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## European Patent Office

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## Survey on psychosocial risks carried out for the Staff Union of the EPO

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*Questionnaire 2020 – 4th edition*

Feb – March 2020

## Executive Summary

A questionnaire survey...

... carried out from 17 February 2020 to 31 March 2020 included. Of the Office's 6,545 agents, 3,124 were invited to answer the questionnaire, and 1,759 participated. The participation rate is therefore 56.3% of those invited, and 26.9% of EPO staff.

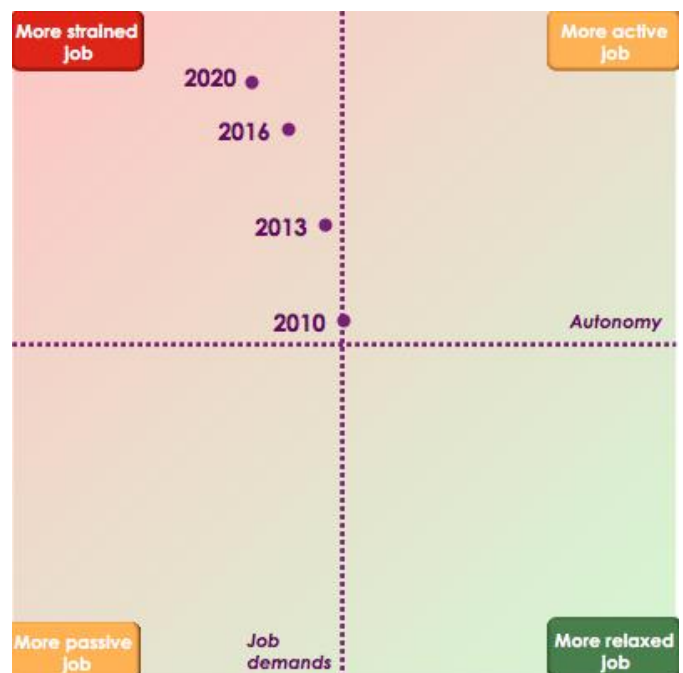
The questions are almost identical to those in the 2010, 2013 and 2016 editions. It should be noted that the participation rate was negatively impacted by the period of the Covid 19 health crisis in Europe and the lockdown periods implemented in various countries.

*The analysis of the results was organised along three lines...*

### 1. What is the evolution of psychosocial risk levels at the EPO?

The levels of psychosocial risk have been measured using validated models (Karasek, Siegrist), which indicate the following trends:

- The work is carried out in an increasingly tense context, i.e. under high work demands and little room for manoeuvre in terms of organisation;
- Recognition of the efforts made to complete the work is stabilising at a relatively low level, after having been perceived to be decreasing over the last 3 editions;
- The meaning of work, significantly weakened, remains at the rather low level of 2016;
- Peer and immediate superior support remains a protective factor against the increase of other levels of risk.



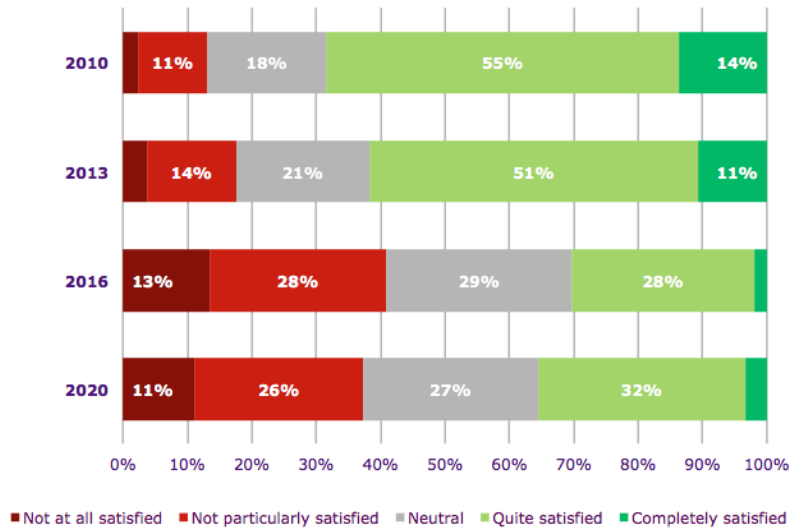
The **psychosocial risk has intensified significantly at the EPO** as a whole, but also in each of the different sites, Directorates General and levels of seniority at the EPO.

