

Next Normal Guidance

After two challenging and unpredictable years, it is an opportune time for us to reconsider the ways in which we work and establish clear guidance on the 'Next Normal' that UNEP is working towards. In doing so, we must take into consideration the opportunities offered by the Policy on Flexible Working Arrangements, the likely reduction of our footprint in the workplace and the increased use of collaborative spaces. The guiding principles and concepts in this document apply to all UNEP duty stations.

Version of 16th September 2022

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Foreword

As we emerge from the pandemic and move towards learning to live with COVID, it is time for us to consider the 'Next Normal' and what this entails as we prepare for "Back to Office".

Prior to COVID—in 2019—we were beginning to re-consider our ways of working in line with the new UN policies on Flexible Working Arrangements (FWA). Then COVID hit the world, and as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) family, we demonstrated that we could still deliver much of our mandate from our home offices, living rooms, dining rooms, coffee shops and various other venues scattered across numerous time zones.

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude and appreciation for how you adapted your work streams and figured out how to convene negotiations, deliver projects and publications, host and facilitate hybrid meetings (including UNEP's most successful UN Environment Assembly to-date), transform our administrative and financial operations and advance UNEP's mandate under new and uncertain conditions.

Now, as we move towards a post-COVID era and start planning our return to office, we need to look back at the past two years where we proved we can work remotely effectively and efficiently and use this insight to reimagine how we work.

This is the "Next Normal" where we envisage that there will be a greater uptake of FWA and, where going forward our office space will be designed to be flexible, collaborative and to promote team cohesion. While we continue to encourage a flexible approach, there is no "one-size" fits all, we will need to have discussions and agree on the options that work best to ensure the continued delivery of UNEP's mandate.

I am therefore pleased to share this first version of UNEP's Next Normal Guidance which sets out the guiding principles for FWA and work modalities as we enter this next phase. We are on a learning curve and will periodically take stock, readjust, and make changes as necessary. During this learning journey, we will be conducting regular surveys, which will give you the opportunity to share your experiences and ideas on where we can improve, what we should adjust or what needs to be introduced.

Sonja Leighton-Kone
Director, Corporate Services Division
21st September 2022

1. Guiding Principles

This UNEP Next Normal Guidance is based on UN Secretariat Guidance and is in line with risk management considerations.

1.1. Spotighting Sustainability

Sustainability at UNEP is a long-term journey, where continuous improvements and developments regularly take place to bring up new opportunities and areas for innovation. On the positive side, the pandemic has forced us to re-adjust the way in which we live and work, and one of the beneficial impacts is our greatly reduced environmental footprint. Digital transformation was a priority initiative even before the onset of the pandemic, and the increase in virtual and hybrid meetings, reductions in air travel, and new ways of thinking about printing and paper usage are just a few of the areas where we have made significant progress quickly and easily. As UNEP continues to adapt and learn in the aftermath of the pandemic, it is important to continue mainstreaming environmental sustainability and use every opportunity to reduce UNEP's environmental footprint.

1.2. Fostering Flexibility and Greater Work-life Balance

Our experience during the pandemic has demonstrated that UNEP can deliver much of its mandate via telecommuting arrangements. UNEP personnel have applied incredible effort to adapt their lives around these new arrangements over the course of the pandemic and have simultaneously transformed into increased flexibility and work-life balance. These are important components that we will build upon in our "Next Normal." By building capacity to work seamlessly in a hybrid environment and using a combination of on-site and off-site work to maximize work-life balance, UNEP can boost morale and productivity while better delivering on its programmed activities and mandates.

The focus in this new era of work will be on deliverables and management by results, which should lead to improved accountability and performance while maintaining flexibility. However, we must also ensure that the quality of output is maintained and acknowledge that certain functions are required to be performed on site. This will require careful consideration in the planning of such arrangements and a mutual understanding that managers and personnel are co-responsible for optimizing the benefits of such flexibility while minimizing the potential challenges.

1.3. Redesigning the Office Space to Address Our New Office Culture

Our transition into and out of the pandemic period over these last few years has fundamentally changed the way we work, especially regarding the office environment. Several day-to-day aspects of work in the office are changing, including *when*, *why* and *how often* the office space is used.

