

Report of the Ombudsman

Ombudsman's recommendations: progress on implementation

Report by the Director-General

1. This document provides an overview of action taken by the administration in response to the recommendations made in the Ombudsman's report submitted to the Executive Board at its 148th session;¹ it also complements the accompanying Ombudsman's report to the current session of the Board.² The human resources update³ provides additional information on action and initiatives being implemented to address some of the challenges and recommendations contained in the Ombudsman's reports.

FOLLOW-UP ON LAST YEAR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Work-related challenges as a result of the pandemic

2. Various measures and initiatives have been implemented to support the WHO workforce during 2020 and 2021, and to address the challenges faced owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation has constantly changed and evolved and therefore required continual reassessment of the appropriate human resource measures in response.

(a) The role of managers/supervisors

3. Senior management has continued to support and assist supervisors in engaging with their staff members to face challenges during the pandemic and to review projected deliverables in order to manage expectations.

4. A repository has been developed within the WHO eManual, accessible to managers and all staff members, which contains human resource and administrative guidance for managing staff members and non-staff personnel during the pandemic. Guidance on teleworking arrangements has been revised on an ongoing basis, to ensure that it is fit for purpose as the pandemic continues; the guidance has been promulgated to all staff.⁴

¹ Document EB148/INF./2.

² Document EB150/INF./4.

³ Document EB150/45.

⁴ WHO. Guidance for managers: teleworking in the context of COVID-19, 31 March 2020. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021 (<https://intranet.who.int/sites/covid19/documents/guidance%20for%20managers%2031%20march.pdf>, accessed 17 December 2021).

5. Managers continue to exercise flexibility regarding working schedules and assigned tasks, with adjustments to reflect achievable outputs and expectations.

6. Managers continue to assist in finding solutions for staff members whose functions cannot be fully performed outside the office by, for example, authorizing and organizing exceptional return to the premises for periods of time and reassigning other tasks that cannot be performed from home. However, such situations have been far less frequent in 2021 than in 2020.

(b) Staff mental health

7. The Organization has recognized the importance of protecting the mental health of staff members during this period, as noted in the accompanying Ombudsman's report. Psychosocial services have been proactively proposed, with facilitated group and team support activities and provisions made for individual consultations.

8. The Mental Health Task Force met regularly in 2021 and established a budgeted workplan with immediate actions to undertake. To achieve a healthy working environment, the Secretariat has contributed to various programmes and initiatives, including the United Nations system's Occupational Health and Safety Forum (chaired by WHO), the revitalization and rebranding of WHO's Health, Safety and Well-being Committee, and the implementation of the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy.

(c) Flexible work arrangements

9. Flexible work arrangements continued through 2021, particularly in the area of teleworking in order to align with national restrictions of movement and policies relating to return to premises. Senior management continues to build on these measures and develop initiatives as the situation evolves. To ensure compliance and transparency for teleworking, adjustments were made to the Global Management System to accommodate requests for teleworking, and coordinators were designated in each major office to manage such requests.

10. The Task Force on Flexible Working Arrangements in WHO, established by the Director-General to review flexible working arrangements, delivered a framework which was endorsed by the Global Policy Group in May 2021. Five types of flexible working arrangements were identified for implementation from 2022 onwards. Policies have been redrafted throughout 2021, and the Global Staff/Management Council at its meeting in November 2021 discussed further policy refinements.

11. Measures continue to be implemented to provide flexibility in the application of staff entitlements that were particularly affected by travel limitations. In this regard, the Organization adopted the United Nations System Chief Executive Board for Coordination's Human Resources Network's Administrative Guidelines for Offices on the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak, which have been updated for WHO as of June 2021.¹

12. During the current circumstances related to COVID-19, the recruitment of interns continues to remain suspended until further notice.

¹ WHO. Administrative guidelines for offices on the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak: Framework for the management of staff members in the World Health Organization, 15 June 2021.