## 2. How does staff perceive this evolution?

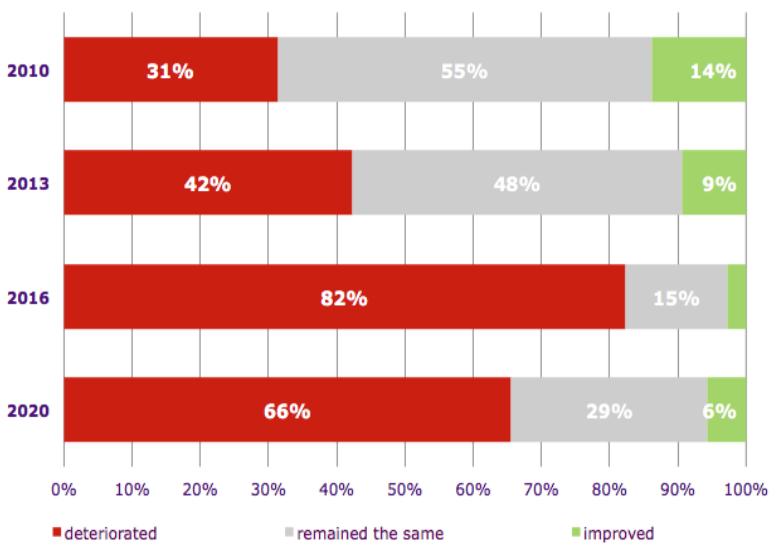
The deteriorating situation at the EPO is clearly perceived by the staff.

The proportion of agents satisfied with their working life is stabilising in 2020 after a sharp fall. Today less than 1/3 of respondents are satisfied. This dynamic is to be put in relation with the decline in recognition in view of the efforts and a pronounced wear and tear on the meaning of work.

Q171. Considering my overall work situation, I am:



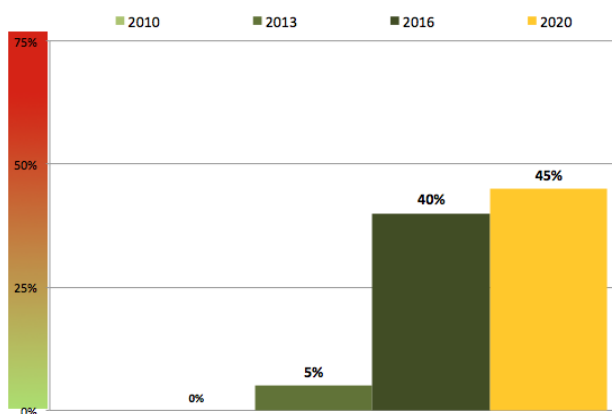
Q113. Over the past three years, your working conditions have:



This disturbing dynamic over several iterations is amplified by the fact that **66% said that their working conditions have deteriorated over the last 3 years.**

