

EC STAFF PETITION TO COMMISSIONER HAHN



TELEWORK FROM ABROAD

TAO-AFI, The Independents
European Commission
Brussels, September 2021

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Commissioner Hahn,

On 2 September, TAO-AFI launched a petition for staff working in the European institutions to express their support for additional teleworking days from abroad. Over a short period of time, **near to 4000** colleagues from all across our institutions and agencies have endorsed our proposal. It is a well-thought and reasonable proposal that can be implemented and will enhance staff wellbeing and the institution's productivity in the interest of the European Citizens without compromising the integrity and continuity of the European Civil Service.

We hope you can approve the “**TAO 60 + 5 teleworking days from abroad**” petition and we look forward to discussing with your team its implementation soon.

Yours sincerely,

Raúl Trujillo Herrera

President

TAO, The Independents

“The best work pattern is that which encourages efficiency based on flexibility, and flexibility based on real trust with guarantees”.

EC STAFF PETITION TO COMMISSIONER HAHN



Brussels, 2 September 2021

- The world is changing and so must our administration.
- The ongoing pandemic has forever changed the way in which we work.
- The European Commission has proved that it can deliver efficiently with its staff working remotely.
- At the same time, each and every staff member should be guaranteed the possibility to work exclusively at the office.
- The European Commission is a public administration of a political nature.

A real and effective hybrid work pattern is the most suitable and efficient system for an institution of its kind. Both ways are complementary taking into account the nature of tasks and the objective general interest: **physical presence where necessary, telework where possible.**

An organisation like the European Commission is not a network of individual providers but a working community: physical presence is necessary for a number of activities (socializing,

creativity, innovation, learning, etc.).

Remote working offers staff more flexibility in managing their work commitments and private life, whilst contributing to the wellbeing of the personnel and a greener Commission.

HR's current plans for the future work pattern lag behind best practices at other International organisations, with a working scheme consisting of, in principle, 1 teleworking day per week, 2 days of physical presence in the office, and the remaining to be agreed with the line manager. Line managers will always have the last say on everything, without any guarantees whatsoever for the staff member.

HR's proposal for only 10 days of telework from abroad per year combined with at least 5 days of annual leave is clearly insufficient and not consistent with HR's own survey conclusions where an overwhelming majority of colleagues has expressed the wish to continue to work from home several days a week.

Other equivalent international organisations, such as the OECD, foresee regular or occasional teleworking for up to 80 working days per calendar year outside the country where staff carry out their duties.

The best work pattern is that which encourages efficiency based on flexibility, and flexibility based on real trust with guarantees. A results-oriented philosophy strengthens motivation and efficiency. HR's current proposal that staff should unilaterally place their trust in their managers, without the latter being required to justify their decisions, is not fitting of a caring and modern administration.

Based on the above, and taking into account:

- Experience
- Principles of modern management
- Compliance with the Staff Regulations and due account that this proposal triggers no impact on the allocations (e.g. expatriation/foreign residence/annual travel)

We hereby ask the following for the European Commission staff members



UP TO 60 + 5 WORKING DAYS OF TELEWORK FROM ABROAD PER YEAR



Up to 5 working days per month



Up to a maximum of 60 days of telework from abroad working days per year not combined with annual leave



An additional 5 working days max combined with annual leave




Clause for these rules to be reviewed after 1 year, to take account of the evolution of the COVID 19

The world pandemic is not over yet. The Principle of precaution would require a reassessment with sufficient perspective.