Before the pandemic, under the previous on-site work paradigm where personnel were assigned individual desks, we were beginning to face serious real estate constraints due to the lack of office space to cater for the increased number of personnel. Paradoxically, several pre-pandemic surveys found that, UNEP was only utilizing on average 54% of its allocated space. This means that almost half of the office space was vacant at any given time. Recognizing the growth of UNEP's workforce, coupled with the interest and uptake in FWAs, we need to rethink and reimagine our space utilization. This means that going forward, in order to optimize and ensure we can accommodate all personnel, we can no longer assign individually designated desks. Instead, we will incorporate greater flexibility into our evolving work culture noting that many personnel will, with the agreement of their First Reporting Officer (FRO), opt to work away from the office two or three days a week. We will therefore shift towards a shared desk modality while also incorporating more flexible spaces for meetings and

collaboration. Going forward, we will plan for a 75% occupancy (as opposed to 100% of personnel), noting that when 100% of unit, branch or division's personnel must imperatively be in office, there are alternative spaces that can accommodate such instances.

2. Work Modalities

In accordance with the UN Secretariat policies, the UN has allowance for Flexible Working Arrangements (FWA) as outlined in [ST/SGB/2019/3](#) and [ST/IC/2019/15](#).

The Secretary-General's Bulletin provides four modalities of FWA:

- a) Staggered working hours
- b) Compressed working schedule
- c) Scheduled break for external learning activities
- d) Working away from the office (telecommuting within or outside duty station)

The modalities are further explained in section 2.1. These FWA options are applicable to both staff and non-staff personnel. Some exceptions may be made for non-staff, subject to the terms of the individual's contract.

It is important to note that FWA is not an entitlement, but a voluntary arrangement agreed between personnel and managers on a case-by-case basis, contingent on the personnel's roles and responsibilities and the exigencies of service. The use of FWA requires careful planning and preparation on the part of all concerned parties. It is recognized that FWA options may not be possible for some jobs and/or at certain periods of time. FWA must be at no extra costs to the organization and all parties are responsible for optimizing the benefits for UNEP's delivery, while minimizing potential problems. Managers may suspend or cancel previously approved FWA at any time due to exigencies of service or unsatisfactory performance.

Those individuals who would like to avail themselves of FWA should initiate a discussion with their supervisors to determine the feasibility and the most appropriate of the available modalities (or a combination of modalities). The discussion should consider the specific work to be performed, noting that some functions need to be performed on site. Supervisors are encouraged to consider if FWA has worked reasonably well in the past, but also the deliverables of the team and how personnel have behaved in delivering their work. FWA for one individual must not cause additional work and demands on other colleagues.

2.1. Definition of the modalities

- a) **Staggered working hours:** This allows for personnel to start and end the working day at slightly different times than the official office hours in the specific duty station, as long as the total hours required are maintained (this can vary depending on duty station) and core hours are observed.
- b) **Compressed work schedule:** This provides for working nine out of ten working days across a 2-week cycle or alternatively, four and a half days out of a five-day work week. This is done by working extra hours on some days, to compensate for the one day taken off every other week, or the half day taken off every week respectively. Considering the need for appropriate coverage and exigencies in service, the one day or half day taken off, must be agreed between personnel and their managers.
- c) **Scheduled break for external learning activities:** Personnel can request 'learning breaks' of up to 6 hours per week during core working hours to attend external courses relevant to their professional development. However, the hours away from work that week must be covered by working the same hours on another day/time within the same week.
- d) **Working away from the office (telecommuting):** Telecommuting allows personnel to work at their official duty station but away from the office up to 3 days a week (refer to further details below). Under compelling circumstances, consideration may be given to telecommuting away from the duty station for periods of up to 6 months, with consideration for an additional 3 months in very exceptional circumstances.

Note: Alternate working arrangements (AWA) are implemented at the request of the organization and are therefore different from FWA although both may involve working from an alternative worksite. AWAs are exceptional (for instance during a crisis to facilitate business continuity as we saw during the COVID pandemic in 2020-2021) and shall not be considered FWA, hence not outlined further in this document.

Directors should discuss and provide overall direction to the Section and Unit Chiefs of the Division/Office on the overall plans for days when personnel need to be in the office.

