatization?, Volume 18, Issue 1, pages 265-283

The way forward involves:

- Develop clear policies that protect the Right to Disconnect and establish guidelines for work hours, communication outside of working hours, and annual leave utilization.
- Increasing awareness and providing education on work-life balance, the benefits of disconnecting, and the consequences of underutilized annual leave.
- Encouraging and promoting the utilization of annual leave by creating a supportive environment and removing barriers to taking time off.
- Establishing technology boundaries to ensure a healthy separation between work and personal life.
- Providing managerial support by training managers to lead by example and respect employees' right to disconnect.
- Managing workloads effectively to avoid overwhelming employees and hindering their ability to disconnect and take annual leave.
- Regularly evaluating and gathering feedback to improve policies and support the Right to Disconnect and annual leave exercise.
- Regulate the Right to Disconnect on the EU level and implement the legal framework to national legislation.

By taking these steps, organizations and countries can prioritize work-life balance, support employee well-being, and effectively exercise annual leave.



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TRADUIRE /
TRANSLATE





LEAVES AT THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION:

Facts, most popular, and recent evolution

Institutions and EU Bodies of which employees work under the Staff Regulations (SR)¹ have a similar set of leave rights. Each Institution or EU body has the legal freedom to interpret the SR corresponding anchors² in the way they wish. This might lead to slight differences in their implementation. In the Commission, in particular the SR, is completed, regulatory speaking, by a Commission decision³ and further completed by implementation practices which might differ from service to service.

The annual leave entitlement is off two working days for each completed month of service meaning 24 working days per calendar year. These basic annual leave rights are complemented by additional ones depending on the age (1 to 6 days) or the grade (1 to 3 days) of the employee.

Beyond regular annual leave, there is a flat rate supplementary home leave of 2 and a half days for the purpose of visiting your home country for employees that benefit from the expatriation or foreign allowance; this means for any employee that has its place of origin/interest formally defined and recognized by the administration as being outside the country he/she works.

1 Staff Regulations of Officials of the European Union and the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Union, laid down by Council Regulation (EEC, Euratom, ECSC) No 259/68(1), have been amended by Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 1023/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2013(2) (the 'revised Staff Regulations').

2 Articles 42, 57, 58 and 61 of the SR and its annex V, articles 16 & 91 of the CEOS (second part of the SR text)

3 Commission Decision on leave C(2013) 9051 final

One could consider as a rule of thumb that employees take 6 calendar weeks of leave a year in addition to the Bank Holidays applicable in their place of work. Bank Holidays are by consensus between 17 and 19 days per calendar year in Brussels and Luxembourg. There is also some flexibility at the Commission in working during some Bank holidays. Indeed, for many years now there are about 2 or 3 specific Bank holiday dates per calendar year (typically to adapt for Easter or May holidays) where one can work and be compensated for (a day annual leave extra for a worked Bank Holiday).

Last but not least, these annual leaves and supplementary days from the employee rights can be carried over to the next calendar year for a maximum of 12 days. This is to ensure a proper/manageable service business continuity. Requests for carry-over of more than 12 days are rarely granted. Also each year Staff in the Commission lose leave rights (probably – no available data – one or two days on average). That is beyond work they might do on weekends / nonflexible Bank Holidays / during leave periods that do not generate additional rights or compensation in effect. The possibility exists to get compensation for working on weekends/holidays but is strongly conditioned in a way that is almost never effectively granted.

The above is for everyone. Now comes the special leaves that are only provided if one fulfills specific and sometimes very precise (not to say logically limitation to avoid abuse) conditions. The Commission has a quite regular/standard set:

14 related to family reasons (adoption, maternity, marriage, death in the close family) and 14 'Others' (shift work, moving, training, elections, public office, job seeking at the end of contract, summons, etc). Beyond being linked to very precise and very limitative conditions, most of these special leaves are very limited in quantity in the sense that they do not allow fulfilling the purpose they aim at (holding elected office max 12 days per year, trade Union leaves maximum 4 days per year, moving maximum 2 days, serious illness of partner maximum 3 days, death of a (close) relative, etc).

The most used special leaves are logically the ones related to the family. Beyond the marriage, employee families often have or adopt kids and therefore benefit from maternity (max 24 weeks) and/or paternity (10 days) leave. A very trendy complementary one when parenting is of course parental leave. It is becoming more and more popular.

The parental leave is a well-established right that was brought alongside the 2004 Staff Regulations reform. The most common use of it is as an extension of maternity leave but not only. Indeed, the second is an extension of the annual leave. One could write a book about parental leave especially as it was not always properly understood and not always 'practised' in the same way by all Commission services, let alone other Institutions or EU bodies.

In the Commission, what does it entail? Does the Hybrid Working mode change its use?

The basics of this more and more popular conditioned leave are enshrined in Article 42 a of the Staff Regulations and mentioned implementing decision:

- Parental leave is a right. It can't be refused. it can only be slightly delayed so that your service can organize the Business continuity due to your scheduled absence.
- The right is of 6 months per child which can be extended to 12 months per child in given conditions (eg heavy handicap of child). It comes with an allowance (a thousand Euros)
- It can be taken full-time or half-time and for a minimum of one month.
- The right is 'usable' up to the 12th birthday date of each child.

One might think the disadvantage is that the allowance is low and does not compensate for the loss of income for the employee, but it can be associated with a part-time leave as is often practiced ensuring a minimum income (in the case of a 50% part-time, the employee gets 50 % of its salary and 50% of the allowance).

The two other key advantages of parental leave are that, unlike an interruption of career, it:

- Does not stop the employee's seniority in his grade/function from running, thereby allowing his/her career advancement.

- Does not put the employee in a position to have to pay for the JSIS (medical) coverage in addition – one keeps its full right for medical reimbursements for himself/herself and his/her family without extra costs.

Last but not least regarding this parental leave, it is compatible with the use of teleworking from abroad (away from the vicinity of your work site for 10 working days maximum per calendar year) This is particularly important as most employees are expatriates and need, beyond taking care of their children, to be there for their relatives (parents) in their place of origin.

The COVID crisis is probably one of the reasons for the increasing success of parental leave. Indeed, the crisis brought the generalized hybrid working and showed the need for dedicated (totally) work and connection-free time. The crisis also highlighted the limits of the administrative (and inhuman) treatment of leave requests (with all their limitations and conditions). We observed a related drawback in our Institution: a potential breach of medical confidentiality and privacy. Indeed, our Administration and the related services (Pay Master Office which i.e. covers medical reimbursement) are becoming increasingly involved in staff privacy. Some leaves involve providing medical or private data. The exchange of information between services is of course heavily regulated for obvious reasons. However, in some cases including leaves, confidential information was made available to such a large number of persons/services that some doubts exist, as to the guarantee of secrecy.

As we have expressed at the start, we also need to address the implementation practices differences. They differed from service to service but following an administration reorganization in 2020, these implementation differences have diminished at the Commission. Still, some special leaves are instrumentally misinterpreted by some managers/resource correspondents. We're probably at a structural level one can expect for any humanly driven organization. However, for colleagues' individual leave refusal / canceling, it can be very emotional (e.g. proof of death or burial not showing the date and/or place).

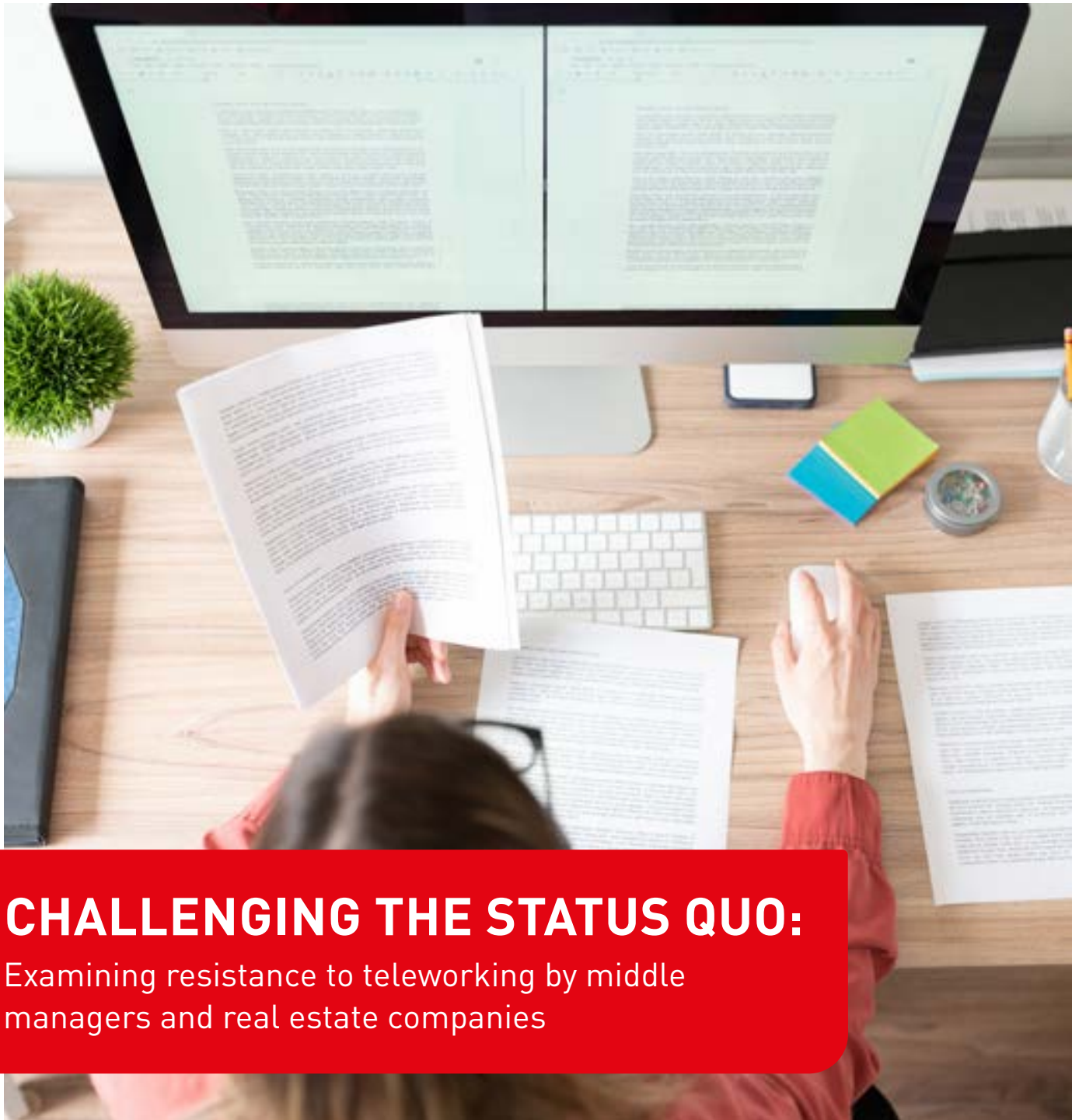


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TRADUIRE /
TRANSLATE





CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO:

Examining resistance to teleworking by middle managers and real estate companies

INTRODUCTION

As the landscape of work undergoes rapid transformation, the collision of viewpoints becomes evident in the dichotomy between middle managers' desire for traditional office settings, real estate companies' concerns over teleworking, and the trade union's role in safeguarding worker rights. This dynamic interplay underscores the complexity of shaping the future of work, calling for a delicate balance that addresses the interests and challenges of all stakeholders involved.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AND COMFORT ZONE VS. INNOVATION

Middle managers' stance in favour of returning to the office can be seen as rooted in resistance to change. Familiarity with traditional working norms and the perceived control that an office environment provides might be driving their resistance to adapting to new modes of work. Familiarity with office-based management and oversight can create a sense of control that some managers find reassuring. However, this preference could inadvertently stifle innovation. For instance, remote work can foster innovative thinking by exposing employees to diverse environments and perspectives. The virtual realm enables cross-cultural collaborations that might not have been feasible in a purely office-centric environment.