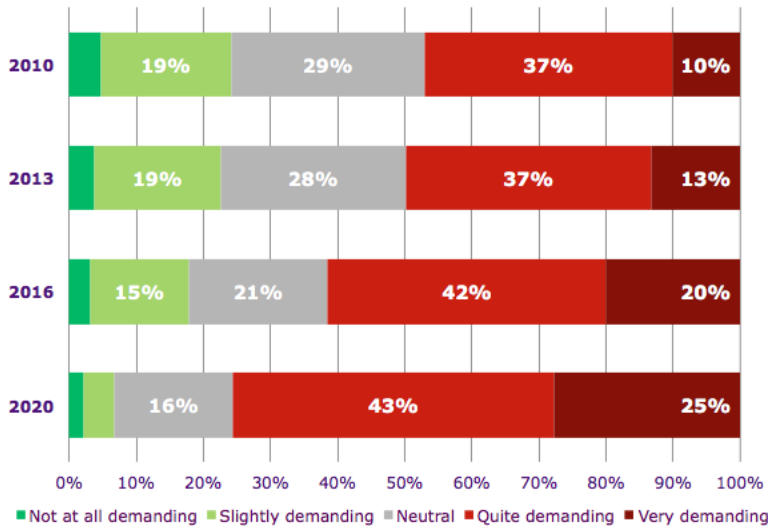
While health remains good or very good for 60% of respondents, the proportion of respondents who feel they are in poor health is increasing and **63% perceive a negative impact of work on their health** (a figure that has risen steadily since the 2010 survey; +23 % points).

Proportion of employees with under-recognised efforts 2010, 2013, 2016 and 2020



Questions on the frequency of occurrence of anxiety, depression, irritability and cognitive problems revealed that **the proportion of agents in psychological distress is 7% in 2020. At the same time, the percentage of employees perceiving a lack of recognition continues to increase.** These situations contribute to the occurrence of sick leave (excluding work accidents or maternity leave) of 10 days or more.

Q170. I think that my current job is:



Work is simply becoming an **ordeal** for an increasing number of staff members!

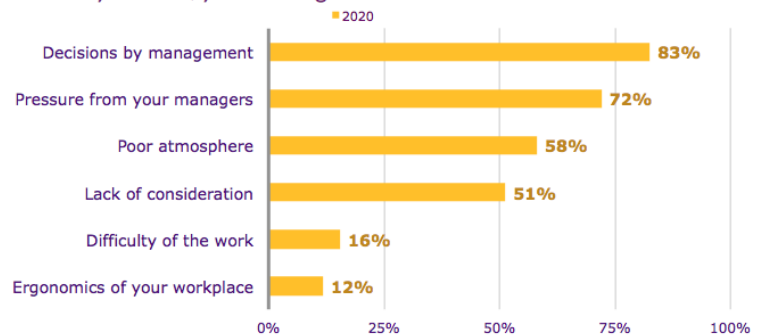
### 3. Why is the situation at the EPO deteriorating?

The analysis of work under constraint shows an overall increase in the elements that prevent agents from carrying out quality work. These elements are not exactly the same depending on the site, Job Group or Directorate General, but the lack of time is increasingly

mentioned (the lack of time was reported by 43% of respondents in 2016 against 72% in 2020). As a result, the quality of the work is greatly affected. **The impossibility of carrying out one's tasks and doing quality work also impacts on the health of employees, particularly in terms of psychological distress.**

The elements put forward by the employees to explain the deterioration in working conditions are first of all linked to management, hierarchical pressure (which grows stronger with each iteration), the atmosphere and the lack of consideration.

Q113. In your view, your working conditions have deteriorated because of:



**The strategy defined by top management is not supported by the employees**, including part of the management itself. The levels of trust of staff in management decreases with increasing hierarchical level. The meaning of work is therefore impacted by this conflict of values; there is a prevailing feeling that the EPO does not operate fairly and that **the work is carried out to satisfy the evaluation criteria of the hierarchy and not to meet the requirements of the job.**

In this context, **the atmosphere at work is deteriorating significantly. It is primarily described as tense (52%), but also confrontational, malicious and aggressive, reflecting the tensions inherent in the organisation of the work and conflicts of values.**

In this dynamic of a deteriorating balance between autonomy and work demands, **social support as a protective factor appears all the more central. Changes in the organisation of the work at the EPO must be designed to strengthen this social support (recognition, working relationship with colleagues and managers). Today's large-scale teleworking, as well as that envisaged under the "New Normal", could degrade this social support, which today makes the scissor effect of increasing demands and decreasing autonomy hardly bearable.**