Your TAO Team



ANNEXES/BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 
TAO welcomes DG INTPA's initiative. The regulation of teleworking must include a clear and effective answer to digital overload. (16/06/2021) [Link to article](#)
- 
 Working from abroad. **TAO** requests ten additional teleworking days from abroad around the summer holidays. (25/05/2021) [Link to article](#)
- 
 Right to disconnect. Teleworking is NOT instant messaging. (14/04/2021) [Link to article](#)
- 
 Working from abroad at Easter. **TAO** calls for maximum flexibility and empathy in these exceptional circumstances (09/03/2021) [Link to article](#)
- 
 Telework and risk of burnout. The European Commission staff's view. (26/01/2021) [Link to article](#)
- 
 How to avoid teleworking burnout? **TAO-AFI** calls for action and suggestions (21/09/2020) [Link to article](#)
- 
 Other articles on the same theme - [Link here](#)

“A real and effective hybrid work pattern is the most suitable and efficient system for an institution of its kind. Both ways are complementary taking into account the nature of tasks and the objective general interest: physical presence where necessary, telework where possible”



TAO SAYS THANK YOU MR KOEN DOENS, DG OF DG INTPA

The regulation of teleworking must include a clear and effective answer to digital overload

TAO-AFI welcomes the 18th of May 2021 initiative by the DG of INTPA of proposing an INTPA digital workload and e-mail Policy. Specifically, Mr Doens proposed:

1. Monday mornings and Friday afternoons are video-conferencing free times
2. On-line meetings are limited to other work days between 9:00-12:30 and 14:00-17:00
3. Clear, well-planned and concise meetings continue to be ever more important with the growth in number of on-line exchanges.
4. Favor more "person-to-person" communication.
5. Use of collaborative, online workspaces is encouraged.
6. E-mails should be sent during working days between 8:00-19:00.
7. Nobody is expected to read or reply to e-mails outside working hours, on weekends and during holidays (except in justified, specific cases agreed with your line manager).
8. Efficient use of CC and BCC.

TAO applauds Mr Koen's initiative, and hopes that other DGs will follow his example of taking action **NOW** to protect the staff under their responsibility. Mr

Koen's eight points are steps in the right direction. TAO will continue advocating before HR and all instances responsible not only the above measures enacted in DG INTPA but others we consider a must such as,

- Videoconferences should not last more than 90 continued minutes, and if they need to last more than 90 minutes then there should be a 20-minute break after each hour. The existing practice of over 8 hours of videoconference, to which some colleagues are subject, should be considered unacceptable. Each videoconference should be separated from another by 60 minutes periods
- Videoconferences during the regular lunch periods should be discouraged, with the exception of voluntary training courses. Clearly, training is part of work hours
- The principle of core hours of presence needs to be regulated to adjust to the new normal where staff will be evaluated based on results and should be empowered under uniform, non-discriminatory rules set out by HR for the whole institution

(See TAO's tract ['Right to Disconnect: Teleworking is not Instant Messaging'](#))

Now it is time for action and a coherent approach across the DGs when the decision on working time and telework will soon be amended by our administration.

TAO stated back in April this year that **'We cannot be at the mercy of the more or less judgment of the responsible managers'**. It would seem DG INTPA colleagues have a DG with the sufficient empathy and leadership to act in this field.

We do not expect less from the other DGs and from HR at central level: please act now.



WORKING FROM ABROAD

TAO REQUESTS TEN ADDITIONAL TELEWORKING DAYS FROM ABROAD AROUND THE SUMMER HOLIDAYS

On 9 March 2021, TAO-AFI, *The association of Independents*, expressed our disagreement with the EC administration's offer concerning the ten-teleworking days from outside the place of employment for the whole 2021 and denounced that it was far from generous. TAO urged the administration to at least triple that offer, i.e., ten working days over Easter, ten working days over the summer holidays, and the same over the end of the year festivities.

TAO believes that the administration is increasingly aware of the tremendous fatigue that the staff is suffering as a consequence of the already long health crisis. However, TAO thinks that the administration is generally not pro-actively and quickly responding in terms of welfare enhancing measures for staff to this unprecedented crisis. Measures of support such as the ergonomic chairs, the screens, and a limited flexibility in teleworking arrangements, core hours or digital breaks' recommendations arrive slowly, insufficiently and late.

As we have been claiming, our administration has once again an opportunity to send a strong message of empathy and support to staff by announcing as soon as possible, ten additional teleworking days from outside the place of employment around the summer holidays, for so many colleagues who have been removed from their families and beloved ones for many long months, or who are just for so many reasons exhausted.

