

How to master the corona crisis together

Dear SUEPO Members,
Dear colleagues,

All indicators show that we, as a society, will be facing one of the most disruptive health challenges ever. Entire countries are putting themselves in quarantine or even lockdown. Schools and universities have closed, all sports events and cultural events are cancelled, and almost all public social activities have been suspended. Governments ask everyone to work from home if possible.

The EPO is in a good position to shift to teleworking. The core of our work – the examination of patent applications – requires little direct contact with people and can largely be done from home. We appreciate that the Office is working hard to provide more colleagues with the necessary equipment. With its recent annual surpluses of 400 m€ / year the EPO has the financial reserves needed to do so. And unlike travel agencies or restaurants, the EPO need not worry about losing business: the files will wait. But that does not mean “home-working for all” is without problems, in particular for staff.

The recent [communiqué](#)¹ of Ms Simon (VP4) simply **orders** staff to “*Ensure that you choose a safe and healthy work-place that is conducive to concentration*” wherein “*You are responsible for the provision and general upkeep of a suitable internet connection.*” Not everybody has the possibility to install an ergonomically sound working space. Similarly, not everybody has an internet connection that is up to speed. In fact: not everybody has internet². And even for those who are fully equipped, working with children in the back-ground (children who are getting over-excited while locked up at home) will hardly be “*conducive to concentration*”, not to speak about the additional duties that come with the necessary home-schooling. And then there is the stress as one worries about the health of family and friends here and in their home country, and about one’s own health. Production will suffer. But Ms Simon does not even mention these aspects. Her communiqué completely lacks empathy. Those who know her may be surprised at this. So are we. So, while the communiqué has her name under it, is it actually from her pen? The language reminds us much of the previous administration.

In the meantime Mr Campinos maintains – without convincing evidence - that in 20 years the EPO will face a financial gap in the range of 5.8 bn Euro. He still insists on a new salary adjustment procedure that is expected to save 2 bn Euro, or about 300.000 Euro per staff member. This follows a pattern that we have seen over and over during the last 8-10 years: the EPO demands additional efforts from staff, staff delivers those efforts and then gets “rewarded” by yet another

¹ « Teleworking – guidance: Carrying out your duties under the present situation » (13.03.2020)
http://my.internal.epo.org/portal/private/epo/organisation/dg4/?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/epo/intranet/organisation/dg4/vp4/announcements/2020/1584103576589_hr_guidance_teleworking_coronavirus

² We note that staff is instructed to use their own « hardware items » in case they do not receive full Office equipment in time, but in the next paragraph are told that any equipment provided by the Office may be used for work-related purposes only. The asymmetry is glaringly obvious.

degradation in the working conditions. The consequences are social unrest and an increasingly stressed and demotivated work-force.

Clearly the coming months will be tough for all of us. If EPO management wants staff to soldier on during the current crisis, it will need to do better itself. We expect senior management to:

- recognise that the corona pandemic will inevitably have an impact on the operation of the EPO, its production and services, *for which the staff will not be held responsible*;
- foresee supportive measures like favourable conditions for part-time working and special leave in order to take care of children that are at home and/or for family members in need,
- abandon or at least postpone the introduction of further reforms that will have a negative impact on staff working conditions³ and instead reward staff for its commitment and high performance over many years.

SUEPO Munich

³ « Assurance-chômage, retraites : vers une pause dans les réformes » en France (15.03.2020)
<https://www.lesechos.fr/economie-france/social/assurance-chomage-retraites-vers-une-pause-dans-les-reformes-1185455>,