Progress towards greater diversity, and increased efforts to address racism

13. Senior management has made strong commitments to greater diversity in the Secretariat and to ensuring that all members of the workforce feel welcome and respected and are given equal opportunities. In furtherance of this commitment, in March 2021 the Secretariat published the new policy and procedures for preventing and addressing abusive conduct (covering harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination, and abuse of authority).¹ WHO also launched the “Listen, Learn and Act Together” initiative, and the new WHO Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Agenda for the Workforce is being further refined in this context.

14. Management has taken action to introduce the policy and procedures on preventing and addressing abusive conduct, which expand on the former policy on the prevention of harassment at WHO to also cover discrimination. Among its actions, management is working to raise the awareness of the workforce² about discrimination in the workplace, the mechanisms available to support those who report or witness acts of discrimination, and the mechanism through which offenders will be held accountable. This is being done through the dissemination of communication and guidance materials, holding information sessions for all members of staff, and organizing both mandatory and supplemental training for all members of the workforce. Additional training and resources are available for managers and supervisors to promote harmonious working environments and address possible instances of discrimination.

15. In 2020, the first draft of a diversity, equity and inclusion approach for the WHO workforce and an associated action plan were produced. The purpose of the approach is to lay the foundations for measures to attract and retain a diverse workforce and to create a work environment that is welcoming to all, where everyone feels valued and can perform at their best. The Secretariat has engaged experts on diversity, equity and inclusion to provide advice in this area. The approach and action plan are undergoing additional review in order to align them with the advice provided by experts. Publication of the first version of the approach and action plan is planned for 2022.

16. Both the approach and the action plan set out the obligations and accountability of the Organization and its leadership in addition to those of managers/supervisors and members of the workforce more broadly. Also, given the importance of monitoring and evaluation, data will be periodically collected and analysed to determine progress as measured by key performance indicators and to identify trends over time. Such monitoring will guide the continuing implementation of the instruments and, to promote greater transparency, this information will be shared with staff members on a regular basis, with due regard to confidentiality.

¹ WHO. Preventing and addressing abusive conduct: Policy and procedures concerning harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination, and abuse of authority – Effective 1 March 2021. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021 (https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/ethics/policy-on-addressing-and-preventing-abusive-conduct-01032021.pdf?sfvrsn=f813e082_1&download=true, accessed 17 December 2021).

² Staff members and non-staff personnel, as well as other individuals who work at WHO (for example, contractors under an Agreement for Performance of Work and technical partners).

ADDRESSING NEW CHALLENGES

NEW CHALLENGES FOR WHO'S WORKING ENVIRONMENT RESULTING FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

(a) Need for senior management to lead additional efforts to motivate and encourage staff

17. In the context of implementing WHO's policy and procedures on preventing and addressing abusive conduct, the holding of information and training sessions and the provision of communication materials reaffirm the Organization's objective of ensuring an inclusive and respectful working environment and set out everyone's responsibilities in this regard. Special focus is given to the role of managers and supervisors in ensuring respectful conduct with and between members of their teams, and intervening where necessary, and to the empowerment of all members of the workforce to raise concerns. Management is committed to expanding the training and resources provided to managers and supervisors to assist them in fulfilling their role.

18. In the context of Respectful Workplace Day 2021, events have been held in thematic areas that were selected by members of the workforce, covering for instance belonging, resilience, kindness, safe spaces to speak up, bias (implicit and unconscious), respect, inclusion and the "growth mindset". Specific activities included active bystander dialogues, courageous conversations, staff members' stories and videos, and presentations by motivational speakers.

(b) The Secretariat should assess how staff are coping with the situation in different departments

19. Staff counsellors facilitate sessions with departments and teams, and collaborate with departments to design support programmes. The implementation of an international instrument designed for the assessment and improvement of psychosocial conditions in workplaces (such as the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire) is being considered.