Do we need to remind our administration that most of EC staff are expatriates, which objectively adds misery to their personal situation in these terrible times?

All the other EU institutions continue to implement more flexible measures in favour of staff, we still do not understand why the Commission is lagging behind, nor why our administration appears ready to implement flexibility

measures only after the pandemic. **The exceptionality of the current period would justify it now.**

The recent Order of the President of the General Court of the EU of 13 April 2021 stating that: *“although the institutions have a wide marge of discretion in the organisation of their services and of the working conditions of staff in accordance with the constraints linked to the health situation, the exercise of that discretion must nevertheless be carried out in compliance with the duty of care”*, endorses legally the measures of empathy and flexibility that TAO has been preaching for the last 15 months to handle these exceptional times placing the human factor at the centre of the administrative measures.

Finally, the process of vaccinating our staff seems to be gaining traction. However, the battle to vaccinate everyone ahead of the summer holidays is far from being won. For instance, colleagues receiving the first dose of Astra Zeneca these days and expecting to meet the Covid travel passport conditions will actually have to wait at least two months for the second dose. Many colleagues are waiting for their turn. This is just one example of the multiple hurdles that need to be overcome if staff are to get their much-needed summer rest. **In the name of efficiency and support for staff**, we are calling on the administration to adopt the following measure: to give staff the option to telework from abroad for up to ten days. By default, this should apply to the period from the start of June until the end of September 2021, which would cover the annual summer holiday requests.

The staff needs it.



Executive committee

Previous TAO-AFI communications on the subject:

- 🌐 [Open letter to commissioner Hann: Your message to staff yesterday, 18/03/2021](#)
- 🌐 [Working from abroad in Easter: TAO calls for maximum flexibility and empathy in these exceptional circumstances, 9/03/2021](#)

TAO-AFI
*proximity
independence*


Association of Independent Officials

Brussels, 14 April 2021

RIGHT TO DISCONNECT TELEWORKING IS NOT INSTANT MESSAGING

TAO-AFI claims for a

RIGHT


to

DISCONNECT

OFFLINE WORK IS ALSO WORK

- ✓ Recognise the right to disconnect. Staff have a right to privacy and family life
- ✓ Right to disconnect is the corollary of staff empowerment and enhances wellbeing and productivity

On 21 January 2021, the European Parliament stated a right to disconnect in the context of teleworking and requested action from the European Commission ([2019/2181/INL](#)).

This is a most necessary first legal step that we salute, as until now there was no definition in EU law on what the “right to disconnect” is. The EP is now calling on the Commission to propose an EU directive to lay down minimum requirements

for the right to disconnect. We shall follow that closely.

As TAO had been reminding for months now, there is an absolute emergency to regulate the right to digitally disconnect and to overcome the constant on-call culture that seems to be developing these days.

Telework is here to stay, who can doubt it? And more use of telework will be part of our lives in the post-pandemic world, but there is work to do to frame it appropriately and to manage it in an efficient and human-oriented manner. In our view, there are two factors of this equation: the right to disconnect, and the right to avoid an overwhelming digital work pattern.

Indeed, the right to disconnect can be defined –according to the European Parliament- as the right *“not to engage in work-related activities or communications by means of digital tools, directly or indirectly, outside working time”*. But in addition to this, TAO calls upon our administration to regulate and frame properly the overuse of on-line work activities.

We are currently in a context where some managers seem to believe teleworking equates to presence in front of the Lenovo laptop for often more than eight hours every day. TAO says that the absence of a formalised right to disconnect at present, in the peak of an already exhaustingly long health crisis, puts at risk the health of staff and even goes against the business continuity of our work when the EU citizens need us more.

Even from an economic or budgetary perspective, a minority, but not a negligible part, of some workaholic managers who abuse their mandated control of the teleworking tools, work against effective productivity with an exhausted staff. In other words, these managers work against not only the staff wellbeing but also the interest of the service and this needs to be pointed out clearly.