ASSUMPTION OF PRODUCTIVITY

A common argument raised by middle managers is that the office environment ensures higher productivity due to increased oversight. This perspective raises questions about whether productivity is truly maximized under constant supervision. The assumption that physical presence equals higher productivity is being challenged by the realities of remote work. Middle managers who emphasize the need for employees to be visibly working might not be fully embracing the potential of telecommuting. For example, companies like GitLab¹ have successfully managed fully remote teams, showcasing that output and impact can be achieved without constant in-person supervision.

CULTURAL MISALIGNMENT

Middle managers often emphasize the importance of maintaining organizational culture through in-person interactions. However, this view fails to acknowledge that organisational culture is a dynamic and adaptable aspect of an organization. Relying solely on office interactions for cultural continuity overlooks the potential for fostering a virtual culture that transcends physical boundaries and can be more inclusive of remote employees. For instance, companies like Automattic², the parent company of WordPress, have fostered a strong virtual culture that thrives on remote interactions. By leveraging digital tools, virtual team-building activities, and regular video conferencing, they have cultivated a cohesive culture among employees spread across the globe.

LACK OF TRUST

The assertion that teleworking diminishes collaboration and teamwork raises concerns about the underlying trust within organizations. If middle managers believe that employees will only work diligently under direct supervision, it suggests a lack of trust in their teams' abilities to self-manage. This distrust can be detrimental to morale, engagement, and the potential for autonomous, high-performance work.

SUSTAINABILITY AND INCLUSION

A renewed focus on inclusivity and sustainability underscores the value of remote work. Middle managers who prioritise the office environment might not consider the implications for employees with disabilities or those facing geographical constraints. For instance, remote work can level the playing field for individuals with disabilities who may find it challenging to commute. Additionally, remote work contributes to reduced carbon emissions and aligns with sustainability goals³.

1 The Washington Post, How to promote culture in a remote workplace, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/09/09/remote-work-culture-tips/>, last access 8 August 2023

2 Top Management Degrees, Wordpress + Automattic: A company built on working from home, <https://www.topmanagementdegrees.com/wordpress/>, last access 8 August 2023

3 Harvard Business Review, Organizational Culture | Is Remote Work Actually Better for the Environment?, <https://hbr.org/2022/03/is-remote-work-actually-better-for-the-environment>, last access 8 August 2023

REAL ESTATE COMPANIES: FINANCIAL REALITIES AND STRATEGIC ADAPTATION

For real estate companies, the impact of teleworking on their bottom line is a paramount concern. The decrease in demand for office spaces poses a threat to their traditional business model, affecting revenue streams. This financial apprehension necessitates innovative approaches to diversify offerings and reimagine office spaces. The operational landscape of real estate companies is intricately linked to physical office spaces. The advent of teleworking prompts these entities to overhaul operations and transform their properties into tech-enabled, flexible environments that align with hybrid work models. However, this transformation often requires substantial investments in infrastructure and technology. Cultural and social implications are also crucial, as office spaces symbolise corporate identity and collaboration. A delicate balance is needed to integrate modern work trends while preserving the cultural elements that define an organisation.

TRADE UNION PERSPECTIVE: EQUITY AND WELL-BEING

Trade unions prioritise employee welfare, viewing teleworking as an avenue for inclusivity. The rise of remote work offers opportunities for individuals with disabilities or geographical limitations. These unions advocate for a balanced approach that caters to diverse needs and promotes fair working conditions. They also underline the malleability of culture, asserting that inclusive virtual cultures can emerge, transcending traditional office boundaries and enriching an organization's identity.

FINDING HARMONY: A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Harmonising these multifaceted perspectives requires a proactive approach. Real estate companies can adapt by embracing the hybrid work model, offering flexible co-working spaces and technologically advanced environments. Recognising teleworking's potential, middle managers can champion innovation through diverse collaboration. Trade unions serve as a vital voice, advocating for balanced, inclusive approaches that prioritize well-being and fairness in the evolving landscape.

CONCLUSION

As we navigate the evolving landscape of work arrangements, our mission as a trade union dedicated to safeguarding workers' rights gains even more significance. The clash of perspectives between middle managers' preferences for the office, real estate companies' concerns, and our unwavering commitment to employee well-being calls for a balanced approach that puts workers at the heart of the discourse.

Teleworking's rise has the potential to reshape the future of work, offering both opportunities and challenges. While middle managers advocate for the office environment, real estate companies voice their financial concerns, and we



advocate for equitable conditions, it is essential to remember that our collective efforts must prioritise the very individuals who power our economy.

As we navigate this transition, it is imperative to champion the rights of employees and leverage teleworking's potential to benefit those facing geographic limitations. Teleworking's rise opens doors for individuals who may have previously struggled with long commutes or geographical constraints. It provides a pathway to meaningful employment for those who were once excluded due to physical barriers. Our union stands at the forefront of ensuring that this transformative aspect of remote work is harnessed to promote inclusion and accessibility.

In this pursuit, we stand firm in championing fairness, inclusivity, and the right to meaningful work. Our focus extends beyond office walls and property revenues. We emphasise the importance of accommodating various needs, including those of employees with disabilities and familial responsibilities. Through a balanced approach, we can craft a future of work that is not only economically sustainable but also just, supportive, and respectful of individual rights.

As we engage in dialogues, negotiations, and advocacy, let us remember that every step we take shapes the working landscape for generations to come. Our commitment to workers' well-being, fairness, and dignity serves as the guiding light as we navigate the intricate path ahead. In unity and dedication, we can pave the way for a future of work that empowers and uplifts each and every worker, ensuring their rights and aspirations are at the forefront of this transformative journey.



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TRADUIRE /
TRANSLATE





BURNOUT RISKS AT THE ECB: A SHORT HISTORY

This article provides an overview of the psychosocial risks existing at the ECB, triggered by the imbalance between demands and resources. Standard burnout analysis reveals that the burnout risks have reached alarming levels at the ECB and are no longer sustainable. Solutions entail working time reduction and more balance in the employment relation between the ECB and its staff.

When asking our so-called founding fathers who started the ECB twenty-five years ago, they will all describe exciting moments where they had this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bring the European project one level further and contribute to a better world. This was not exactly a time when ECB staff were counting their hours. Twenty-five years later, colleagues are still very excited about contributing to the European Project and are not counting their hours either. However, according to the latest psychosocial survey¹ one-third of them have been diagnosed as a potential burnout case², two-thirds of them show signs of mood disorder, exhaustion, or disengagement, and three quarter reported psychosomatic symptoms (muscle tension, insomnia, problems concentrating at work, headache/migraine, ...). Alarmingly, about 6% reported suicidal thoughts or ideas of hurting themselves in the last two weeks of filing the survey. This situation raises two questions: How did we get there and what can we do about this?

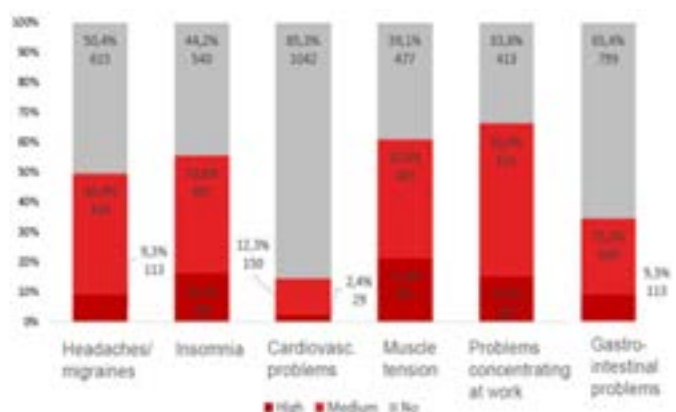
FIGURE 1 ECB STAFF BURNOUT RISKS

Source: Staff-Committee+PSY@Work wellbeing surveys (2014, 2016, 2021)

	2021 (July-Sept.)	2016 (Dec.)	2014 (Oct.)
At risk of burnout (%)	33.2	29.7	30.9
Suicidality (%)	6.1	5.4	4.5
Psychosomatic symptoms (%)	73.9	46.7	na
Respondents	1,221	1,386	903

FIGURE 2 PSYCHOSOMATIC SYMPTOMS (2021)

Source: Staff-Committee+PSY@Work wellbeing surveys (2014, 2016, 2021)



1 2021 Staff Committee Wellbeing survey, PSY@Work, September 2021

2 Based on the passing of the so-called Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI)

FIGURE 3 ECB STAFF BURNOUT SYMPTOMS (2021)

Source: Staff-Committee+PSY@Work wellbeing surveys (2014, 2016, 2021)



HOW DID WE GET THERE?

Burnout symptoms are not uncommon in professional populations who care a lot about their mission (teachers, hospital workers, etc). Whereas the indicator is often used in the HR literature as an inverted proxy for engagement, in reality, burnout symptoms often develop within workers who are deeply engaged in their work. More specifically, burnout was initially defined as a syndrome of exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced professional efficacy (see Reis, Xanthopoulou and Tsaoasis 2015³, reporting on Maslach & Jackson 1981⁴). Medically, it is essentially a depression that is triggered by an imbalance between job demands and available resources.

The demands placed on ECB staff have been very high from day one. Building a new central bank from scratch was not a negligible project. At the very beginning, such demands could be met by asking colleagues to tap into their existing stock of energy. Most naturally, the energy stock depleted with time, whereas the demands sustained or increased. The question therefore boils down to ascertaining why resources did not grow in line with demands. After all, it should have been in the interest of the institution itself to ensure it is sufficiently endowed so that its operations are not compromised.

ECB'S FUNDAMENTAL GOVERNANCE FLAW

To answer this question, we have to go back to the heart of ECB's governance. While the Maastricht Treaty transferred the monetary policy competence to the European Central Bank, there were strings attached to it, namely that the control of the institution would remain in the hands of the National Central Banks (NCBs).⁵ Each of them would indeed have a share of the capital of the European Central Bank, granting them a corresponding decision-making power over its budget and staffing. Somehow, this compares to a situation where the central entity is controlled by its subsidiaries. Beyond the six members of the ECB's Executive Board, the ECB Governing Council is composed of the Governors of the National Central Banks whose countries belong to the euro area. Whereas such Governors are expected to keep the interest of the Euro area as a whole in mind – and therefore, that of the ECB – they are de facto also in charge of defending the interest of their own central banks or countries. And here comes a crucial conflict

of interests: the more the ECB grows, the more the National Central Banks shrink. In the same vein, NCBs compete with the ECB in the labour market to attract and retain talents. The more positions available at the ECB level, the more competition for them.

Overall, this conflict of interest developed into creating a significant understaffing situation for the ECB, which materialised by the imposition of a headcount cap by President Trichet in 2004, set independently of the ECB's business needs. This headcount cap constituted the root of many evils, as business needs continued to grow – and even more so when the financial crisis hit in 2008. The ECB therefore had to find creative ways to overcome the resource limitations. One way was to request ECB staff to perform overtime on a structural basis. Another way was to engage in off-balance-sheet hiring, leading to the exponential growth of non-standard forms of employment such as temporary contracts, agency staff, and consultants, which also had an impact on the increase of psychosocial risks.