Based on this, for the modalities defined under point a-c above the FRO has the approving authority, but the Section/Unit Chief, if not the FRO, should be informed. For the modality defined under point d (telecommuting) see details of approval process further below under sections 2.1.5 and 2.1.6.

The FWA agreement can be issued for a period of up to 6 months, subject to renewal depending on a follow-up discussion between the personnel and the supervisor and consideration of changes in work etc. A quarterly performance evaluation will be documented as such in the performance management template. (The 6 months limitation is also to ensure that for instance the various days of telecommuting can be assigned on a rotational basis within a team).

2.1.1. Official office hours and 'Core hours'

Specific schedule requirements differ by duty station. Details of office hours and core working hours for all duty stations are being collected and will be included in the next version of this guidance.

Under FWA there is flexibility in start and end times as long as personnel are available during the core working hours and they meet the minimum required hours per week.

While working from the office or other venues, personnel must be reachable by phone, email, and Microsoft Teams for meetings, inquiries, and consultations. Similarly, we encourage personnel, as much as possible, to schedule their consultations, inquiries, and meetings within these core working hours. Recognizing the normal exigencies of service, personnel can adapt their scheduled work week around these core hours.

2.1.2. Staggered working hours

Staggered hours can be used while working in the office and under telecommuting arrangement or a combination of both.

To enable flexibility while ensuring continuity of work through staggered working hours, core hours must be established in each duty station. The 'core working hours' is when all UNEP personnel at the duty station, working from the office or remotely should be available.

As an example, if the established core working hours at the duty station are Monday to Thursday 8.00-16.30 or 8.30-17.00 with a 45 min lunch break and Friday 8.00-14.00 or 8.30-14.30 without lunch break, any regular work schedule outside of these hours falls under "Staggered Working Hours" and requires FWA approval. Therefore, for those wanting to start work later, work must start at the latest by 10:00am (and continue, for example, until 18:30) and for those wanting to start working earlier in the day, work must not end before 16:00.

2.1.3. Compressed work schedule

Under this methodology, which applies while working in the office and under telecommuting arrangements or a combination of both, personnel can work additional hours to achieve the total weekly working hours in 9 out of 10 days or in 4.5 days out of 5 days. For example, with a 37-hour work week, the staff member could plan to work longer days to reach 37 hours in 4.5 days and thereby take half day off on the fifth day or work 74 hours in 9 days and thereby take the tenth day off.

2.1.4. Scheduled break for external learning activities

Under this modality personnel can request for breaks during official office hours to attend external courses relevant to their professional development at universities or other institutions of learning. The breaks can be up to three hours per day for a maximum of two days per week and the total official working hours of the week must be achieved, like FWA under staggered working hours modality.

2.1.5. Telecommuting in the duty station

A manager may allow personnel to telecommute within the duty station up to a maximum of three days during the work week. The duty station is the designated location assigned in an individual's contract. Telecommuting may be authorized in units of half or full days. FRO have the approving authority, but the Section/Unit Chief, if not the FRO, should be consulted.

In cases where there are compelling personal circumstances, consideration may be given to allowing personnel to telecommute within the duty station for more than the maximum number of days. This includes the need to address a tight deadline or other special circumstances. These requests within the duty station require written approval from the FRO but do not require engagement with the Corporate Services Division (CSD).

While there is no cap in the current policy on the number of FWA requests for telecommuting at the duty station that may be approved, UNEP will be using a six-month cycle whereby the arrangement must be reviewed at least every six months, with a recommendation that the arrangement be reviewed quarterly, so that supervisors can adjust based on the delivery, performance, need to rotate FWA amongst team members and other exigencies of service.

If telecommuting arrangements are deemed unproductive by the FRO, the prior approval can be amended in duration or withdrawn. Should this arise, personnel should be given a minimum of 30 days' notice of the change and CSD is to receive a copy of this notification.

2.1.6. Telecommuting outside the duty station

Personnel with compelling reasons¹ may request consideration for FWA – telecommuting away from the duty station, which can be approved within the Division for periods of up to 6 months. Requests for an exceptional extension of an additional 3 months, irrespective of who the first approver was, must be approved by the Executive Director, or as delegated to the Corporate Services Director.