Therefore, TAO alerted already on [September 21, 2020](#) on the seriousness of the problem and buttressed its call for action and proposals on the basis of the results of its survey among staff on the risks of burnout linked to teleworking ([see TAO 26/01/21](#)). Now TAO insists more than ever in its requests with these concrete, feasible, and urgent requests:

- ✓ No obligation to react to emails received before 8:00 am and after 6 pm.
- ✓ No obligation to react to emails received during weekends and other holidays.
- ✓ Videoconferences should not last more than 90 continued minutes, and if they need to last more than 90 minutes then there should be 20 minutes

break after each hour. The existing practice of over 8 hours of videoconference, to which some colleagues are subject, should be considered unacceptable.

- ✓ Each videoconference should be separated from another by 60 minutes periods;
- ✓ Videoconferences during the regular lunch periods should be discouraged, with the exception of voluntary training courses. Clearly, training is part of work hours.

HRs' present teleworking guidelines are far from giving a credible response to the matter. Clearly, the EC reminder of the core hours' presence policy including the 4pm sunset clause on Wednesdays and Fridays is a source of inspiration for the future regulation of teleworking hours. However, the principle of core hours needs to be regulated to adjust to the new normal where staff will be evaluated based on results and should be empowered under uniform, non-discriminatory rules set out by HR for the whole institution.

We cannot be at the mercy of the more or less judgment of the responsible managers. TAO wants clear and uniform EC/HR rules applicable to all.

🌐 Link to Article "[How to avoid teleworking burnout? TAO-AFI calls for action and suggestions](#)" – 21.09.2020

🌐 Link to TAO EU-SURVEY "[Telework and risk of burnout](#)" – 26.01.2021



Executive committee

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Association of Independent Officials



Brussels, 9 March 2021

FR

WORKING FROM ABROAD IN EASTER TAO CALLS FOR MAXIMUM FLEXIBILITY AND EMPATHY IN THESE EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Four weeks before the Easter break and we have no news from our administration on whether the colleagues who will want to visit their families and beloved ones including those many in vulnerable situation will 'enjoy' the required flexibility to travel and work outside their place of employment in the week or weeks before and after the EC official Easter holidays.

TAO once again requests the maximum empathy, clarity and simplicity from management in this one in a lifetime situation. The teleworking requests around Easter from abroad should be granted by default in Sysper as normal place of employment work hours. Let's not complicate things unnecessarily. Management should trust and empower the staff based on their work results and care about their well-being in effective ways. Along the same lines of staff empowerment, should the administration hide behind the Belgian and other Member States present travel restrictions to reject our fair request please do not do that: the local rules keep on changing and our colleagues in need will find ways to adjust and comply with the rules.

TAO calls the administration to keep options open and facilitate things in this domain now please, not later.

Make no mistake **TAO** is not asking for a privilege. Tragically, the situation of EC staff is not necessarily better than that of local communities throughout the pandemic in many critical areas such as access to vaccinations. For instance, the EC policy or rather political position to fully and blindly follow the local authorities is putting in a disadvantageous position the families of those colleagues without a *Mutuelle* in Belgium. This institution is becoming less and less attractive in terms of benefits and the claims by HR that the EC can keep on attracting the best European talent is delusional.

Please show empathy and grant the required flexibility around the Easter holidays.