IPSO explained these governance flaws and their consequences at length in an open letter sent to NCB Governors in March 2015.⁶ The European Court of Auditors also argued along the same lines, when challenging the understaffing of the Banking Supervision in their 2016 report⁷, and the follow-up they made in 2023.⁸

There is however another level of governance flaw that also contributed to the understaffing situation. It relates to the extra-territorial nature of the ECB. According to this, the ECB is not bound by the legal framework of the host country as regards labour law. Instead, the ECB has been granted full legislative power. We are therefore in a situation where the employer is also the legislator. Besides, the lawmakers (that is: our NCB governors) have no democratic accountability towards the citizens that will be bound by their decisions (that is: ECB staff). ECB staff cannot outvote their lawmakers, simply because they are not elected! Governors are not even available to talk to ECB staff representatives – and no provisions exist which would foresee that regular meeting could take place between both parties. In a nutshell, the ECB was granted by the Treaty (drafted by NCB Governors) a joker card that no

3 D. Reis, D. Xanthopoulou, I. Tsaoasis, "Measuring job and academic burnout with the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI): Factorial invariance across samples and countries" *Burnout Research*, Volume 2, Issue 1, March 2015, Pages 8-18

4 C. Maslach, S.E. Jackson, "The measurement of experienced burnout", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 2 (2) (1981), pp. 99-113,

5 It is worthwhile flagging that the Maastricht Treaty was prepared by the Governors themselves, first in the so-called Committee of Governors and later in the so-called Delors Committee. When looking at the history of the statutes of the European Central Bank, it is therefore not surprising to see that their proposed approach was tilted towards retaining decision-making powers for themselves. This might have been at the time a necessary evil to secure their buy-in. Twenty-five years later, this approach has showed its limit as it essentially plays as a break towards the good functioning of our European institution.

6 IPSO to NCB Governors, Staffing situation at the European Central Bank, 27 March 2015 https://ipso.de/documents/2015-03-27_OpenlettertotheNCBGovernors-onECBstaffingsituation.pdf

7 European Court of Auditors, 2016, Single Supervisory Mechanism – Good start but further improvements needed [see sections 62 to 65] https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR16_29/SR_SSM_EN.pdf

8 European Court of Auditors, Special report 12/2023: EU supervision of banks' credit risk – The ECB stepped up its efforts but more is needed to increase assurance that credit risk is properly managed and covered [see sections 42 to 47] <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?ref=SR-2023-12>



federation of employers would ever dream of having in Europe. This means that, whenever there is a need to balance the contradicting interests of the employer and the employees, the legislator is by default taking the side of the employer because the legislator and the employer are the same body. On that basis, many of the features of the ECB legal framework do not encompass protections that are normally available to workers at the national level.

This governance flaw was particularly visible when it came to overtime management. Indeed, ECB staff were expected to perform overtime on a structural basis, beyond the working hours foreseen in their contract, and without any form of compensation. The argumentation used at the time was that ECB staff salaries were “all-inclusive”.⁹ No system of time measurement was in place. For a staff member willing to challenge this situation, no provision in the Staff Rules was available for them to bring the claim in an internal appeal. The so-called EU Directive on Working Time was in principle binding towards the ECB, but it was not implemented. In any case, the Directive was regulating working time going beyond 48 hours per week on average, but was silent about the obligation to compensate for the overtime performed between the weekly 40 hours foreseen in our contracts and the 48 hours of which the Directive kicked in.

STEPS TAKEN BY IPSO

Facing an increasing number of colleagues reporting exhaustion and psychosomatic symptoms, ECB staff

representatives tried to find ways to overcome the situation. First of all, IPSO obtained the establishment of a Health & Safety Committee including staff representatives in February 2011. Unfortunately, the setting of the said Committee was weakened by the fact that all health questions were excluded from its mandate. A Regular Dialogue between HR and the Staff Representatives was created to tackle health aspects, but this was merely a forum to exchange views, dominated by HR representatives and without decision-making powers.

Therefore, as a second step, IPSO started to document and quantify the level of overtime and stress in-house – merely doing what the so-called OSHC should have been doing in the first place. The first IPSO workload survey was carried out in June 2012 and revealed that high workload was affecting the health of 2/3 of the staff.

While this survey did have an impact (being even noted by the Bild Zeitung¹⁰), it did not prove enough for the ECB Executive Board and Governors to change anything to the situation. The efforts to build the business case therefore intensified. The Staff Committee, led by a majority of IPSO representatives, decided to hire a professional company to carry out the first psychosocial risk assessment of ECB’s history.

In 2014, all ECB staff were offered to pass a so-called Maslach Burnout Inventory. The results were very alarming, with one third of the staff being diagnosed as potential burnout candidates, and an additional third suffering from exhaustion symptoms. The level of suicidality was also measured, reaching 4.5% of the respondents. The publication of such figures within

⁹ This is the wording used by Ms Tumpel-Gugerell, the Executive Board member in charge of Human Resources between 2003 and 2011.

¹⁰ “Burnout Alarm bei den Euro-Rettern” 02 February 2012.



the ECB made it difficult for the ECB Executive Board to escape their responsibilities. For the first time again, they were forced to accept a dedicated meeting with the Staff Committee to discuss the figures and talk about the follow-up.

Unfortunately, the outcome of such discussions was still very disappointing. The Executive Board, chaired by Mario Draghi, challenged the methodology followed in the survey or the representativeness of the sample. Some also questioned if the suicidality rate was indeed so worrying in comparative terms. Eventually, the press got to learn about the result, which resulted in important press coverage.

At this point in time, the Executive Board could not anymore

deny the figures. We hoped that they would have taken action. Instead, they decided to launch their own staff survey, in order to get their own assessment of the situation, possibly hoping they would find a different result. Alas!, the 2015 ECB staff survey filled by 90% of ECB staff conveyed the same message: one-third of ECB staff reported that overtime was seriously damaging their health. Also, on a different note, colleagues heavily complained about favouritism in hiring and promotion, a factor that was also affecting their mental health (see later section).

As nothing was moving, the Staff Committee hired PSY@Work again to perform another edition of their burnout test in the fourth quarter of 2016, this time using the Oldenburg Burnout



Inventory (an enhanced version of the Maslach Burnout inventory¹¹). The results confirmed that the situation has structurally not changed¹². The Staff Committee also started a campaign to force the implementation of the working time directive and ask for the introduction of time measurement, which was a legal obligation that the ECB still refused to comply to. Another survey on working time and time measurement was launched. A referendum was prepared. Eventually, after months of campaigning, the ECB agreed to negotiate the implementation of a new flexitime system that would offer all ECB staff the possibility to have their overtime compensated in the form of additional days off, the so-called recuperation days. Such a system would be made on a trust-based basis, that is: without measuring working time. Instead, it granted

every ECB staff the right to credit their own leave account by additional leave days whenever they happened to work above their contractual hours.

In that regard, it is interesting to note that the intellectual debate has shifted. When the discussion started in 2010, the ECB was reluctant to implement time measurement out of fear that it would reveal the amount of overtime and force their compensation. Eight years later, after an intense campaign in favour of time measurement, the ECB became worried about the cultural impact that time measurement could have on ECB staff behaviour. They therefore decided to grant overtime compensation for the sake of avoiding the introduction of time measurement!¹³

A deal was made, however, that working time would be regularly measured at the aggregate level via regular surveys, to monitor the effectiveness of the new measures. Interestingly, we could capture the positive impact of the new measures, as the stress level captured by the ECB staff survey launched in 2018 declined by 4 ppt compared with 2015. Nevertheless, there was a need to further encourage the use of recuperation days, because colleagues were still reluctant to use them, sometimes because they were discouraged by their local management to do so. Overall, survey data since that date show that about 10% of overtime is performed, but only 10% of this overtime is claimed back as recuperation days.

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

Whereas the introduction of time compensation improved the situation, the pandemic breakthrough unfortunately jeopardized most of the gains made. The first COVID survey made by IPSO in March 2020 revealed an increased level of anxiety and exhaustion generated both by the health concerns related to the virus, the impact of isolation on mental health, and the extra burden of having to combine homeschooling/childminding with a full time-job performed from home. Another survey made in June 2020 revealed a high level of fatigue for one-third of the colleagues. The fatigue was particularly strong within the middle management – 41% of them reporting high fatigue – as they struggled to perform their coordinating role in the new remote working environment, on

11 The OLBI is a modified version of the MBI. The main difference is that it only use two dimensions (exhaustion and disengagement) instead of three (exhaustion, cynism and efficacy). Its scale contains both positive and negative statements, which is expected to lead to better psychometric properties. Is it now the standard which replaced the MBI to measure burnout risks. See Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Vardakou, I., & Kantas, A. (2003). "The convergent validity of two burnout instruments: A multitrait-multimethod analysis. European Journal of Psychological Assessment."

12 More precisely, the tests revealed a reduction in burnout levels. This reduction was however only the results of a change of the workforce composition due to the establishment of the Banking Supervision. At this occasion, the ECB workforce doubled in size to include newcomers which were on average 10 years younger than staff working in the central banks and had also less seniority in the ECB, having started two years ago only. Once comparing the two survey with the same perimeter, the situation was essentially unchanged.

13 It is also interesting to note that time measurement was initially meant as a managerial tool to ensure control over workers. This caters for situations where workers do not have an intrinsic interest in the work they do, for instance workers performing repeating tasks in a factory line. However, in an environment where workers have an intrinsic motivation to perform their task, time measurement is not anymore a tool to exert control over them but rather to protect them about themselves and organisational incentives to go beyond what is stipulated in the contracts as a way to progress in their career. In this environment, the nature of the health & safety risks is changing, with less emphasis on physical safety and more emphasis on mental health.

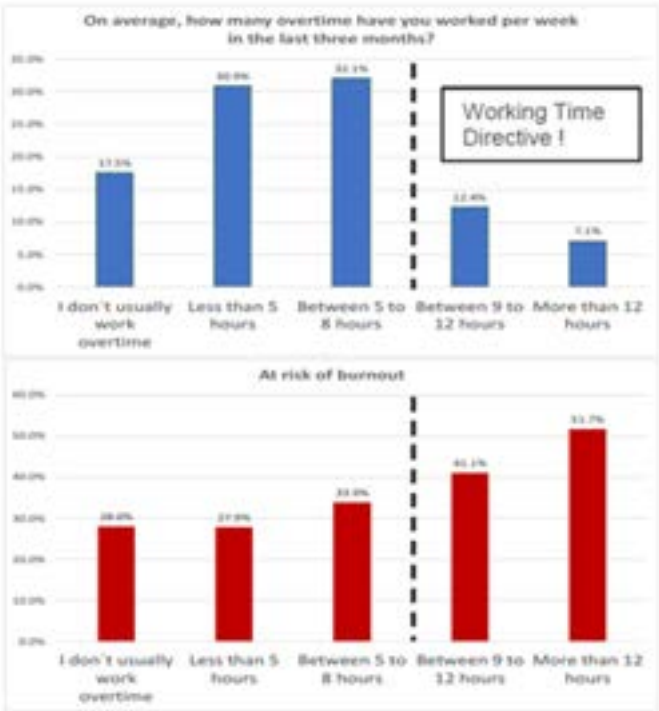
top of their other duties (many of them are also fathers and mothers). While staff expressed their appreciation towards the ECB for its management of the pandemic, and the efforts made to accommodate people’s needs, it is only in the second step that efforts were made to reduce workload via a reprioritisation of tasks. Also, the standstill of the international labour markets created a lot of anxiety among the temporary segment of the ECB workforce (roughly half of the staff), as well as with managers who had to request numerous exceptional contractual extensions to keep their businesses operating.

THE SITUATION AS OF TODAY AND ROOT CAUSES IDENTIFICATION

This is the context in which the Staff Committee launched a third edition of its wellbeing survey, together with PSY@Work, which included not only the OLBI questionnaire but additional questions aiming at identifying the root causes behind the burnout symptoms. The high workload was one important factor. It is in fact striking to see that burnout diagnostics increase with working time, specifically when the 48 weekly hours threshold foreseen by the EU Directive is breached (see figure 4).

FIGURE 4 - WORKING TIME AND BURNOUT RISKS (2021)

Source: PSY@Work-SC wellbeing survey



This third edition however brought further insights into other root causes. Splitting the sample of respondents between the “burnout” sample and the “healthy” sample, we could differentiate the factors that were either prevalent in the population at risk of burnout or substantially deviating from the “healthy” population (see figure 5). This analysis showed that, besides working time and workload, ECB staff suffered from unequal treatment and lack of equal opportunities in hiring and promotion, poor leadership practices, and inappropriate behaviors. These findings were consistent with the survey made by the ECB in 2018, which revealed that 14% of ECB staff reported having suffered from harassment and that a large majority of them also felt that knowing the right people mattered more than performing their job well to progress in their career.