(c) The Secretariat should foster the implementation of practical measures for the protection of staff well-being and mental health

20. The Secretariat's Mental Health Task Force met regularly in 2021. A workplan has been developed and activities such as webinars and workshops on psychosocial issues have been undertaken. The task force envisages the establishment of a structured mental health and psychosocial unit, with a workplan and budget, in order to continue such activities.

(d) Further support for managers and supervisors on how to interact with their staff

21. Conducting information and training sessions and the provision of communication materials on the policy and procedures on preventing and addressing abusive conduct together support and guide managers and supervisors on serving as role models: maintaining a high standard of personal conduct, continuing an open dialogue within their teams, and responding to cases of inappropriate behaviour. Specifically in the context of teleworking, the Director-General has on multiple occasions emphasized to managers and supervisors the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance and reminded

the workforce of the Organization's guidance on electronic communications (for example, not expecting a reply outside working hours).

22. In addition to the introduction of the Leadership Pathways programme, WHO has offered leadership courses by the United Nations System Staff College to staff members at different levels worldwide. Management training and workshops under development are focused on the management and supervisory roles and skills needed to fulfil obligations under new policies and to manage teams and individuals in the new working environment.

NEED TO TAKE EFFECTIVE STEPS TO BRING REAL CULTURE CHANGE

(a) Further steps should be taken to embed the WHO Values Charter in WHO's practices

23. In accordance with the WHO Values Charter and WHO's Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, everyone in the Organization, irrespective of their contract, position or grade, is required to adhere to its core values of diversity, inclusion and respect.

24. Several initiatives have been implemented to embed the WHO Values Charter into the Organization's practices, including the launch of Listen, Learn, Act Together, a project on diversity, equity and inclusion to promote culture change and to ensure that core values flourish within the Organization. Moreover, the Secretariat is committed to strengthening action to prevent and tackle abuse of power and all forms of discrimination, including action for zero tolerance of all forms of harassment.

25. In this regard, several actions have been taken, including the release of the policy and procedures on preventing and addressing abusive conduct and the development and implementation of its action plan. Online sessions on values, attitudes and organizational culture are being offered to managers. Additionally, workshops and training sessions are being provided (on preventing and addressing abusive conduct) to offer all members of the workforce an opportunity to explore together the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs that will support cultural change and translate the WHO Values Charter into action.

26. WHO has also intensified efforts to strengthen the Organization's work on the prevention of and response to sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment, including the establishment of an organization-wide Task Team on Prevention and Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment (PRSEAH) with an accompanying implementation plan that aims to shift WHO to a victim- and survivor-centred approach; ensure that all personnel, leaders and implementing partners know, are capacitated and held accountable to act according to WHO's relevant policies, values and obligations; and that WHO undertakes review and reform of its structure, systems and cultures to implement its Zero Tolerance for SEAH and for inaction against it.

27. Furthermore, the Secretariat recognizes the importance of core values in the Organization's Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. This Code incorporates the basic principles of ethical behaviour and standards of conduct that must be followed at all times by all WHO staff members. New training is being developed around the Code to reinforce the ethical standards that the WHO workforce must adhere to and to increase their awareness of their duties and obligations.

(b) Need to place staff at the centre of WHO culture change

28. In late 2017 and early 2018, a survey of WHO's culture was undertaken throughout the Organization to examine three organizational dimensions (alignment, execution and renewal) mapped

against nine outcomes (direction, accountability, coordination and control, external orientation, leadership, innovation and learning, capabilities, motivation, and work environment). It defined the organizational culture as the alignment towards a shared vision and strategy, the way work gets done to uphold those values, and the practices that help all staff members continuously to adapt to the evolving internal and external environment.

29. Between December 2017 and September 2021, a number of specific all-staff surveys were conducted, primarily linked to major transformation initiatives (and the evaluation of WHO's transformation). The results were used to inform the recommendations of task forces in the areas of focus and in keeping with the main thematic areas under the Year of the WHO Workforce (including diversity, equity and inclusion, contract modalities, career pathways, mental health, innovation, teleworking, and staff health and well-being).

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