 TAO'S TEN FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES FOR MANAGING THE COVID-19 CRISIS WITHIN THE COMMISSION WORKPLACE 	
1 ALL DECISIONS MUST BE BASED ON EXPERTS' & INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO BEST TACKLE THIS PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS.	6 FLEXIBLE APPLICATION OF RULES ON LEGAL TIME TO REST Exceptional mitigation from the 11 days limit on working time around Easter 2021.
2 TOP MEDICAL IN-HOUSE SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO STAFF Support for colleagues for all staff and voluntary psycho-social interventions. Enhanced medical services to staff backed by extensive reinforcement of hospital. Reinforcement of the psychological support team.	7 WORK MISSIONS REMAIN EXCEPTIONAL, ONLY WHEN NECESSARY AND SUBJECT TO GUARANTEES Working hours for priority and full supported from a special wage including to home road testing before and after the trip. Take-up transport planning with full recovering rights.
3 COVID PROOF BC BUILDINGS No. masks, temperature checks, no open space working, no office working supervised in office and regular air quality controls.	8 LESS RED TAPE AT WORK Light touch, automatic, rapid registration in detail, and temporary decision of the new team, established.
4 FLEXIBILITY AND UNIFORM APPROACH TO WORKING FROM THE PLACE OF ORIGIN DURING PHASE 1 Same clear instructions and guidance for all regardless of their EU. Flexible approach to what flying restrictions means.	9 A SUSTAINABLE, MODERN, EFFECTIVE AND HUMAN-ORIENTED TELEWORK REGULATIONS. FLEXIBLE MEANS AND SUPPORT Targeted regulation of rules and working hours including digital and internet to protect both side of equipment for all staff at home, including content and ergonomic hardware. Use the internet and IT tools, add a 100% call working to cover all other teleworking situation.
5 COVID TESTING FOR ALL Testing available to all staff and fast track reimbursement procedure by 2021.	10 PERMANENT AND SINCERE DIALOGUE WITH THE STAFF AND THEIR OFFICIAL REPRESENTATIVES

 **TAO-AFIs call for solidarity** [Link here](#)

TAO-AFI's communications on Coronavirus:

- EC Covid-19 Health crisis management – we call for a reinforced and comprehensive medical and administrative response - [Link here](#)

- How to avoid teleworking burnout? TAO-AFI calls for action and suggestions – [Link here](#)
- Are we Ryanair? 21st century EC staff working conditions – [Link here](#)
- Commissioner Hahn, TAO-AFI cannot kiss you yet – [Link here](#)
- A safe return to the office. Clarification on office layout and vulnerable groups needed! Plus, early alert of possible dark clouds on the horizon – [Link here](#)
- A safe return to the office. The devil is in the detail – [Link here](#)
- A safe return to the office? [Link here](#)
- More empathy, more leadership please - [Link here](#)
- Not business as usual – [Link here](#)
- Progress made yet more to do – [Link here](#)
- TAO-AFI asks for a lockdown – [Link here](#)
- We see hard work in the Commission's protective measures but... - [Link here](#)
- The Commission is still not doing enough – [Link here](#)
- Communication policy and recommendations to staff – [Link here](#)

As always, stay safe, well informed and keep your spirits high!



Executive committee

Your TAO-AFI team:

*Raúl Trujillo Herrera, Rosario de Simone, Marco de Stefano, Andres Font Galarza
Juan Luis Barbolla Casas, José Bellod, Evelyne Granta-Lubac, Cristina Perret, Chloé Matagne*

TAO-AFI



TELEWORK AND RISK OF BURNOUT: THE EC STAFF'S VIEW

TELEWORKING, WORKING ENVIRONMENT AND BURNOUT. TAO-AFI POLL RESULTS. THE GOOD NEWS, THE BAD NEWS, AND TAO-AFI PROPOSALS

Brussels, 26 January 2021

FR

TAO-AFI, the Association of Independent Officials, launched on 24.11.2020 a first of a kind questionnaire specifically asking Commission staff about working conditions, telework and burnout. 1.797 colleagues answered. We are delighted with this level of response. Given the comprehensive nature of the exercise (43 questions), we consider it gives the basis for meaningful conclusions. We thank the colleagues who took the time to answer our questions, thereby allowing us to reflect on the "new normal" and to continue our quest to improve conditions for Commission staff.