FIGURE 5 – IDENTIFICATION METHODOLOGY OF ROOT CAUSES BEHIND BURNOUT (EXTRACT)

A deeper look at stressors and resources

Identification Methodology: focus on important stressors for “burnout”

Identification/Values	Agree %		Deviation Burnout vs Healthy
	Burnout	“Healthy”	
My personal goals are consistent with the organization’s goals	63%	88%	-25%
My values and the organization’s values are alike	66%	88%	-22%
For my job I have to do things that are contrary to my values	25%	7%	18%
Management treats all employees equally	23%	48%	-25%
Opportunities are granted based on merit	36%	30%	+6%
Within the organization, power games play an important role	90%	69%	21%
At work there is favoritism	79%	49%	30%
When there is a dispute there are effective appeal procedures available	13%	28%	-15%

A deeper look at stressors and resources

Identification Methodology: focus on stressors making a difference between “burnout” and “healthy”

Identification/Values	Agree %		Deviation Burnout vs Healthy
	Burnout	“Healthy”	
My personal goals are consistent with the organization’s goals	63%	88%	-25%
My values and the organization’s values are alike	66%	88%	-22%
For my job I have to do things that are contrary to my values	25%	7%	18%
Management treats all employees equally	23%	48%	-25%
Opportunities are granted based on merit	36%	30%	+6%
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At work there is favoritism	79%	49%	30%
When there is a dispute there are effective appeal procedures available	13%	28%	-15%

It is worth emphasizing the link between burnout and factors not connected to long working hours. In fact, a high workload might not necessarily be an issue whenever the worker enjoys his/her work and has sufficient resources to cope with the demands. Among the resources, factors like having sufficient autonomy over one’s tasks and working schedule, or receiving professional recognition for the work done, play a role. Work is not bound to lead to alienation but can also be a factor in personal development. A virtuous circle can exist between workload, performance, recognition and personal development, which benefits the worker and the company. However, when workers feel that their hard work is having little impact on their own condition, because it is not recognised by their management, because someone else took

the credit for the work they did or because promotions are not granted based on merit but on other factors such as personal ties, this is damaging their morale. The longer the situation lasts, the more there is a disconnect between the efforts and the rewards, and the higher the risk that burnout is triggered. This is essentially what is captured by our root cause analysis. It is also very striking that this agnostic analysis, which let the survey results speak for themselves, is matching our own experience as staff representatives. Colleagues who approach us in a situation of burnout do not only mention the high workload but also share the suffering from the lack of professional recognition or the way they were treated which was challenging their own dignity as human beings.

As a common root cause of all these factors, we find the fundamental governance flaw mentioned earlier. The high level of concentration of power within the ECB, and the corresponding absence of adequate checks and balances, is having widespread implications in many ECB processes. This touches upon time management, the fairness of the performance management and the career system, the high power granted to managers upon their staff and the lack of effective appeal systems which could give hope to colleagues to seek redress when unfairly treated. To address such root causes, it is necessary for the ECB to accept sharing the power with the staff and their representatives.

Such results were shared with the staff and of course also with President Lagarde and ECB’s Executive Board. However, we observed a similar reaction as in the first edition of our well-being survey. The representativeness of our findings was questioned, no action was taken, and the ECB felt the need to launch its own surveys possibly hoping to find different results (as they waited for the end of the pandemic to launch it). This management-led survey was eventually launched in April 2023 and inevitably found the same results as ours: 35% reported that their work-life was having a detrimental impact on their mental health, 40% reported that their workload was not manageable within their contractual hours and the same figure reporting having been often or always stressed during the past month. 17% reported suffering from humiliating behaviours, being shouted at, etc. 30% reported their feeling of having been discriminated against or equally treated, 45% said others were taking credit for the work they did. There was a general lack of trust in ECB’s determination to follow-up on this survey, including 77% not trusting HR senior management.¹⁴ The fact that, contrary to the approach previously followed, the ECB opted for not disclosing the Business Area results to the ECB at large did not reinforce staff trust.

PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

In that context, after achieving some positive results regarding the new teleworking framework applicable at the ECB, which was an important demand for many colleagues, IPSO redefined its priorities. We want the ECB to seriously follow-up on the findings of the most recent psychosocial risks assessment.

¹⁴ J. Treeck, POLITICO, “ECB riddled with aggressive, degrading, humiliating talk, internal poll finds” Jul 10, 2023



The follow-up needs include, in our view:

- 1 Working time reduction, including the exploration of a 4 day working week
- 2 The establishment of a fair career system where all ECB staff can progress based on a mix of seniority and performance.
- 3 The establishment of people-management indicators so that managers' careers are made dependent on their performance as people-managers (rather than based on their divisional output only)
- 4 The sharing of power with the staff and their representatives, including in the treatment of dignity at work case, to circumvent existing abuses of power and prevent future ones

In IPSO's experience, in an environment where the employer is enjoying exceptionally large power and faces little accountability, a lot of effort is required to bring positive change. Nevertheless, experience also showed us that with stamina and persistence, we can make change happen. You can support us in our efforts by joining IPSO as a member and participating in the initiatives we will launch to call for change.



CARLOS BOWLES

Carlos Bowles joined the ECB as a macro-economic forecaster in 2003. He earned his PhD in Economics at the European University Institute. He is currently chairing the ECB Staff Committee and also serves as IPSO's Vice-President. This article is written in his trade-union capacity.

**TRADUIRE /
TRANSLATE**





REDÉFINITION DE L'ÂGE DE LA RETRAITE

L'évolution du concept de retraite et son impact sur les individus et la société. Politiques et pratiques liées à l'âge de la retraite et leurs implications

INTRODUCTION

La retraite, autrefois considérée comme un repos bien mérité après une vie de travail, traverse une période de profonde transformation dans le monde actuel, qui évolue rapidement. La notion traditionnelle de fin de vie professionnelle à un âge fixe est remise en question par les changements démographiques, les réalités économiques et les attitudes sociales.

CHANGEMENTS DÉMOGRAPHIQUES ET RÉALITÉS ÉCONOMIQUES

L'un des principaux moteurs de la redéfinition de l'âge de la retraite est l'évolution démographique. Les gens vivent plus longtemps et en meilleure santé, et cette longévité a des conséquences importantes sur la planification de la retraite.

Par exemple, en 1990, l'espérance de vie après 65 ans était de 16,3 ans en Allemagne, de 17,2 ans en Italie et de 17,5 ans en Espagne ; en 2020, elle sera de 19,7 ans en Allemagne (+3,4), de 20,1 ans en Italie (+2,9) et de 20,5 ans en Espagne (+3,0).

Avec une telle augmentation de l'espérance de vie, l'idée de prendre sa retraite à 60 ou 65 ans ne correspond plus à la réalité d'une vie post-professionnelle potentielle qui peut être encore active et productive pendant des dizaines d'années.

En outre, les réalités économiques jouent un rôle crucial dans la redéfinition du concept de retraite. De nombreuses personnes ne sont pas prêtes financièrement à prendre leur retraite à un âge prédéterminé en raison d'une épargne inadéquate, de pensions insuffisantes ou de la nécessité de continuer à travailler pour se soutenir et subvenir aux besoins de leur famille. Par conséquent, les gens réévaluent leurs plans de retraite et recherchent des options flexibles qui leur permettent de rester actifs sur le marché du travail ou de poursuivre d'autres activités lucratives.

IMPACT SUR LES INDIVIDUS

L'évolution du concept de retraite présente à la fois des défis et des opportunités pour les individus et la société. D'une part, retarder le départ à la retraite peut permettre aux individus

d'améliorer leur sécurité financière, de combler le fossé entre l'épargne et les dépenses, et de profiter d'une vie post-professionnelle plus épanouissante, axée sur un but précis. Travailler plus longtemps peut également contribuer à un meilleur bien-être mental et physique en donnant un sens à sa vie, en favorisant les interactions sociales et en offrant une stimulation intellectuelle continue.

Cependant, la redéfinition de l'âge de la retraite soulève également des inquiétudes pour certaines personnes. Les emplois physiquement exigeants peuvent devenir insoutenables avec l'âge, et les personnes confrontées à des problèmes de santé peuvent avoir des difficultés à continuer à travailler. En outre, certaines personnes peuvent souhaiter prendre une retraite anticipée afin de poursuivre des intérêts personnels, de passer du temps avec leur famille ou de s'engager dans des activités qu'elles n'ont pas pu découvrir pendant leurs années de travail.

Dans le contexte du secteur public international, nombreux sont ceux qui aspirent à prendre leur retraite, à retourner dans leur pays d'origine et à profiter des dernières étapes de leur vie dans un contexte culturel plus familier. Concilier le désir d'une retraite anticipée avec la sécurité financière et les attentes de la société devient une décision complexe pour beaucoup des gens.

IMPLICATIONS POUR LA SOCIÉTÉ

La redéfinition de l'âge de la retraite a des conséquences importantes pour la société dans son ensemble. Le modèle traditionnel de retraite basé sur un âge fixe entraîne souvent une perte soudaine de compétences, de connaissances et d'expériences précieuses au sein de la population active. En encourageant les gens à travailler au-delà d'un certain âge, la société peut exploiter le vaste potentiel des personnes âgées et bénéficier de leur expertise, de leur sagesse et de leur assistance. La redéfinition de l'âge de la retraite remet également en question les idées reçues sur le vieillissement et la productivité. Elle favorise la collaboration intergénérationnelle en encourageant l'échange d'idées, de compétences et de points de vue entre les générations plus âgées et plus jeunes. Cette interaction entre les différents groupes d'âge au sein de la vie professionnelle renforce non seulement l'innovation et la productivité, mais favorise également l'émergence d'une société plus inclusive et plus diversifiée sur le plan de l'âge.

Les gouvernements, les employeurs et les responsables politiques réévaluent les politiques et les méthodes relatives à la retraite afin de faire face à l'évolution du paysage de la retraite. De nombreux pays ont déjà relevé l'âge officiel de la retraite ou mis en place des options de retraite flexibles, permettant aux personnes de se retirer progressivement de la vie active ou de réduire leur temps de travail tout en continuant à bénéficier d'un revenu. Les employeurs s'adaptent également à l'évolution du concept de retraite en proposant des programmes de retraite progressive, des possibilités de développement des compétences et des initiatives de parrainage. Ces pratiques profitent aux employés plus âgés et contribuent à la rétention des talents, au transfert des connaissances et à la diversité de la force de travail.



Cependant, des défis subsistent. La discrimination fondée sur l'âge sur le lieu de travail et l'accès limité aux possibilités de formation et d'emploi pour les personnes âgées peuvent entraver la mise en œuvre efficace de politiques de retraite redéfinies. Pour résoudre ces problèmes, il faut une législation complète, une application efficace et un changement culturel qui valorise les contributions et le potentiel des personnes de tous âges.

En conclusion, le concept de retraite subit une profonde transformation en réponse aux changements démographiques, aux réalités économiques et à l'évolution des attentes sociales. La redéfinition de l'âge de la retraite offre aux individus des possibilités d'accroître leur productivité, leur sécurité financière et leur épanouissement personnel. Simultanément, elle pose des défis et appelle à des ajustements des politiques et des pratiques en matière de retraite. En adoptant ce changement de paradigme, les sociétés peuvent libérer le potentiel des personnes âgées, promouvoir la diversité des âges et favoriser un avenir plus inclusif et productif pour tous.



CARLO SCANO

Carlo Scano, de la section Commission de l'U.S.B., est membre du Comité fédéral de l'USF ainsi que membre du Comité exécutif et trésorier de l'U.S.B.

TRADUIRE /
TRANSLATE





BALANCING ACT :

Women Redefining Work-Life Balance in Trade Unions

In the ever-evolving landscape of the modern workplace, the concept of work-life balance has emerged as a pivotal concern for individuals across various professions. However, for women engaged in trade unions, the pursuit of work-life equilibrium takes on unique significance and complexity. The fact is, among thousands of our members, 51% are women. Some of them are members of our federal bureau and have seats on our executive committee boards. These are individuals who have navigated the intricate intersection between their professional commitments and personal lives while contributing to the evolution of our trade unions.

