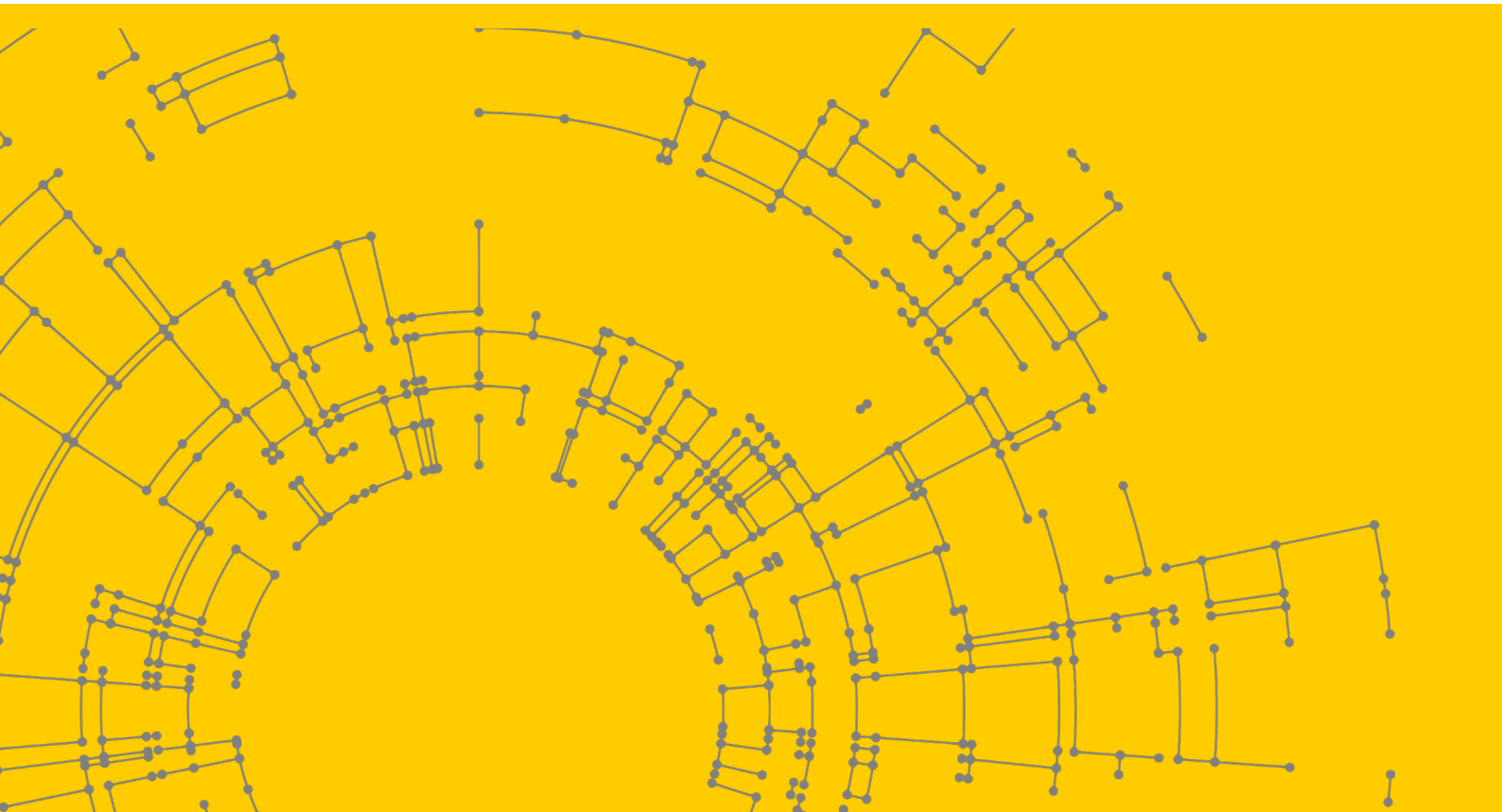




Union
Syndicale
Fédérale

2025 Internal Survey Report on
Teleworking & Hybrid Work

USF Working Group



Executive Summary

In early 2025, USF launched an internal online survey to gather insights into ongoing digitalisation efforts across its Member Organisations. The initiative aimed to assess the current state of digital transformation within the USF community and to better understand its impact on both teleworkers and office-based colleagues. The primary objective was to collect a robust set of qualitative and quantitative inputs to support the development of a digitalisation Vade mecum—a collection of practical recommendations and best practices—scheduled for presentation before the summer break of 2025.