I. THE RESULTS:



II. THE GOOD NEWS

- **Communication policy:** Communication by the EC as employer on teleworking implications and psychosocial support is judged as good. Indeed, over two-thirds of colleagues consider that the EC Communication policy with staff during the Covid lockdown has been more than satisfactory. Obviously, TAO-AFI agrees that an extraordinary effort has been put into ensuring the EC-intracomm content is up-to-date and comprehensive. However, a good communication policy needs to be supported by action: beyond the words, concrete steps should be taken to support staff wellbeing (see the 'bad news' section below).
- **Management:** Staff believe they are generally capable to deal with the new teleworking responsibilities. Indeed, over 67 % of colleagues believe that managers are competent to do this (TAO-AFI results survey Question 2.3). This is good news, given other staff surveys where confidence in Commission middle management has not been so high. Indeed, TAO-AFI recognises that, even in our survey, the existence of one-third of management not fit for the

job is not an acceptable situation, given the implications for staff well-being. Action is needed on this (see *TAO-AFI's proposals below*).

- **Teleworking acceptance:** The majority of staff confirm they are happy with teleworking going forward: they are coping well; it's not a problem for maintaining good relations with colleagues; staff feel they have gained autonomy; the work they produce remains of high quality; good learning options are available, and there is trust that geo-localisation is not being used (see *replies to Questions 5.2, 6.1, 7.1 of TAO's survey*). Indeed, around 60 % of colleagues believe that they are coping well with teleworking (see also *Question 1 results of week 12 HR Pulse Survey, "Coping with Covid 19"*).

However, teleworking comes with implications for wellbeing and burnout: we need to protect the not insignificant number of staff who are struggling with teleworking. Our results need to be read also in conjunction with the results of DG HR's week 12 Pulse Survey, "Coping with Covid-19" where a **majority of staff, over 45%, recognised that the confinement was having a negative impact on their wellbeing**). Our survey also showed some staff's concern about the financial implications of teleworking. In view of these conclusions, it is clear that more effort is needed to address the wellbeing and financial consequences of telework (see *'TAO-AFI's proposals below*).

III. THE BAD NEWS

- The ingredients for **Burnout** in the context of teleworking are real. Indeed, over two-thirds of colleagues face in general situations of tension at work and witness colleagues who are suffering (see *replies to Question 4.1. of TAO survey*). These results are extremely concerning and are underlined by DG HR's Pulse Survey result (on question 2 -referred to above), according to which a majority of colleagues believe their well-being is worse off because of teleworking. Indeed, it is clear that telework under enforced lockdown has introduced a range of factors leading to deterioration of general staff wellbeing for a number of reasons such as digital overwork (*TAO survey answer to Question 3.4*), stress caused by connectivity problems (*TAO survey answer to Question 2.2*), and last but not least the lack of options in the highly divisive issue of teleworking from the place of origin in a context of travel restrictions and life centre of interest remoteness. Certainly, fixing the identified issues will be part of the fight against burnout (see *TAO's proposals below*).
- **Teleworking costs** not covered by the EC are considered unfair. Indeed, over 73 % of colleagues confirm that the administration should cover a significant part of the teleworking costs (*TAO survey answers to Question 7.3*). There is a pending debt to staff in terms of past non-reimbursed teleworking costs that will need to be paid (see *'TAO's proposals below*).

IV. TAO-AFI's PROPOSALS

There is a difference between the nice speeches and cosmetic measures to fight lockdown-telework burnout AND structural solutions to minimise the effects of enforced lockdown on staff wellbeing, while allowing for the business continuity of the institution. Our survey shows also structural problems of long working hours, stress at work, under-utilisation of staff skills and management weaknesses that go deeper than the current enforced telework regime. Therefore, TAO requests:

