

REPORT OF THE JOINT SESSION ON FLEXIBLE WORK

Introduction

1. The standing committees on Staff–Management Relations and Human Resources Management (SMR and HRM) held a joint hybrid session on 26 April, elected Annarita Palumbo (UNGSC) as Rapporteur and addressed their agenda.

New norms, CEB Model Policy on Flexible Work

2. The session was intended to serve as a fact-finding exercise to establish a baseline, and to address challenges/best practices with the development, negotiation and adoption of policies on flexible work (FW) in organizations. The participants reviewed the main points of CEB's [Model Policy on Flexible Work](#). The discussion focused on leadership, people management, flexible work arrangements, transparency, dialogue and inclusion and diversity

3. FW must be distinguished from alternative working arrangements. The main difference was that FW was voluntary and alternative working was mandated by the organization in response to external forces. COVID-19 had been an accelerating factor in implementing FW policy for some organizations.

4. The CEB Model Policy was entirely oriented towards improving teamwork, communication and work–life balance, and was not seen as a management tool. FW did not represent an entitlement; its implementation was fragmented among the different organizations falling under the UN umbrella, and represented the minimum conditions that every organization should implement. The CEB Model Policy was not universally applicable; policy should result from dialogue, including input from staff, and most of all consider staff's wellbeing.

5. Participants shared their experiences in their respective organizations, answering leading questions on the subject. Negative experiences included examples of ad-hoc policy-making in response to the pandemic and not aiming at a formal FW policy. The HR guidelines were sometimes presented to staff without prior consultation. In contrast, some organizations had proactively provided their staff with laptops, secure access to their computer networks, and office equipment and furniture in the early stages of pandemic.

6. In addition, some organizations made only a framework, not a policy, on FW. This allowed them to implement the framework in HQ but not regional and country offices. FW frameworks also lacked flexibility. It was suggested to research the necessary resources (mental health support) by resource pulling at regional office and country level.

7. The FICSA President described teleworking as an exceptional measure during the pandemic and working from an office, a norm in the UN context. FW guidelines should be people centred, and

developed within reasonable parameters, using certain pre-established criteria. Attention should be paid to prevent the loss of any privileges: for example, working out of the duty station for over three months can result in losing post adjustment, working visa, immunity and other privileges and imposing the payment of local taxes. A loss of jobs could be a real danger, as some duty stations were relocating positions to low-cost countries, under the pretext of staff being able to work from anywhere.

8. Several factors needed consideration in negotiations on FW: for example, managers must be open to accept such a policy, and often base their decisions on personal preferences or political factors. In one case, after delays of almost two years, staff representatives were being consulted on the draft policy, which would likely include a compressed week: 2–3 days working from home, and possible work out of duty station for a radius of 50 km for a certain staff category.

9. The FICSA President outlined other aspects to consider in negotiations, as FW was not an entitlement and the arrangements must be made with respective supervisors. Those aspects included health and safety at home, ergonomic equipment, access to technology, insurance and liability issues. A mindful approach to FW policy was needed, balancing the needs of organizations with staff's needs for a work–life balance.

10. The following challenges in FW policy application were identified: variations in approach among different departments, insurance issues (working at home covered by home insurance), access to equipment and security, integration of new staff, management's evaluation of staff working from home, and mental health. Participants were invited to attend a meeting on FW's mental health challenges.

11. A delegate suggested that staff associations ensure the inclusion of explicit wording in their FW frameworks/policies, indicating that the refusal of FW requests by managers must be done in writing, so that staff could challenge the decision.

Recommendations

12. **HRM and SMR recommended that:**

- **the FICSA Secretariat should create a database of policies on flexible work from information supplied by the membership;**
- **the FICSA membership should monitor and collect the positive and negative aspects of the application of those policies in their organizations and share their experiences at a joint SMR/HRM session at the 77th FICSA Council in 2024;**
- **FICSA ExCom should communicate to the top management of member organizations the urgency of developing and adopting policies on flexible work.**
- **HRM and SMR recommended that the FICSA Secretariat should note the need for a joint session of HRM and SocSec at the 76th FICSA Council, to address the mental health issues related to flexible work.**