The survey was distributed internally among USF Member Organisations and completed on a voluntary and anonymous basis, encouraging open and experience-based feedback. The questionnaire combined structured questions with open-ended responses, allowing participants to report on digital tools, working practices, communication processes, and perceived benefits or challenges associated with digitalisation.

Survey results constitute a key resource for the USF Member Organisation Committee, enabling the identification of both effective approaches and areas requiring further reflection or improvement. Data were analysed using a descriptive approach, with aggregated results highlighting common trends and qualitative responses providing contextual insights and illustrative examples.

While the findings are not intended for external publication or statistical generalisation, they play a central role in strengthening internal communication and supporting informed discussion within the USF community. This report presents an overview of the main responses, trends, and insights emerging from the survey, with the aim of fostering shared understanding and guiding future actions related to digitalisation.

Recommendations

by USF Working Group on Telework and Digitalisation

The internal survey developed by the USF working group on digitalisation was launched early 2025 and provided an overview on the situation in the various member organisations. The revealing details of this survey are taken together with the general comments and analyses available in the media to draft a set of recommendations for the future.

1. Fundamental considerations

The Covid crisis boosted all technical developments allowing telework from home like no other event. The gathered experience opened up an entirely new chapter of work relationships worldwide with a deep impact on everyday life. As soon benefits and dangers appeared clearly and led to a broad discussion throughout the society, both benefits and dangers were identified and sometimes overrated. The challenge that remains is to find a balance, identify the important details and get as many of these details as possible of the work arrangements right. A key question is how deep the involvement of staff representatives will be appropriate.

On the positive side of teleworking:

- As USF committed to more attention for the carbon footprint issue, one first benefit of telework is achieved by reducing the commuting of workers to their workplaces and back.
- Commuting time is mostly lost for workers and generates costs for the employee, which is a further point of consideration.
- Families with small children or responsibility for elderly family members welcome the additional flexibility and saved time.
- Many other employees with lower family constraints welcome the flexibility offered by teleworking achieving a better work-life balance.
- **Considering the diversity of personal situations of workers and the advantages enumerated above, it appears unwise to take a dogmatic stance against or in favor of telework.**
- Employers take advantage of the reduced need for office space. Objecting to this consequence as such is not easy, as reduced costs through less office rental may also allow for a higher efficiency of the organisation which will be welcomed by users or citizens.

All considerations above apply to international staff organised in USF branches, with some additional aspects to be considered: expatriation may cause additional challenges for workers caring for elderly or children. Telework opportunities, including working from abroad, may be assumed of easing some situations. It appears thus right for USF to focus on the details of telework circumstances and arrangements, avoiding dogmatic positions against (or in favour of) telework.

On the negative side of teleworking:

- The media reported amply on the negative side of teleworking. Isolation is to be named, particularly dangerous for students and young professionals. Poor equipment working at home, leading to various health problems are mentioned.
- The loss of office space mostly comes along with hot-desking, which is mostly unpopular due to its flavour of anonymity in the work environment. Hot desking weakens the bond with the workplace and may also raise issues with ergonomics.
- A further issue is arbitrariness granting or refusing the option of telework, which calls for the examination of two essential questions:
 - which tasks are suitable for telework.
 - where and how should this question be assessed, and a decision taken (administrative or legal redress).

These two questions are inextricably linked to the ability or inability of middle management to trust their employees and linked to acceptable levels of control from a remote place, avoiding excessive micro-management.

The issue of the **right to disconnect** is particularly relevant for teleworkers, as the traditional boundaries of the employer's premises become blurred. This fluidity can lead managers to request additional work at any time of the day—or night—while, at the same time, **the recording and monitoring of working hours may become unclear when teleworking**. From the employees' perspective, the loss of clear boundaries between work and private life is frequently reported, with workers themselves finding it difficult to disconnect. As a result, this situation often leads to **excessive working hours, reduced motivation, and an increased risk of fatigue and burnout**.

A further important consideration is the great variety of tasks even within one organisation. Blanket agreements to be applied to all workers are therefore difficult to establish, even within one single organisation with an open-minded management. Only the right to disconnect, non-discrimination and similar fundamentals can be identified and kept in agreements. First and foremost, the Agreement on digitalisation of EPSU and the European National Administrations (USF resolution of the 2023 Alicante congress) is to be considered at local level.

A further problem reported upon is the lack of skills of middle management, who more than often fall into the trap of excessively micro-managing teleworkers. Leadership based on trust is not a given. Special training of managers to this effect may be a sound demand of staff representations. These fundamental considerations are well reflected in the USF internal survey and lead, together with the survey results, to the following analysis.