- **Limit online meetings time:** unless urgent circumstances require otherwise, staff should not be required to spend more than twenty hours per week in video-conference meetings. Rules should be created for regular breaks from online meetings. More training events should be scheduled during the working day, rather than at lunchtimes when staff need digital breaks. DG HR should consult staff representatives on a new in-house working time code adapted to the digital age.
- **Recognise the right to disconnect: staff have a right to privacy and family life.** We should not be expected to reply to messages and requests at all times of day or at weekends.
- **Pay the teleworking cost:** We thank DG HR for the chairs and screens. However, this is not sharing the teleworking cost. Let's be serious. TAO-AFI requests an EUR 150 per month allowance for staff in permanent teleworking (see *TAO-AFI tract "Are we Ryanair?" 09/06/2020*).
- **Triple the Medical Service's resources:** TAO-AFI appreciates the significant effort by DG HR to expand the great team of specialised social assistants, psychologists, fit at work support and conflict resolution experts. However, burnout is or can become a medical issue in many instances and TAO-AFI believes that staff deserves a top quality and not overloaded in-house medical department. (see *TAO-AFI tract, "How to avoid teleworking burnout" 21/09/2020*).
- **360 % CDR annual evaluation exercises between staff and management:** staff can as part of this also evaluate managers' adequacy to manage teleworking teams with implications for their management careers (see *TAO-AFI survey replies to Question 2.6*). The majority of managers have nothing to fear from this 360% exercise but will benefit through the recognition of their new skills. Managers who are persistently evaluated as unable to manage colleagues in teleworking mode will have to be transferred to other positions. Burnout in the context of teleworking is a specific and serious issue and managers can be part of the solution or part of the problem.

Last but not least,

- **Right to telework from the place of origin:** (see *TAO survey replies to Questions 4.5 – 4.10*). This is the elephant in the room. It is not **TAO-AFI's** style, *The Association of Independent Officials*, to ignore real problems and to react to the Administration's *fait accompli* policies when it is too late. **TAO-AFI's** position is in favour of a maximum of flexibility and options as regards the place of telework. There are colleagues who would be ready to waive some financial rights in exchange for working from where their centre of interest lies because they give more weight to other interests and values. Other colleagues by no means would like to change the *status quo* and have strong and legitimate arguments to continue working from Brussels, or other established places of work. They logically should continue to be rewarded for this expatriation cost. **TAO-AFI** will defend flexibility and diverse options for all categories of staff. We underline the need for autonomy, trust and empowerment in the context of teleworking, should it become a permanent reality.

TAO-AFI thanks all the participants, is pleased to provide our community with this reliable and meaningful thermometer of the situation at hand, and is eager to continue doing our part to contributing to make our institution an ever-healthier workplace.

With kind regards,

Raúl Trujillo Herrera
TAO-AFI President

C/c:

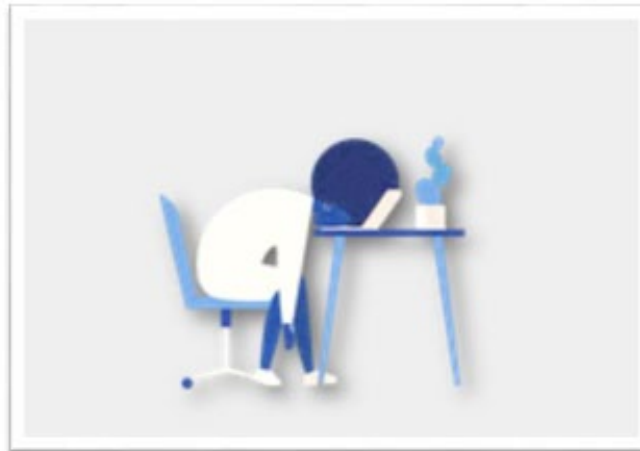
- Mr J. Hahn
Commissioner Budget and HR
- Mrs. G. Ingestad
Director General DG HR
- European Commission staff

TAO-AFI

Brussels, 21 Septembre 2020

FR

HOW TO AVOID TELEWORKING BURNOUT TAO-AFI'S CALL FOR ACTION AND SUGGESTIONS



TAO-AFI, *The association of Independent Officials*, would like to send a warning to our administration to take seriously the mental health implications of generalised teleworking. This warning is based on the already numerous experts' reports flagging the risk of burnout resulting from teleworking. This burnout can affect vulnerable segments of staff such as isolated colleagues or those struggling to reconcile work with the caring for children. However, nobody among us is immune to this psychological risk.