In this series of interviews, we presented them with sets of questions, and they selected the ones they wished to answer. These interviews represent their voices, echoing their opinions and shedding light on their perspectives, insights, and experiences. These illuminate the intersection of gender, trade unions, and the pursuit of balance between professional and

private lives. They offer insights into their personal definitions of this crucial work-life balance and explain why it holds particular importance within the context of their roles in trade unions.

One of the central themes of this discussion revolves around the role of trade unions in supporting women's quest for work-life balance. Are there specific initiatives, policies, or programs introduced by trade unions to address these issues? Is there adequate flexibility and accommodation for women to manage their work and personal lives within these organizations, and what improvements are suggested?

Their stories and insights provide valuable lessons and inspiration for women of all ages and backgrounds striving to achieve delicate harmony and equilibrium between their professional and personal lives. [AK]



SANDRINE COETS

Sandrine est membre de l'Union Syndicale depuis 2018 et a été activement impliquée au début de 2022 lorsqu'elle a été élue l'une des vice-présidentes du comité de l'Union Syndicale Bruxelles. Elle est en charge des questions juridiques et a été désignée pour participer à certaines commissions mixtes (réunissant des représentants du personnel et de l'administration pour discuter de sujets particuliers) telles que le COPEC (comité de l'égalité des chances). Elle participe également à diverses activités conjointes telles que des réunions avec les directeurs généraux pour les reclassements (et promotions) et est activement impliquée dans divers dialogues sociaux, en particulier les problèmes concernant les collègues travaillant dans les délégations de l'UE à l'étranger ou le statut des agents contractuels.

Qu'est-ce qui vous a motivée à devenir membre d'un syndicat ?

(Hélas) ma motivation est venue de problèmes vécus et de l'envie d'éviter cela à d'autres en me servant positivement de mes expériences pour les mettre au service des collègues.

Comment définiriez-vous « l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et privée » et pourquoi pensez-vous que cela est important, en particulier pour les femmes dans notre syndicat ?

Pour moi, l'équilibre entre les deux sphères, à savoir la vie privée et la vie professionnelle, existe lorsque l'on peut profiter et s'épanouir dans chacune d'elles sans que l'une n'empiète indûment sur l'autre et vienne ainsi perturber l'équilibre de l'autre sphère. Je pense que cet équilibre est personnel et s'applique aussi bien aux hommes qu'aux femmes. Cependant, contrairement à une balance, il est évident que plus on investit ou accepte de charges dans l'une de ces sphères, moins il en reste pour l'autre. La véritable difficulté réside dans la recherche de l'équilibre qui convient à chacun. À une époque où les responsabilités familiales et parentales pèsent encore largement sur les épaules des femmes, tout en leur demandant d'être aussi efficaces, productives et performantes que leurs collègues masculins, il est évident que l'équilibre est d'autant plus difficile à atteindre et à maintenir.

À mon sens, c'est la féminisation croissante du marché du travail qui a mis en lumière cette notion d'équilibre entre la sphère privée et la sphère professionnelle. Auparavant,



l'équilibre était plus simple et reposait sur la répartition des rôles au sein du couple : l'homme était associé à la sphère professionnelle, tandis que la femme assumait la sphère privée, principalement axée sur la famille. À présent, avec la participation de tous dans la sphère professionnelle (la seule qui permet de s'épanouir socialement et de subvenir à ses besoins), il est nécessaire de redéfinir la répartition des responsabilités au sein de la sphère privée. Les entreprises et le monde du travail doivent également s'adapter à cette nouvelle réalité, car cet équilibre est essentiel pour la santé physique et mentale, ainsi que pour le bien-être de tous.

Selon vous, quels sont les éléments clés qui contribuent à un bon équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée ?

L'aptitude et la possibilité de séparer les 2 :

- Aptitude dans le sens qu'il faut pouvoir se laisser à soi-même un temps pour le travail et un autre pour sa vie privée (et s'y forcer au besoin)
- Et la possibilité, dans le sens où il faut un équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée qui permette - non seulement en théorie, mais aussi en pratique - d'avoir cette séparation de manière régulière.

Cependant, les nouvelles technologies ont rapproché la sphère professionnelle de la vie privée, facilitant ainsi la transition d'une sphère à l'autre, tout en compliquant la délimitation claire entre les deux. Cela a des conséquences sur la santé et le bien-



être des individus, comme en témoigne le nombre croissant de cas de burn-out.

De plus, certaines périodes de la vie ou événements peuvent entraîner une charge plus importante dans l'une des sphères, ce qui devrait normalement se traduire par une réduction des responsabilités dans l'autre sphère. C'est particulièrement vrai pour la parentalité, qui ajoute un nombre significatif de tâches à la sphère privée. Cette situation devrait être compensée par une réduction des tâches dans la sphère professionnelle, mais ce n'est pas toujours possible en raison des conséquences financières, telles que la perte de salaire ou les répercussions sur l'avancement de carrière. Une fois de plus, cela entraîne un déséquilibre avec des conséquences sur la santé des individus, en particulier des femmes, qui continuent à assumer la majorité des responsabilités familiales.

Quels sont certains des défis courants auxquels vous avez été confrontée pour maintenir un équilibre satisfaisant entre votre vie professionnelle et votre vie privée au sein de votre institution ?

Généralement tout changement dans l'une ou l'autre sphère peut avoir un impact sur l'équilibre. À mon avis, l'un des défis principaux est celui de la parentalité. Devenir parent est une période extrêmement compliquée pour maintenir un bon équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée, car bien sûr votre vie privée est soudainement bouleversée et « chargée », mais rien ne change en général dans la sphère professionnelle. La conséquence au niveau professionnel sera

généralement une stagnation ou un retrait/une diminution du travail (ce qui aura évidemment des conséquences financières et sur l'avancement de la carrière). Malheureusement, c'est particulièrement vrai pour les femmes, qui assument encore souvent la majeure partie des tâches familiales.

J'ai en tête l'histoire d'une collègue qui était chef d'unité adjoint (et dont la compétence était donc déjà reconnue), mais qui a refusé un poste de chef d'unité qui lui était proposé car, en tant que mère de 2 jeunes enfants, elle estimait ne pas pouvoir le faire correctement (son mari était en effet chef d'unité).

Avez-vous déjà eu l'impression que votre équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée était compromis par la nature de votre travail ? Si oui, comment y avez-vous remédié ?

Oui mais pas tellement en raison de la nature de mon travail mais plutôt de l'absence de flexibilité suffisante pour tenir compte d'un changement important et assez courant de la vie privée : celui de devenir parent. Encore actuellement je ne suis pas sûre d'avoir atteint un équilibre. En l'occurrence après avoir vécu une expérience professionnelle difficile dans une délégation, ce qui m'a obligée à revenir « récupérer » au siège, je me vois dans « l'obligation » de repartir car constatant qu'en Belgique (en Europe je pourrais dire), la gestion d'un temps plein et de 3 enfants en bas âge est très difficile et ne permet sûrement pas un équilibre vie privée/vie professionnelle. On reçoit très peu d'aide. Je repars donc en délégation où je pourrai en principe trouver plus d'aide (vu le salaire plus élevé dus aux primes d'expatriation – le prix pour être loin de chez soi et des siens et loin d'un système de santé sûr – et la possibilité d'engager du personnel d'aide). D'autres formules auraient pu être possibles mais n'existent pas.

Comment un bon équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée affecte-t-il votre bien-être général et votre satisfaction au travail ?

Les 2 sont évidemment liés. De cet équilibre dépend le bien-être et la motivation.

Comment le syndicat vous a-t-il aidée, vous et d'autres femmes à trouver un meilleur équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée ?

Le syndicat me permet de procurer à d'autres ce que j'aurais voulu recevoir lors des moments difficiles vécus au travail (et qu'il est très difficile d'obtenir par le système lui-même) : de l'écoute, de la compréhension, de l'aide dans les démarches possibles à entreprendre face à un problème, etc. Cela me donne l'impression d'être utile, ce qui pour moi est important. Cependant, je ne pense pas que cela ait un impact sur l'équilibre entre les 2 sphères : il s'agit clairement d'améliorer l'une d'entre elles : le travail.





Existe-t-il des initiatives, des politiques ou des programmes spécifiques que le syndicat a mis en place pour traiter les questions d'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée ?

L'US a organisé plusieurs ateliers sur le sujet, mais nous pouvons toujours faire plus. Comme je l'ai répété tout au long de cet entretien, un moment particulier où il existe un risque réel de rompre cet équilibre est celui où l'on devient parent. Je pense qu'il serait intéressant de s'y intéresser (au niveau institutionnel... ce qui pourrait se faire via le syndicat).

Il n'y a pas longtemps, j'ai participé à un séminaire sur "la parentalité au travail", que j'ai trouvé très intéressant et qui visait, d'une part, à expliquer aux managers/cadres comment mieux prendre en compte ce moment important (et assez inévitable) dans la vie de leurs employés (pour éviter de les "brûler") et, d'autre part, à donner des conseils aux employés « parents » pour mieux combiner leur rôle de parent et de travailleur (sans les « brûler »).

En termes d'initiatives, je pense par exemple à la proposition du Parti socialiste (PS) belge qui a récemment déposé une proposition de loi visant à harmoniser le congé de paternité avec le congé de maternité (actuellement fixé à 15 semaines en Belgique) et à le rendre obligatoire. Cette initiative ouvrirait la voie à une répartition plus équitable des responsabilités familiales, supprimerait le risque de discrimination à l'embauche (lorsqu'un employeur voit une femme devant lui et craint déjà le moment où elle annoncera sa grossesse), permettrait aux femmes de gérer plus sereinement leur début de grossesse (la peur de "l'annonce" à l'employeur) et offrirait aux pères et co-parents un droit/devoir équivalent de s'occuper de leurs enfants, allégeant ainsi le fardeau des femmes. Cette proposition pourrait également inspirer le syndicat.

Dans votre institution, pensez-vous qu'il y a suffisamment de flexibilité et d'aménagements pour que les femmes puissent gérer leur travail et leur vie privée ? Quelles améliorations suggèreriez-vous ?

Pour moi, ce n'est pas suffisant. Mais pas pour les femmes en tant que telles, plutôt pour les parents (en particulier celui qui assume l'essentiel des charges familiales, c'est vrai souvent les femmes...mais il arrive que ce soient des hommes).

Il vaudrait mieux intégrer la parentalité dans le monde du travail (aussi bien les hommes que les femmes). Cela pourrait commencer par un meilleur accès à l'information, un réconfort, des explications et une préparation pour les futurs parents. Une proposition concrète qui a été évoquée lors d'une conférence sur l'intégration de la parentalité dans le monde du travail à laquelle j'ai assisté, était la création d'un guide de la parentalité qui pourrait inclure :

- 1 Informations juridiques et administratives : Fournir une vue d'ensemble des droits et des lois liés à la parentalité, y compris le congé parental, les prestations et les garanties de protection de l'emploi.