2. Analysis

Tasks one could consider as comparable or similar do not lead to harmonised practice throughout our organisations. One organisation stands out with two 60 days per year rules, asking for 60 days in office per year and allowing 60 days of telework abroad (in one of the member states). Another organisation allows for a substantial time of teleworking but asks for office presence every other week, which considerably reduces the options available to employees caring for children or elderly family members. Other organisations offer very limited options.

Rationality does not appear to be the guiding principle in the design and implementation of telework systems. Instead, practices often depend largely **on the personal—and not necessarily rational—preferences of higher management or supervising body representatives**, leading to **inconsistent and sometimes random outcomes**, especially when staff representatives were insufficiently involved in the decision-making process.

There are obviously several similarities with the practice and constraints known from national public services. However, as expatriate employees of international organisations mostly have old family members in home countries and / or children with special needs, the issue of teleworking in a member state for longer periods can be an essential option when trying to improve work-life balance.

3. Conclusions

The resolution of the 2023 Alicante Congress resolution contains the essentials of our policy on digitalisation and telework. Addressing the problems experienced and making the best use of the technically available options require first and foremost the deep involvement of local staff representatives who are familiar with the tasks in question.

Indeed, staff representatives are aware of the nature of the tasks involved and are able, more than any other actor in this context to give guidance to management and provide colleagues with support.

This support is **two-fold**, as the telework options made available to communities must be appropriate to the nature of the tasks performed. **Arbitrariness in the granting or rejection of telework requests calls for individual support by staff representatives**, as well as for clear conflict-resolution procedures. In organisations where a single employer encompasses multiple task categories, several distinct staff communities may coexist: some may be able to telework extensively, while others may have limited access to telework due to the specific requirements of their tasks.

The focus on the tasks is essential, as even the same employee may well be entrusted with tasks that require office presence while others are perfectly suitable for telework.

The loss of bonds and creativity at the workplace may call for regular meetings of procedures or other compensation measures (campus days, social events etc). The shape, frequency etc of these meetings must be reasonable and adequate; arbitrariness must be ruled out. Again, involvement of the local staff representatives is the right approach to improve the efficiency and fairness of these meetings or other compensation measures.

Health and safety rules and procedures must be extended to the new source of potential problems related to telework. This includes the mandates of the existing committees and their agendas that must be updated to match the new challenges.

Leaving the whole definition of telework options and its application to management alone would be the worst situation for all actors and must be avoided under all circumstances.

Deep involvement of both staff committees and unions is a must, for the current situation and for the future, both in the drafting of internal telework rules and their application in daily life.

Key Findings

The key findings below are based on the result of the survey, explores how European institutions are adapting to digitalisation, telework, and evolving workplace policies, highlighting key trends, inconsistencies, and risks.

The findings draw attention to critical areas such as employee representation in digital strategies, the right to disconnect, telework flexibility, workplace equity, and occupational safety. While some institutions have embraced flexible and modern work arrangements, significant gaps remain in terms of policy coherence, enforcement, and worker inclusion.

These disparities not only affect employee well-being and satisfaction but may also impact institutional performance and resilience in the long term. This analysis underscores the urgent need for more inclusive, consistent, and employee-focused approaches to digital workplace transformation.

1. Employee Representation in Digitalisation

- Unions are largely excluded from digitalisation decisions (only 3 out of 17 institutions involve them).
- Staff committees have some involvement (9 out of 17 institutions), but their role is inconsistent.
- Institutions with stricter digitalisation policies tend to exclude worker representation more.

- ⊘ Without employee representation, digital policies are designed primarily for institutional efficiency rather than worker well-being.

2. Right to Disconnect & Work-Life Balance

- 10 out of 18 institutions have an official policy on the right to disconnect, but enforcement is weak.
- Some institutions treat it as a recommendation rather than a rule.
- Employees in digitalised workplaces feel more pressure to remain available outside work hours.

- ⊘ The existence of a policy does not guarantee real work-life balance if managers do not respect it.

3. Telework Flexibility & Workplace Equity

- Huge disparities exist in telework policies:
 - Some allow only 10 days/year.
 - Others permit up to 140+ days/year.
 - Rules about presence in the office are inconsistent → Some require 2 days/week, while others have annual quotas (e.g., 60 days/year).

- Few institutions fully cover home office costs (electricity, internet, furniture).