Telecommuting outside the duty station is limited to 6 months (exceptionally 9 months) within 12 consecutive months. After reaching 6 months (or exceptionally 9 months), a subsequent request for telecommuting outside the duty station will not be considered until after 6 months from the last day of the previous FWA has elapsed. Requests should be submitted through the weCollaborate FWA portal,

¹ Compelling reasons could include special medical needs of family members/parents; other family circumstances which may have special requirements such as residential requirements linked to adoption or other legal processes which are limited in duration and others.

(refer to chapter 2.3) and once approved, for personnel holding a UNEP staff contract, the FWA should be recorded in Umoja.

Ad hoc requests² for up to 5 consecutive working days should be considered on a case-by-case basis between the personnel and FRO. Such requests need to be approved by the FRO in writing and in the case of staff members, recorded in Umoja. Such ad-hoc requests for up to 5 consecutive working days can only be approved twice during a calendar year. These requests should not be submitted through the FWA portal and CSD endorsement is not required.

There should be a limited number of requests longer than 5 consecutive working days during the personnel's career in UNEP. If the personnel accumulates 12 months (two 6 months requests) of telecommuting outside the duty station within their UNEP career, any subsequent request will require the CSD Director's endorsement.

P5 and below: For requests beyond 5 consecutive working days (and up to 6 months), Personnel should discuss the arrangement with their FRO and submit an application in the FWA portal which is then routed to CSD Director for review. CSD Director then forwards to the Division Director for final approval.

Division Directors, Heads of Offices and MEA Executive Secretaries: Requests should be submitted via the FWA portal, irrespective of the duration, to the Executive Director (ED) or Deputy Executive Director (DED) as the relevant FRO. After review by the DED, the application is routed to the CSD Director for review and endorsement. CSD Director then resends to relevant FRO (ED/DED) for final approval.

Other staff members at the D1 level: For colleagues at the D1 level that do not report directly to Heads of Offices/Divisions Directors and MEA Heads, staff should discuss the arrangement with their FRO and submit an application in the FWA portal which is then routed to CSD Director for review. CSD Director then forwards to the Division Director for final approval.

***Note:** When staff members are authorized to telecommute outside their official duty station and in accordance with section 3.12 of Secretary-General's bulletin [ST/SGB/2019/3](#), the benefits and entitlements that require physical presence at the official duty station shall be suspended, including but not limited to hardship allowance and home leave points accrual when staff members are telecommuting from their home country. If staff members telecommute from their home country for more than two thirds of the academic year, education grant and special education grant will be prorated in accordance with section 6.1 (a) of [ST/AI/2018/1/Rev.1](#) and section 8 of [ST/AI/2018/2](#), respectively. Coverage under medical insurance will be determined by reference to the official duty station of the staff members and not the location of telecommuting. Staff members are advised to seek information on the impact of telecommuting from outside their duty station on their benefits and entitlements with the HR Section. Divisional focal points are responsible for informing the UNON Staff Pay & Benefits Section of agreed arrangements to telecommute away from the duty station. Further information can be found in Flexible Work Arrangements -Telecommuting Outside the Duty Station: [Frequently Asked Questions](#).*

2.2. Flexibility with Responsibility

Flexibility comes with responsibility from both managers and personnel. Therefore, where a telecommuting modality is agreed upon, the following ground rules must be adhered to:

² Ad hoc request of up to 5 consecutive working days are not expected to be recurring but is really a one-off instance.

- a) Personnel must be reachable by phone, email, and Microsoft Teams during the core office hours for the particular duty station. The appropriate status in Microsoft Teams should be visible during the core working hours.
- b) If personnel cannot attend their functions on a certain day or period, a leave request should be submitted and recorded per usual procedures.
- c) Telecommuting personnel must have the necessary office equipment and working station facilities, including reliable internet, to enable the smooth discharge of their functions. UNEP will only be required to provide a laptop by issuance of gate pass to carry the assigned laptop out of the office.
- d) Personnel can, at times due to operational requirements, be required by the supervisor to report to the office at a given time or period, for instance where other personnel are unexpectedly out or during peak times and organized meetings.
- e) The supervisor must ensure the personnel have a clear workplan outlining the roles, responsibilities, functions and expected outputs as well as any relevant quality standards linked to the outputs.
- f) When personnel avail themselves of FWA, their productivity and quality of output must be maintained at a satisfactory level, as assessed by their managers. The fact that personnel is authorized to telecommute shall not alter the manner in which the personnel is managed and evaluated.
- g) The supervisor must ensure continuous monitoring of output and provide regular feedback and performance evaluation.
- h) Where there is an FWA agreement, this must be assessed and documented via regular performance conversations during the period.