- 2 Gestion du temps et de la charge de travail : Conseils sur la manière d'adapter son emploi du temps aux besoins de la famille, en mettant l'accent sur les options de travail flexible, le télétravail et l'horaire flexible.
- 3 Possibilités de garde d'enfants : Fournir des informations détaillées sur les types de garde d'enfants disponibles, qu'il s'agisse de crèches, de garderies, d'assistantes maternelles ou d'autres solutions, ainsi que des conseils sur le choix de la meilleure option en fonction des besoins de la famille.
- 4 Gestion du bien-être des parents : des sujets tels que la prévention de l'épuisement parental, la gestion du stress et de l'anxiété, et des ateliers pratiques tels que le retour au travail après un congé de maternité/paternité, l'expérience de la grossesse au travail, l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie personnelle, ainsi que des stratégies pour éviter l'épuisement parental.
- 5 Le congé parental : Expliquer en détail les congés disponibles pour les parents, y compris les congés de maternité, de paternité et de maladie des enfants. Souligner les procédures de demande et les ressources pour s'assurer que les parents comprennent bien leurs droits.
- 6 Soutien psychologique et émotionnel : Mettre en place des ressources de soutien psychologique et émotionnel, telles que des séances de coaching ou de conseil pour les parents qui traversent des périodes difficiles.
- 7 Ressources familiales : Fournir des informations sur les groupes de soutien aux parents, les associations de familles, les réseaux sociaux et d'autres moyens d'entrer en contact avec d'autres parents.
- 8 Équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée : Proposer des stratégies et des conseils pour maintenir un bon équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée, en soulignant l'importance de prendre du temps pour soi.
- 9 Rôle des responsables et des collègues : Sensibiliser les cadres et les collègues à l'importance de soutenir les parents, en mettant en évidence les pratiques de leadership inclusives et les moyens de créer un environnement de travail favorable.
- 10 Changer la culture d'entreprise : Suggérer des moyens de promouvoir une culture d'entreprise inclusive qui valorise l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée et encourage l'égalité des sexes en matière de responsabilités familiales.

Avez-vous eu recours à des formules de travail flexibles, telles que le travail à distance, l'horaire flexible ou le partage d'emploi, pour vous aider à maintenir un bon équilibre ? Quel impact ces mesures ont-elles eu sur votre expérience ?

Oui, j'ai utilisé le "congé parental" pendant les vacances scolaires. L'impact est très faible en termes d'équilibre car la sphère privée allait être plus chargée (cfr s'occuper de 3 enfants de moins de 10 ans en congé) que j'ai décidé d'alléger l'autre. J'ai donc gardé le même équilibre... déjà déséquilibré compte tenu de ma réponse précédente et de mon besoin de partir pour trouver plus d'aide et évidemment avec, d'autre part, une contrepartie financière négative.

Existe-t-il une perception selon laquelle le fait de donner la priorité à l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée pourrait entraver la progression de la carrière, en particulier pour les femmes ? Comment cette perception peut-elle être prise en compte ?

Il est évident que la perception générale est encore celle d'un "se donner" au travail. Mais je pense que les choses changent avec la jeune génération qui attache de plus en plus d'importance à cet équilibre, quitte à sacrifier la progression de carrière, ce qui pourrait peut-être à terme faire évoluer les mentalités sur ce qui est important.

Quels conseils donneriez-vous aux jeunes femmes qui s'inquiètent de devoir concilier leurs aspirations professionnelles et leurs engagements personnels ?

Soyez fortes, sachez ce que vous voulez et dites-le, les choses peuvent changer (et changent), mais n'abandonnez pas (ni la vie familiale ni la vie professionnelle), battez-vous pour que les choses changent et pour qu'il y ait un meilleur équilibre.

Quel rôle pensez-vous que les employeurs et l'institution dans son ensemble devraient jouer dans la promotion de l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée pour les femmes ?

Les employeurs et l'institution dans son ensemble jouent évidemment un rôle sociétal crucial dans la promotion de l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée. Dans un monde en constante évolution, il est impératif que les employeurs suivent l'évolution des besoins de la société et mettent en place des mesures qui répondent aux attentes des nouvelles générations. Et l'une de ces nouvelles attentes est bien évidemment l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée.

Les employeurs et l'institution doivent donc d'abord reconnaître que l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée est devenu un critère décisif d'attractivité de l'emploi pour la nouvelle génération, ainsi qu'un facteur important

de la satisfaction et du bien-être des employés au travail. Ils doivent également tenir compte du fait que la parentalité est une source assez courante et relativement inévitable de déséquilibre dans l'entreprise, et qu'il serait donc utile d'avoir une politique positive en la matière.

L'employeur et l'institution sont en tout cas les premiers à subir les effets négatifs de l'absence de prise en compte d'un déséquilibre. Lorsque les besoins des parents ne sont pas pris en compte, cela peut entraîner une augmentation de l'absentéisme, de la rotation du personnel et une baisse de la motivation des employés. Les femmes en particulier peuvent être touchées de manière disproportionnée, car ce sont souvent elles qui gèrent les charges familiales et qui sont confrontées à des défis supplémentaires liés à la maternité et à la garde des enfants.

Bref, en intégrant ce fait et en prenant des mesures positives concrètes, les employeurs et l'institution démontreraient leur engagement en faveur du bien-être de leurs employés et contribueraient à briser les stéréotypes liés au genre.

Y a-t-il des changements que vous aimeriez voir au sein de la profession qui pourraient faciliter un meilleur équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée pour les femmes à long terme ?

Absolument, il existe plusieurs changements concrets et rapides au sein de la profession qui pourraient grandement faciliter un meilleur équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée (et en particulier pour les femmes) à long terme. Les horaires flexibles et les possibilités de télétravail sont l'un d'entre eux et ont déjà été largement mis en place dans l'Institution (encore qu'avec des degrés divers selon les fonctions, les institutions et les DG).

À nouveau, j'ajoute que l'élément qui pourrait être davantage encore pris en compte par l'institution, car source de grand déséquilibre, est la parentalité. À côté du traditionnel congé parental déjà prévu, d'autres pistes pourraient ainsi être explorées pour soutenir cette période particulièrement dense pour tout parent (et en particulier les mamans) :

- Un Guide de la Parentalité : Élaborer un guide complet et convivial offrant des informations détaillées pour concilier parentalité et carrière professionnelle au sein de l'institution (aspects légaux, avantages/facilités offerts par l'institution, ressources disponibles pour soutenir les parents) ;
- Un accompagnement lors du départ/retour en congé maternité/paternité ;
- Un soutien à l'allaitement et un aménagement des espaces de travail : par exemple, créer des zones de repos confortables et des salles de lactation spécialement équipées, comprendre que l'allaitement suit des horaires physiologiques imprévisibles, dédier des frigos au lait maternel, installer des sièges d'allaitement ;

- Un congé paternité obligatoire (pour alléger les mamans et permettre aux papas de profiter de leurs enfants aussi) ;
- Proposer des ateliers de soutien aux parents et de sensibilisation professionnelle des managers (avec des sujets tels que la gestion de la parentalité au travail, l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée, la déconstruction des stéréotypes de genre, les ressources disponibles pour les nouveaux parents et la communication efficace).
- Des solutions de garde d'enfant (en partenariat avec des services reconnus) ;
- Des programmes de mentorat intergénérationnel permettant aux femmes plus expérimentées de guider et de conseiller les plus jeunes, en partageant leurs
- Une évaluation objective de la performance : Mettre en place des processus d'évaluation de la performance qui tiennent compte des responsabilités familiales et évaluent les employés sur la base de leurs résultats plutôt que de leur présence physique au bureau.
- Des groupes de soutien internes : Créer des groupes de soutien internes où les femmes peuvent partager leurs expériences, échanger des conseils et discuter des défis spécifiques liés à la conciliation travail-famille
- Un leadership inclusif : Promouvoir un leadership inclusif qui encourage activement la participation des femmes aux postes de direction et qui valorise leur contribution équilibrée entre vie professionnelle et vie privée.

Comment parvenez-vous personnellement à trouver un équilibre entre vos responsabilités professionnelles et votre vie privée ? Y a-t-il des stratégies ou des pratiques que vous trouvez particulièrement efficaces ?

Des stratégies et aides extérieures pour gagner du temps (encore mieux quand elles ne coûtent rien) : aide pour les courses (commande en ligne), aide pour la cuisine (livraison de box avec des recettes), aide pour la garde des enfants (famille, amis...), télétravail (même si cela empêche la claire scission entre travail et famille)... Sans tout cela, la vie en Belgique aurait été ingérable.

Que pensez-vous de l'organisation du travail sur 4 jours par semaine ? Si vous êtes pour (ou contre), pouvez-vous expliquer pourquoi ?

Personnellement, je serais en faveur d'une diminution du temps de travail en général : 4 jours, mais avec toujours 8 heures par jour (les fameuses 32 heures françaises qui me paraissent être une très bonne idée en termes d'équilibre entre vie privée et vie professionnelle).



DANIELA MORMILE

Daniela Mormile est membre active de l'Union syndicale depuis une dizaine d'années. Elle a été impliquée dans l'action syndicale depuis son entrée à la Commission il y a plus que 30 ans. Elle a été présidente d'un autre syndicat pendant des années ainsi que Présidente du Comité du personnel de Bruxelles. Elle militait déjà dans des associations et dans des mouvements d'étudiants avant cela. Elle est actuellement détachée de l'Union Syndicale Bruxelles en tant que membre du Comité du personnel de la Commission à Bruxelles. A ce titre, elle est aussi membre de différents comités paritaires dans cette institution (Comité de promotion, comité pour le temps de travail, comités de discipline, membre de jury de concours).

Qu'est-ce qui vous a motivée à devenir membre d'un syndicat ?

L'homme (et la femme) est un animal social, disait Aristote. Et pour cela, nous avons besoin de relations sociales et de nous entraider les uns les autres pour notre développement humain et social. La solidarité est aussi un principe fondamental pour construire des sociétés respectueuses de la diversité et pour défendre les intérêts des plus faibles. Le syndicat en tant qu'organisation sociale ne fait pas exception et doit promouvoir ces principes. Pour cette raison, j'ai décidé de m'engager. Je ne crois pas aux logiques individualistes et aux prises de pouvoir personnelles.

Comment définiriez-vous "l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée" et pourquoi pensez-vous qu'il est important, en particulier pour les femmes dans notre syndicat ?

Le concept d'équilibre en général est très difficile à faire passer car il implique une révision de la façon de penser historiquement dominante et qui est le résultat de stratifications successives dans les structures sociales. Un rééquilibrage demande des réajustements et donc un changement de culture.

Par exemple, quand j'ai rejoint l'US Commission Bruxelles il y a quelques années, il n'y avait que 3 femmes dans le comité exécutif et 11 hommes !! Et tout le monde (la majorité masculine) trouvait cela normal. Depuis, je me suis investie à faire passer le message qu'un syndicat doit être représenté aussi par des femmes, et j'ai demandé l'application de quotas à chaque élection.



Ce genre de situation a aussi un impact sur l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée des femmes dans le syndicat. Par exemple, la coutume de tenir des réunions le soir et les week-ends empêche les femmes jeunes, actives, et avec une famille de s'engager dans le syndicat. Je continue à mener une bataille contre ces pratiques dépassées à l'ère digitale des réunions en ligne. Je suis sûre qu'on arrivera à obtenir de meilleures conditions pour l'intégration des femmes dans les activités syndicales, mais il faut insister.

Selon vous, quels sont les éléments clés qui contribuent à un bon équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée ?

Nous devons faire attention à ne pas mélanger les facilitations techniques qui permettent cette conciliation (télétravail, réunions avant 17h30, mise en place de services de crèches et garderies, etc.) avec les possibilités réelles d'avoir une vie professionnelle et une carrière pour les femmes qui soient équivalentes à celles des hommes.

Je me réfère notamment dans le cadre syndical à l'accès aux postes de direction politique les plus élevés. Si vous regardez dans l'organigramme de l'USF, les dirigeants de notre organisation comme les présidents de l'USF, de l'USB, et de la plupart des organisations membres sont des hommes. Dans ces conditions, nous pouvons avoir le meilleur des systèmes de conciliation de vie privée-professionnelle au travail dans lequel la discrimination des femmes est perpétrée sur la base de la nature de leur travail et des tâches qui leur sont confiées.



Quels sont certains des défis communs auxquels vous avez été confronté pour maintenir un équilibre satisfaisant entre vie professionnelle et vie privée dans votre institution ?

Renoncer à postuler sur des postes qui m'intéressaient. Quand j'avais des enfants en bas âge, cet équilibre a été difficile à garder. Cela a certainement eu un impact sur ma carrière. J'ai dû choisir, comme beaucoup de femmes de mon époque (mais pas uniquement), entre la carrière et la famille.