- Common Limitations :
 - Geographical restrictions: Some institutions do not allow teleworking outside the EU or specific partner countries.
 - Approval process: Teleworking from abroad often requires case-by-case approval rather than being a standard policy.
 - Distance restrictions: In some cases, telework is only allowed if the employee can return to the office within 2 hours.
 - Policy variations: Some institutions have additional 30 days of occasional telework, while others impose stricter rules.
 - Energy savings exceptions: Certain institutions allow extra teleworking days during office closures (e.g., for summer or winter shutdowns).

- Medical exceptions: Some institutions allow teleworking abroad only for medical or justified reasons.
- Task-based allowance: Some rules depend on job tasks rather than fixed limits.

↳ Employees in different institutions or even within the same workplace may experience inequalities in telework access.

→ Assigned Desk / Hot Desking And Telework Rules

A strong connection between assigned desk policies and telework rules in various institutions.

- Institutions with fewer assigned desks tend to have more teleworking flexibility
 - > Organizations that allow more telework days (especially abroad) often have hot desking or shared spaces instead of assigned desks.
 - > Example: Some institutions allow up to 90 days of teleworking abroad and simultaneously remove assigned desks in favour of dynamic workspaces.
- Institutions that restrict telework have more fixed desks
 - > If teleworking is strictly limited (e.g., only 10 days per year abroad), employees are more likely to have permanent desks.
 - > Some institutions explicitly state that all employees get a desk, meaning teleworking is not expected to be a dominant work mode.
- Medical reasons are a key factor in both policies
 - > Both in teleworking rules and assigned desk policies, medical justifications are a major reason for exceptions.
 - > Example: Employees needing special accommodations for health reasons may receive a dedicated desk and additional telework flexibility.
- Some institutions are moving to fully dynamic workspaces
 - > A few organizations are transitioning from assigned desks to fully dynamic spaces, where desks are only available on a booking system.
 - > These same institutions often reduce the telework limit for fairness, ensuring that space remains available for all employees.

4. Workplace safety & risk management

- Only 5 out of 18 institutions have ergonomic safety policies despite increased screen time.
- Few institutions conduct risk assessments for remote work.
- Most institutions lack conflict resolution processes for telework disputes.
- ↳ Institutions focus on digital transformation but neglect the long-term physical & mental health risks.

5. Data protection & telework security

- Only 6 out of 18 institutions have a formal data protection policy for telework.
- Many institutions lack separate accident insurance for remote workers.
- ↳ Without data security measures, employees & institutions risk breaches, leaks, or cyber-attacks.

6. Telework as a core aspect of digital transformation

- Telework is increasingly central to workplace operations, especially in a post-COVID world. The shift to remote and hybrid working models has become more common and permanent in many organisations, driven by the availability and use of digital tools (cloud services, communication platforms, virtual collaboration tools).
- Employer policies on telework are evolving but often lack clarity or are not universally enforced. In some organisations, telework is flexible and increasingly accepted, but in others, it's still under review or considered as an exception rather than the norm.

7. Digital tools and its support are crucial

- Employer support for digital tools is essential for successful remote work. Many institutions provide employees with the necessary hardware (laptops, screens, ergonomic chairs, etc.), though support for other aspects like internet connection or heating remains limited or unclear.
- The responses show that some employers are committed to providing adequate digital infrastructure (hardware, software, technical support), while others leave employees to arrange these resources on their own.

8. Data protection and cybersecurity are critical

- With the shift to remote work and digital collaboration tools, ensuring robust data protection is a growing priority. Many organisations have policies in place, but enforcement and clarity vary.
- There's also a growing concern around security risks related to remote access, with some organisations offering training on digital security and others still lacking comprehensive risk management strategies for remote work.

9. Health and safety concerns in a digitalized work environment

- The physical and psychological well-being of employees working remotely is an area that is still underdeveloped in many organisations. While some have specific rules and risk assessments for telework, others only offer general tips for ergonomics or don't address risks like musculoskeletal disorders and psychosocial issues (e.g., isolation, burnout).
- There is a clear need for more comprehensive preventive measures, including ergonomic guidance for screen use, recommendations for safe audio practices, regular breaks, and access to occupational health support, particularly for those working from home on a full-time basis.
- **Digital-intensive work environments pose significant risks to eye and ear health, particularly for professionals such as translators who spend prolonged hours working with screens and audio devices. Extended screen exposure can lead to digital eye strain, characterized by dry eyes, blurred vision, headaches, and increased sensitivity to light. These issues are often exacerbated by poor lighting, inadequate screen positioning, and insufficient breaks.**
- **Similarly, the frequent and prolonged use of headphones or earphones—common in translation and interpreting tasks—can result in hearing fatigue, tinnitus, or long-term hearing loss, especially when volume levels are not adequately regulated. Continuous exposure to audio input without sufficient recovery time can also contribute to cognitive overload and increased mental fatigue.**
- Risk assessments for telework-related health concerns are still not standardized across organisations, and **eye and ear health risks are often overlooked in existing occupational safety frameworks**. However, organisations in certain regions, such as the Netherlands, are increasingly aligning with national legislation to incorporate broader health considerations, including digital work-related risks, into their remote work policies