2.3. Procedure to request for FWA

The FWA portal on weCollaborate facilitates the automated online workflow for submission and approval. The forms for the different FWA modalities [are available on weCollaborate](#) and personnel and managers should use the FWA portal to submit requests³ as per existing requirements. Refer to FWA weCollaborate Job aid, or HR focal points for assistance with submissions as needed.

- a) The personnel initiates the process by discussion with the supervisor.
- b) The request is submitted by the personnel through the FWA portal for approval (or disagreements) and record keeping
- c) For those on a "Staff" contract, FWA should also be recorded in Umoja
- d) Follow this link to access the FWA portal on weCollaborate

<https://wecollaborate.unep.org/x/4onDBQ>

Alternatively, you may access the application directly through the following link

<https://apps1.unep.org/fwa-stg/app/view-applications>

Should a request for FWA not be agreed by the FRO, the FRO provides a written justification in the FWA portal and submits to CSD Director for endorsement of the FROs decision or request for further comments. If CSD Director endorses the FROs decision, the application is sent to the Director for recording purposes.

FROs and Division Directors Managers can track FWAs by visiting their personal dashboards in the weCollaborate FWA platform and view all the FWA's where they are either the Recipient, FRO, SRO or Director.

For requests that require CSD endorsement: submission through weCollaborate should, in addition to the duration, include the compelling reason and the Division/Regional Director's clearance.

3. Towards UNEP's 'Next Normal' ⁴

A **'Next Normal' task force** will be established at each duty station to consider opportunities for review of our real estate footprint and office space usage, ICT resources and skills sets, communications, among others, also taking into account environmental sustainability considerations.

Their discussions, recommendations and actions are expected to be formed around the concepts and principles for the future of managing space in UNEP described in the remainder of this chapter.

3.1. Office Facilities

Prior to the pandemic, UNEP's working culture reflected a hierarchical, on-site working paradigm.

In the case of UNEP's headquarters in Nairobi, demands from sister agencies for office space on the Gigiri campus as well as an increased demand for office space as UNEP has grown in numbers are countered by the increased appetite for FWA, creating the need to reassess optimal ways of using our office facilities and real estate configurations. Furthermore, the UN General Assembly has requested that staff, throughout the system, better utilize existing space (as opposed to renting or building more space for increasing staff numbers) and we are therefore looking into possible ways of achieving this, including changes in space norms.

It had been recorded via global surveys that before the pandemic, desk occupancy in many UN offices was seldom greater than 50% and UNEP was no exception. With the increase in telecommuting and FWA, this number is likely to decrease even further.

Going forward, we intend to cultivate a new culture that reflects and supports a hybrid working environment and personnel well-being. This will require reviewing our desk and office configurations and broader real estate needs, further investing in ICT resources and skills sets, reviewing modes of internal communications and periodically assessing personnel engagement as well as guiding and supporting managers and personnel on the particular challenges and opportunities of managing and working in hybrid teams, among others.

3.1.1. Office Space and Desk Sharing Considerations

One of the ways to improve the utilization of the existing space is to implement a 70 -80% desk to personnel ratio. For example, if an office has 100 personnel, it will receive an allocation of 75 desks and concordant space allocation for the grades and functions of its staffing complement. This has implications for how the shared office space should function, what it should look like, and takes into account principles of equity in the use of this shared space across divisions, job functions, and grades.

The key to making a flexible and collaborative workspace succeed is to create an open office space in which there is no assigned seating. A 1:1 desk-to-personnel ratio is not realistic in our next normal. Instead of one desk for every person, the new flexible workspace will feature a combination of desks, small offices, and "phone booths", and will include more space for collaborative work, such as small tables seating 2-4 people, conference rooms, and where feasible (like in Nairobi) designated outdoor space, to foster better cooperation and teamwork.