Avez-vous déjà eu l'impression que votre équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée était compromis par la nature de votre travail ? Si oui, comment y avez-vous remédié ?

Absolument, j'ai été obligée de faire un choix. Je n'étais pas disponible pour partir en mission, par exemple, et donc je n'ai pas pu avoir le même développement de carrière ni la même visibilité que d'autres collègues hommes.

Comment un bon équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée affecte-t-il votre bien-être général et votre satisfaction au travail ?

Un bon équilibre est à 80 % une affaire de bien-être individuel. Je m'en suis aperçue en écoutant les histoires de nombreux collègues qui s'adressent à nous tous les jours pour des problèmes soi-disant de harcèlement. Dans certains cas, ces personnes sont réellement des victimes de harcèlement et de

comportements inappropriés sur le lieu de travail. Mais dans la plupart des cas, derrière ces histoires, il y a des individus en souffrance qui n'arrivent pas à qualifier cette souffrance. Ce sont des personnes avec des parcours familiaux et sociaux compliqués, des problèmes de santé, de solitude, de marginalisation. N'oublions pas que nous sommes pour la plupart des expatriés qui ont été déracinés de leur lieu d'origine, de leur famille, d'amis, pour vivre dans un milieu international, en contact avec des cultures et modes de vie différents. Concilier tout cela est déjà extrêmement compliqué si tout va bien. Mais quand on est confronté à une situation difficile et imprévue, telle qu'un divorce, un abandon, une maladie, la réaction individuelle s'amplifie jusqu'à se sentir la victime d'un système entier, y compris dans le contexte de son propre travail. Cela explique le nombre important de dépressions et de maladies psychiques dans notre institution. Il faut faire attention.

Pouvez-vous nous faire part d'expériences personnelles au cours desquelles le maintien d'un bon équilibre vous a permis d'améliorer votre bien-être mental, physique ou émotionnel ?

Le bien-être, je le répète, dépend des individus, de leurs histoires, de leur capacité de réaction et de leur volonté de s'aimer. À la base, il est important de garder un certain respect envers soi-même, de son corps en pratiquant du sport, en essayant d'avoir une vie saine, et de son mental, en pratiquant des activités qui nous procurent du plaisir. Personnellement, j'adore faire des promenades, visiter des musées, jouer du piano, et surtout cuisiner pour mes amis et mes enfants.

Comment le syndicat vous a-t-il aidée, vous et d'autres femmes à trouver un meilleur équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée ?

À un moment de ma vie, grâce au syndicat, j'ai pu faire du télétravail pour m'occuper de mes enfants. C'était ce que je voulais à ce moment.

Existe-t-il des initiatives, des politiques ou des programmes spécifiques que le syndicat a mis en place pour traiter les questions d'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée ?

Malheureusement, non. Cependant, je répète qu'au lieu de simplement mettre en place des initiatives, l'US devrait engager une réflexion sur la nécessité de changer sa culture pour intégrer les femmes dans ses structures et son groupe dirigeant.

Dans votre institution, pensez-vous qu'il y a suffisamment de flexibilité et d'aménagements pour que les femmes puissent gérer leur travail et leur vie privée ? Quelles améliorations suggèreriez-vous ?

Comparé à il y a 20 ans, d'énormes changements ont eu lieu. Aujourd'hui, nous pouvons tous télétravailler, même depuis l'étranger, par exemple. Si cela a favorisé les femmes, je n'en suis pas certaine. Prenons le télétravail. En permettant de travailler de n'importe où et à n'importe quel moment, le nombre d'heures travaillées a considérablement augmenté. Ainsi, même si on travaille depuis sa cuisine en préparant le dîner, l'impact de cette surcharge de travail sur la vie familiale a parfois été désastreux. La seule amélioration possible est de favoriser un véritable développement de carrière et l'intégration des femmes à la Commission et aux autres institutions (et non seulement pour les femmes "managers" pour lesquelles des quotas sont prévus).

Existe-t-il une perception selon laquelle le fait de donner la priorité à l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée pourrait entraver la progression de la carrière, en particulier pour les femmes ? Comment cette perception peut-elle être prise en compte ?

Absolument. Il ne faut pas confondre les deux aspects, même si certains trouvent leur intérêt à le faire (je vous laisse deviner leur sexe).

Quels conseils donneriez-vous aux jeunes femmes qui s'inquiètent de devoir concilier leurs aspirations professionnelles et leurs engagements personnels ?

Malheureusement, même si elles télétravaillent et sont flexibles, le fait d'avoir une famille continuera à être un élément de discrimination pour elles. Si elles veulent faire carrière, elles doivent être prêtes à renoncer à leur famille ou à accepter de

travailler trois fois plus que leurs collègues masculins, ce qui pourrait malheureusement les mener vers un épuisement professionnel. J'en ai rencontré quelques-unes.

Quel rôle pensez-vous que les employeurs et l'institution dans son ensemble devraient jouer dans la promotion de l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée pour les femmes ?

Une révision de la politique de carrières pour une véritable intégration des femmes est la démarche fondamentale à entreprendre pour instaurer le changement. Sans cela, le reste n'est que de la flexibilité qui s'applique de manière identique à tous, hommes et femmes, sans résoudre de problème majeur.

Comment parvenez-vous personnellement à trouver un équilibre entre vos responsabilités professionnelles et votre vie privée ? Y a-t-il des stratégies ou des pratiques que vous trouvez particulièrement efficaces ?

Je suis actuellement dans une phase de ma vie où j'ai beaucoup de temps pour moi. Cela me permet également de prendre du recul par rapport aux problématiques liées au travail. Aujourd'hui, j'arrive à me détacher plus facilement du "boulot" qu'auparavant. J'ai pratiqué la méditation et les techniques de respiration, ce qui m'a beaucoup aidé. Le reiki est également une technique que je recommande aux femmes. C'est fantastique.

Que pensez-vous de l'organisation du travail sur 4 jours par semaine ? Si vous êtes pour (ou contre), pouvez-vous expliquer pourquoi ?

Je travaille tout le temps, même en vacances, bien que je ne le recommande pas évidemment.

Cela dit, nous vivons dans une société de services où la richesse n'est plus basée sur la production de biens matériels comme au siècle passé. Avec l'automatisation, les processus sont devenus de plus en plus rapides, ce qui permet aujourd'hui d'accomplir les mêmes tâches qu'il y a 20 ans en un temps record. Cela laisse la possibilité de travailler moins.

Honnêtement, je n'ai pas une position tranchée sur la semaine de 4 jours. Tout dépend des conditions financières et de la possibilité de conserver l'aspect des "relations sociales" au travail. L'isolement est le principal problème de nos sociétés post-COVID.

Y a-t-il autre chose que vous souhaiteriez ajouter ou partager sur l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée dans votre institution, en particulier du point de vue des femmes ?

Oui. Mon message aux femmes et aux hommes est de continuer à se battre pour réaliser le changement culturel nécessaire en vue d'atteindre l'égalité homme-femme. C'est là que nous devons chercher la base de l'équilibre.



VAIDA RUKAITE – DRAZDOVE

Vaida joined Union Syndicale Petten in 2012, shortly after starting at the Joint Research Centre in Petten. Her first action as a union member was a memorable one. She went on strike in cold weather when the administration decided to extend the weekly working time in 2012, all while expecting her third child. Vaida is a member of the Executive Committee of the US-Petten and was recently elected to the bureau of the USF. As the Chairwoman of the Local Staff Committee in Petten, for her second term, she primarily focused on social dialogue activities within the Staff Committee, which slightly differs from the union's scope.

What prompted you to become a member of a trade union?

I was attracted by the opportunity to have my rights defended. When I joined the Commission in 2007 as a contract agent, I held a somewhat naive belief that the Commission was the most progressive and fair employer in the world. However, after seeing the situation from within and noticing the discrepancies between declarations and reality, the inequalities between men and women, the existence of glass ceilings, limitations for colleagues from newly accessed countries, and the acquisition of power by certain managers and toxic colleagues, I felt that the union is a platform to address these injustices.

How would you define "work-life balance," and why do you think it's important, especially for women in our trade union?

Defining "work-life balance" is always tricky. The term implies that work is not part of life, which I disagree with. Work should also be lived well, executed effectively, and integrated into your overall well-being. For me, balance means not being overly stressed for extended periods, effectively managing my workload, and still having time for my family, including meaningful conversations during the week. Achieving work-life balance is essential for everyone's health. For decades, society praised workaholics and had a better acceptance of fully dedicated male professionals compared to their female counterparts. While this statement is a simplification of complex social constructs, some may find it offensive. It's my personal perspective. Even with a supportive husband, as a working mother, I often find myself trapped in a never-ending cycle of guilt. As a professional, I feel guilty when I need to leave work early for family reasons, and I feel guilty when I must focus on work or travel for it, while missing

important events in my children's lives. Achieving this balance is an aspiration but often feels impossible, even with tools like flexitime, parental and family leaves, and time credits. Ultimately, it comes down to the humanity and understanding from your manager. However, due to COVID, the paradigm of work-life balance has shifted. We've learned to work in a hybrid mode, realizing the benefits of working from home and the importance of team collaboration, collegiality, and office space. This flexibility is a win-win for both employers and employees. While there are stories of "bad apples," these individual unfortunate cases should not overshadow the good framework the EC has provided for its staff.

In your opinion, what are the key components contributing to a healthy work-life balance?

The aforementioned tools, such as flexitime and leaves, are essential. However, it's also crucial to find satisfaction in your work, feel that it's meaningful, and earn the trust and respect of your manager(s).

What are some of the common challenges you've faced in maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance in your institution?

I started working at the Commission in September 2007, and my second son was born on October 31. In Lithuania, we had generous maternity leave, and I was judged for returning to work when my son was only four months old. Balancing work and breastfeeding was challenging, and it remains my biggest regret. Other common challenges include being available for children's school events, which often occur during core working hours, resulting in my absence from many of them over the years. Now, with my children older and the flexibility of hybrid work and flexitime, planning and managing these challenges is easier.

Are there specific initiatives, policies, or programs that the trade union has introduced to address work-life balance issues?

I have always been proud that the idea of flexitime originated in Petten and was achieved by colleagues from our union. It's a great idea that significantly helps us balance our lives.

Have you used flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, flexible hours, or job sharing, to help maintain a healthy balance? How have they impacted your experience?

Yes, I took advantage of remote work and began taking parental leave in 2022 during the summer. Ironically, it's not to spend time with my children but to spend time with my mother, my only surviving parent. During COVID, we couldn't visit my home country, and I realized that it's not about how long my mom will stay with us but how many more times we'll see her. This realization led me to plan more time and quality time with her, as a strong family relationship is crucial for work-life balance.

Is there a perception that prioritizing work-life balance might hinder career progression, particularly for women? How can this perception be addressed?

There may be such a perception, but it's less prevalent than in the past. Changing the approach involves top management leading by example and treating their teams accordingly. In the case of the JRC, our DG is doing just that.

How do you personally manage to strike a balance between your work responsibilities and personal life? Are there specific strategies or practices that you find particularly effective?

I don't always achieve a perfect balance, and the scale often leans towards work. However, it should be simple: rest, delegate, ask for help, and prioritize your health. Ultimately, your family, mental health, and physical health are the most important things.





URSZULA MOJKOWSKA

Urszula is the President of Union Syndicale in the European Parliament (US-PE) and has been a member of the trade union since 2020.

What motivated you to become a member of a trade union?

I am a defense attorney by education and practice. It has always been my calling to help people, and in the EU Institutions, trade unions offer an opportunity to fulfill that calling.

What are some of the common challenges you've faced in maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance in your institution?