10. Flexibility in telework arrangements but gaps in policy

- Flexibility is a key benefit of digital work environments, but the policies governing telework arrangements and exceptional cases (such as medical reasons or working from abroad) remain inconsistent across organisations.
- While some organisations have robust policies allowing telework for medical reasons, others lack a clear framework or formal approval process.
- There's also a disparity in the way work-life balance is managed, with some organisations offering the right to disconnect, while others are still catching up with policies to ensure employee well-being outside of working hours.

11. Legal and institutional frameworks for telework and digital work

- There is a need for more clear, published rules concerning telework and its associated risks, including ergonomics, psychosocial risks, and data protection. A significant number of respondents indicated that clear guidelines and legal frameworks are either missing or underdeveloped.
- Legal coverage for teleworkers varies, and while accident insurance and health safety policies are generally applicable to in-office workers, the application of these for remote workers is still inconsistent. Some organisations extend these protections to teleworkers, while others haven't addressed it explicitly.

12. Role of employee representatives in digital work policies

- In many organisations, staff committees or unions are not sufficiently involved in the risk assessment process, with some workers indicating that they are not consulted or that their involvement is minimal.
- However, where there is involvement, staff committees play a vital role in ensuring that telework policies are fair and inclusive, especially concerning health and safety, conflict resolution, and employee welfare.

13. Potential for broader organisational change

- Many organisations are still evolving their remote work policies, with a work-in-progress mindset. This includes considering dynamic workspaces, hybrid working models, and the right to disconnect. While change is happening, the speed of adaptation varies significantly between organisations.
- There's a noticeable cultural shift post-COVID toward more flexibility and trust in remote working arrangements, which has opened up new avenues for improving employee satisfaction and work-life balance. However, this flexibility should be better supported by clearer policies to ensure equality and fair treatment for all employees.

14. Need for comprehensive telework policies

- The overall findings indicate a clear need for more comprehensive and standardized telework policies that cover everything from health and safety to conflict resolution.
- While telework is growing as a workplace norm, organisations must address gaps in existing policies and create a more supportive infrastructure for teleworkers, especially in terms of physical workspace conditions, mental health support, and legal protections.

Survey Methodology

Survey Design and Scope

The survey was designed as an internal diagnostic tool to collect qualitative and quantitative insights on the state of digitalisation across USF Member Organisations. Its scope covered key dimensions of digital transformation, including digital tools and processes, work organisation, communication practices, and perceived impacts on both teleworkers and office-based colleagues.

The questionnaire combined closed-ended questions (e.g. multiple-choice and scaled responses) to allow for comparative analysis, with open-ended questions to capture contextual feedback, examples of practices, and perceived challenges or opportunities related to digitalisation.

Target Result and Participation

The survey was addressed to USF Member Organisations and distributed internally through established communication channels. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were encouraged to provide honest and experience-based feedback reflecting their organisational context. Responses represent a diverse range of roles, organisational sizes, and levels of digital maturity within the USF community.

Data Collection

Data collection took place in early 2025 over a defined survey period. The survey was administered online to ensure accessibility for both teleworkers and office-based staff. Measures were taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, in order to promote open and candid responses.

Data Analysis

Survey responses were analysed using a descriptive approach. Quantitative data were aggregated to identify general trends, recurring patterns, and areas of convergence or divergence across Member Organisations. Qualitative responses were reviewed and thematically analysed to highlight common themes, illustrative examples, and noteworthy insights.

The analysis focused on identifying:

- Practices perceived as effective or beneficial;
- Areas where digitalisation presents challenges or inefficiencies;
- Differences in experiences between teleworking and office-based contexts.

Use of Results and Limitations

The findings are intended solely for internal use within the USF framework. They serve as an evidence base for discussion within the USF Member Organisation Committee and as input for the development of the digitalisation Vade mecum.

Given the voluntary nature of participation and the diversity of organisational contexts, the results do not aim to provide statistically representative conclusions. Instead, they offer a qualitative and indicative overview of current practices and perceptions, supporting informed dialogue and knowledge-sharing across the USF community.