⁴ Details will be elaborated in subsequent versions of this guidance.

3.1.2. Clean-desk Policy and the Use of Personal Lockers

We envision that having no assigned desks in open space means that personnel are expected to leave the desk/workstation clean at the end of their workday. Lockers (or lockable cabinets) will be assigned to those personnel who wish to keep personal belongings at the office (i.e., coffee mug, reusable water bottle, scarf, etc.). Desks will be cleaned daily by the building custodians.

3.1.3. Managing of Equipment

In addition to laptops, personnel will be issued with a keyboard, mouse, and headphones if necessary. Desks will be equipped with ergonomic chairs, monitors and docking stations/USB drives to simplify hooking up several devices to the monitor. Personnel will be expected to bring the mouse and keyboard that they have been issued with them to their choice of workstation.

3.2. ICT and Training

Prior to the pandemic, the Organization's working culture reflected a hierarchical, on-site working paradigm. Going forward, we intend to cultivate a new culture that reflects and supports a hybrid working environment and personnel well-being. This will require guiding and supporting managers and personnel on the particular challenges and opportunities of managing and working in hybrid teams.

With a larger number of personnel working remotely, the Organization is more vulnerable to cyberattacks. Establishing learning programmes for digital and cyber literacy and providing up-to-date training on info security will be vital.

Areas that we will be looking into are:⁵

- a) Deployment of secure and resilient technological solutions, including cloud hosting, analytics, collaboration tools for meetings and conferences, accessible meeting recordings and leveraging a “soft-phone solution” to replace office phone extensions
- b) Upgrade of cybersecurity tools to ensure full functionality and location-independent protection from cyberthreats; and secure remote support and software update capabilities
- c) Increase the number of ICT systems and applications that leverage multi-factor authentication systems
- d) Explore opportunities with end-user equipment vendors to ensure seamless logistical arrangements to fulfill requests for UN-issued laptops, phones and other ICT equipment, to equip all personnel with proper technology to work on-site and/or remotely
- e) Make ICT user instructions simple and “friendly”, encourage personnel to attend ICT training to increase digital awareness and literacy and empower users to protect themselves and the organization from cyberthreats

We must also strengthen our existing training programmes to help managers performing their functions under the new flexible and hybrid environments where we move from a typical hierarchical management style to one which includes more coaching and mentoring activities. Some of these could be in form of peer-learning and informal learning sessions.

UNEP will establish a task force to prepare ‘Best practices’ guidance for Virtual and Hybrid meetings. This will include health and wellness considerations as we move into our next normal. Example of areas to be covered are:

- Instructions for set up
- Troubleshooting facility

⁵The five points are quoted from “Next Normal - Reimagining how we work @UNHQ”

- Limit duration of online meetings
- Scheduled breaks for longer meetings

3.3. Preparedness for Future Emergencies and Organizational Resilience

There is no doubt, that the COVID pandemic caught all of us somewhat unprepared, but we have learned from that experience, and we must continue to prepare ourselves for any future emergencies.

Part of this preparedness is to document how we work in a hybrid environment and the issuance of clear guidance on various areas. Therefore, this chapter will be enhanced in future versions of this document, and could be covering topics, guided by the UNHQ 'Next Normal' ⁶document, such as:

- a) Improve the approach for **handling the first 48 to 72 hours** of an emergency, including clear instructions and guidance to personnel and delegates on how to respond and where to get information during an emergency
- b) Ensure **transparent communication** to keep personnel updated on emerging crises that could potentially affect them (e.g., what will be done in first 24/36/72 hours and onward communication, what support systems will be set up)
- c) Consider developing a **playbook for guiding responders** during the first 48 to 72 hours in specific emergency scenarios, such as hurricanes, floods and terrorist attacks
- d) **Train managers in Crisis Management** and ensure relevant personnel have the skills, training and equipment they need to perform in an emergency. Ensure appropriate check-ins with all team members in case of emergency, via phone trees or other methods
- e) Simplify Business Continuity planning and strengthen implementation of the **Organizational Resilience Management System** in UNEP.

⁶ The five points are partially quoted from "Next Normal - Reimagining how we work @UNHQ"