The main challenge is evident: the conditions for trade union secondments in the European Parliament are prohibitive; in practice, there are none. Consequently, every trade union activist faces the dilemma of either giving up trade union work or working two jobs. This means that most of my evenings and weekends are occupied by trade union work, which, in the long term, is unsustainable and the opposite of work-life balance. The fact that there are fewer women than men engaged in trade unions is quite telling in this context.

Have you ever felt that your work-life balance was negatively impacted by the nature of your job? If so, how did you address it?

Every day! We have raised the issue of the functioning of trade unions in the EP with our hierarchy, but so far, nothing has changed.

How does achieving a good work-life balance affect your overall well-being and job satisfaction?

Since it is impossible to find the right work-life balance as a trade unionist in the European Parliament, due to the absence of proper arrangements for the functioning of trade unions, this has a clear negative impact on health.

Are there any specific initiatives, policies, or programs that the trade union has introduced to address work-life balance issues?

The matter does not concern the trade union but rather the relations between the trade unions and the employer.

Do you think there is enough flexibility and accommodation for women to manage their work and personal lives in your institution? What improvements would you suggest?

For some time, our Institution put in place flexible arrangements for teleworking, which were an enormous help, especially for women. However, it now seems that the Parliament is planning





to reduce teleworking, which, in our opinion, would be a step in the wrong direction. It's important to remember that a large majority of employees in the EU Institutions are expats without access to family support for matters as basic as caring for small children, which, frankly, affects women. Therefore, flexible teleworking was a game changer, and we would like to keep it.

Have you used flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, flexible hours, or job sharing, to help maintain a healthy balance? How have they impacted your experience?

So far, teleworking has been helpful, but the complete ban on teleworking from abroad (it seems that the European Parliament is the only EU Institution maintaining this ban) is a problem, especially since I am currently based in Poland. The possibility to telework from one of Parliament's three locations (BRU, LUX, or STR) would allow regular contact with our trade union members and help me better fulfill my duties as the president of the organization.

What advice would you give younger women concerned about balancing career aspirations with personal commitments?

I've observed that women are less inclined than men to delegate, and we tend to be perfectionists. My advice is to remember that you only have the tools you have, and you can only do so much with malfunctioning software, etc. So, take it easy and do your best, but don't place undue pressure on yourself, which is not entirely yours to bear within a hierarchy. Also, consider taking some management courses and see if you can delegate some of your tasks.

What role do you think employers and the institution should play in promoting work-life balance for women?

I would say there should be less training and more action on the part of the employer. We all know the theory, but it's the practical arrangements that matter. Simplification of bureaucratic procedures, which consume a lot of our working time, would also be beneficial.

Are there any changes you'd like to see within the institution that could facilitate better work-life balance for women in the long term?

Better use of teleworking. Cutting down on commuting time saves an average of two hours per day, which is self-evident. Most of my female colleagues have reported that when teleworking, they take more breaks to move around, possibly because they are, by default, wearing more comfortable clothes instead of office attire, and nobody looks at them strangely when they do their sit-ups. Scientists have raised concerns that sitting is the new smoking, with its negative effects being even more pronounced on female bodies.

How do you personally manage to strike a balance between your work responsibilities and personal life? Are there strategies or practices you find particularly effective?

I'm simply waiting for better times for trade unions in the European Parliament!



VÉRONIQUE MICHEL

Véronique est membre élue de l'IPSO (Organisation internationale et européenne des services publics), le seul syndicat reconnu par la Banque centrale européenne. Elle aspire à créer un lieu de travail inclusif afin que chaque employé se sente respecté et puisse progresser. Les employés sont souvent présentés comme des atouts précieux par les organisations qui ont besoin des talents de leur personnel pour réussir. La reconnaissance de leurs compétences crée, en effet, un environnement de travail sain qui, à son tour, stimule l'engagement et la productivité des employés. C'est ce qu'elle appelle un "cercle vertueux".



Selon vous, quel est le rôle d'un syndicat ?

En tant que porte-parole des salariés, les syndicats assurent les freins et contrepoids nécessaires dans les secteurs public et privé. Au cours des dernières décennies, le monde a connu de profondes mutations : l'avènement des technologies numériques a transformé les lieux de travail, les citoyens attendent des preuves tangibles des chartes éthiques des organisations, mais aussi une transparence et une responsabilisation accrues de leurs représentants politiques... Clairement, les citoyens souhaitent être des acteurs de leur vie, se sentent responsables, et sont très désireux de créer une société meilleure. Dans ce contexte, l'objectif des syndicats est d'améliorer les conditions de travail des salariés pour le bénéfice de tous, y compris pour les investisseurs de leur organisation, mais aussi de relever des défis sociétaux tels que la digitalisation et l'emploi, le changement climatique, la sécurité alimentaire, la sécurité sociale, le maintien des services publics, de meilleures retraites... Les syndicats ont un rôle important à jouer pour façonner nos sociétés, aux niveaux local et national, mais aussi au-delà de nos frontières. Les gens se sentent de plus en plus préoccupés par l'avenir du monde et souhaitent participer à sa gouvernance. Je crois donc que les syndicats d'aujourd'hui doivent être définis comme des groupes de pression – des lobbies –, les représentants du personnel comme des lobbyistes au sein de leur propre organisation, mais aussi pour leur contribution à la société en général, et les salariés, par leur travail et leur engagement, comme des actionnaires de leur organisation.

Quelle est votre définition d'un environnement de travail efficace ?

Les salariés devraient se voir offrir des opportunités d'évolution de carrière, quel que soit leur tranche d'âge, leur sexe, leur nationalité, leur origine sociale (un aspect souvent négligé), leur niveau hiérarchique dans leur organisation, leur mode de travail (à temps partiel ou à temps plein), ou s'ils ont un handicap... Une organisation devrait pouvoir refléter la société telle qu'elle est, sans exclure des éléments de cette société.

Dans cette perspective, les syndicats contribuent à concevoir une stratégie RH efficace pour attirer les talents, créer de la diversité, développer des compétences avec des opportunités de promotion, mais aussi retenir l'expérience. Les connaissances acquises par l'expérience sont en effet un savoir-faire précieux souvent oublié. Et cette connaissance est liée à l'ancienneté. L'âge ne doit pas être considéré comme un obstacle mais comme une opportunité. L'expérience ne s'invente pas, elle s'acquiert avec du temps et de la patience. À travers les échecs et les succès.

Une gouvernance, si, et seulement si, elle ambitionne d'être efficace, doit également accepter la diversité de pensées : un véritable défi lorsqu'on évolue dans un milieu de travail international avec des employés aux origines culturelles diverses, qui possèdent des façons de penser et de travailler

différentes, mais aussi des expériences propres et une histoire distincte avec les syndicats et la représentation du personnel dans leur pays d'origine (un aspect à ne pas négliger). Collaborer avec les autres, se remettre en question, être prêt à écouter et à apprendre des autres peut conduire à la conception de projets innovants qui autrement n'auraient jamais vu le jour, mais qui souvent se révèlent essentiels au succès d'une organisation. C'est vrai : la créativité et l'innovation rendent une organisation unique et performante. Mais il faut que les organisations osent ! Il faut oser se remettre en question. Ont-elles l'ambition de réussir ? Cette approche est pragmatique et s'appuie sur mon expérience personnelle. Je l'ai mise en pratique et ça marche.

Pensez-vous que la participation des employés à la gouvernance d'une organisation peut faire la différence ?

Que ce soit dans le secteur public ou privé, pour toute organisation, poser les bases d'un environnement de travail inclusif et respectueux commence par la participation du personnel à la conception de sa stratégie. L'Allemagne, par exemple, a mis en place une législation visant à impliquer les travailleurs dans la gouvernance de leurs entreprises, elle est appelée « Mitbestimmungsrecht » (le droit de codétermination).

Quelle est votre approche en ce qui concerne sur l'équilibre vie professionnelle – vie privée ?

Depuis l'apparition du COVID, les gens du monde entier ont commencé à s'interroger sur le sens de leur travail, leurs aspirations et l'impact de leur vie professionnelle sur leur vie personnelle. L'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée n'est pas une nouveauté, mais je dirais qu'il est devenu un sujet de préoccupation majeur depuis que l'idée de la qualité de vie est désormais largement reconnue - ce qui est particulièrement le cas pour la génération actuelle mais n'était pas nécessairement le cas pour les générations précédentes.

L'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée est lié à la participation des femmes en général, des femmes avec enfants (qui doivent souvent travailler et s'occuper de leur foyer), mais aussi de toutes celles et ceux qui aident leurs parents. Parce que "les femmes représentent la moitié du ciel", elles devraient être accompagnées dans leur vie professionnelle. Les femmes devraient se voir offrir des opportunités et un salaire égal en reconnaissance de leurs talents. Il en va de même pour tous ceux qui s'occupent de leurs parents mais aussi des handicapés et des personnes âgées. Ils font tous partie de notre société.

TRADUIRE



TRANSLATE



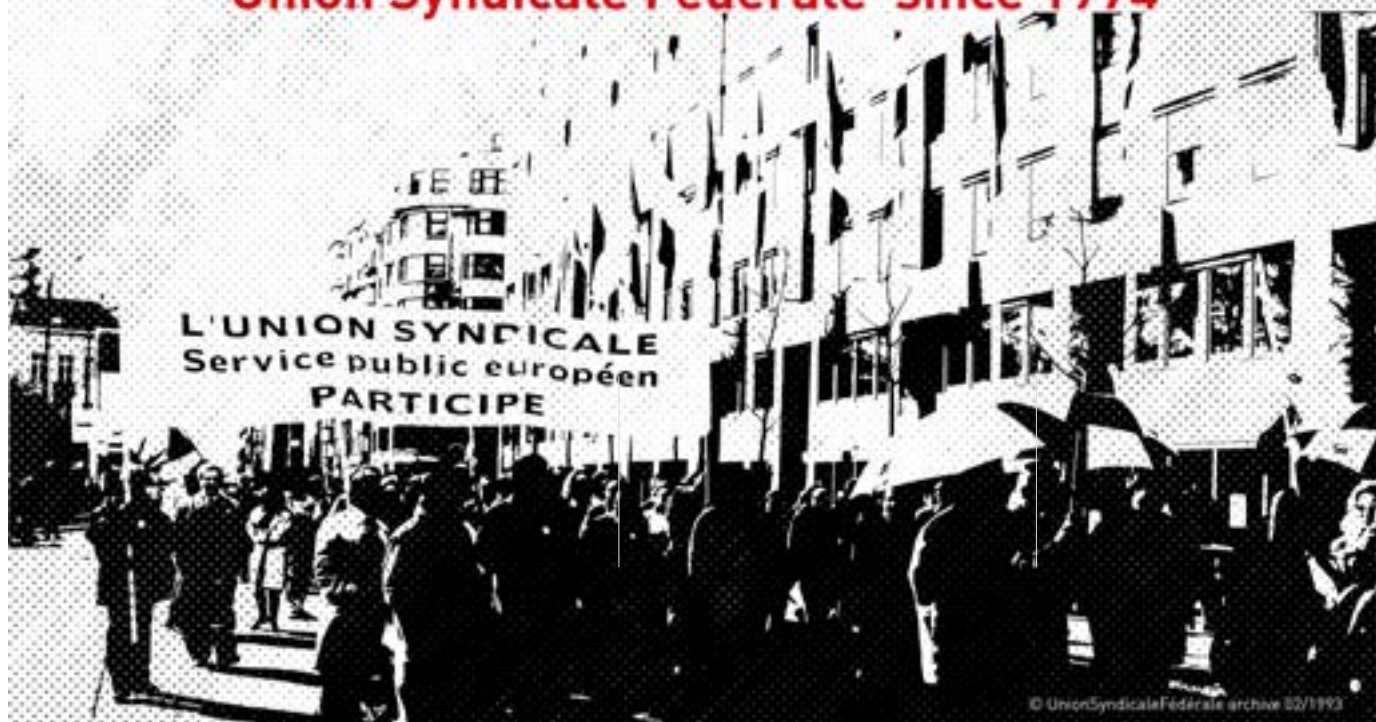




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