Simply put, burnout is characterised by emotional and physical exhaustion related to work. Burnout is neither stress nor depression, although these three concepts are often linked. Burnout is common and increasing i.e. recent research indicates that between 10% and 20% of the working population have burnout symptoms such as fatigue, irritability, mental distance or cynicism. The analysis and solutions for burnout are not straightforward and require specialised support that might include awareness, psychotherapy and life-style changes.

According to the experts, there are certain specific symptoms that could hint that one may be on the road to burnout, which are useful to be aware of for a rapid reaction:

- Every day is a bad day.
- Caring about your work or home life seems like a total waste of energy.
- You're exhausted all the time.
- The majority of your day is spent on tasks you find either mind-numbingly dull or overwhelming.
- You feel like nothing you do makes a difference or is appreciated.^[1]

If you feel you could be going through this situation, experts recommend turning first of all to specialised assistance, but a few tips are also most useful: social contact with your beloved ones; don't hesitate to be more sociable with colleagues; limit insofar as possible contact with negative people; practice regular sport; and have good nutrition habits...

Coming back to our administration in these changing times, make no mistake, we are aware in **TAO-AFI** that a majority of staff does not want to return to the presential work policies of the past, or at least not to a fixed single work pattern. We support teleworking but a regulated form of teleworking that ensures that **workers' rights and well-being are not damaged**. The new problems we see arising from enforced teleworking should be addressed diligently. The "new normal" should be about trusting the autonomy of staff and not monitored isolation. Hopefully, this new normal of trusted autonomy will guide the new teleworking guidelines HR is preparing. We will surely follow-up closely on your behalf. **TAO-AFI** will fight against abusive practices based on false productivity gains, old-fashioned management styles and distrust.

Therefore, we request the:

Right to disconnect: Management must receive clear instructions to respect the right to disconnect from work or work-related instructions given via electronic communication. In practice,

- No emails before 8:00 am and after 6 pm;
- No emails during week-ends and other holidays;
- Videoconferences should not last more than 90 continued minutes, and if they need to last more than 90 minutes then there should be 20 minutes break after each hour. The existing practice of over 8 hours of video-conference, to which some colleagues are subject, should be considered unacceptable;
- Each video-conference should be separated from another by 60 minute periods;
- Videoconferences during the regular lunch periods should be discouraged, with the exception of voluntary training courses.

Right to withdraw: We need clear instructions from DG HR to management to confirm that staff have the right to withdraw from teleworking presence in some exceptional circumstances, in particular where the teleworking obligations are abusive and have implications for the member of staff's wellbeing e.g. excessive time spent in continuous video conference presence during a working day.

Right to return: There should be the right to return to a safe work office space, subject to applicable health guidelines, for those colleagues who would prefer the hybrid or even full office working.

Managers should respect the above principles. Their capacity to plan, lead and show empathy should be factored into their annual evaluations and careers. The administration should take note of where the bottlenecks are in the design of a more modern management structure.

Last but not least, TAO-AFI is happy to recognise that our past calls to the administration to reinforce the wonderful team of **psychotherapists** in our medical service has been partially fulfilled. However, we believe additional resource to provide of psychological support will be needed in the near future. Therefore, we call on the administration to use their budget appropriately to invest in staff mental wellbeing going forward.

As we always say : stay safe, well informed, and keep your spirits high!

Further reading:

Belgian Law 28/2/14: <https://emploi.belgique.be/fr/actualites/nouvelle-legislation-relative-aux-risques-psychosociaux-au-travail-partir-du-1er?id=41483>

Belgium: <https://www.stressburnout.belgique.be/fr/reconnaitre/quest-ce-que-le-stress-et-le-burn-out/etudes-scientifiques-et-publications>

WTO: https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/burn-out/en/

Oxford University (OUP): <https://academic.oup.com/occmed/article/50/7/512/1444456>

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm>

Stress vs. Burnout

Stress	Burnout
Characterised by over-engagement	Characterised by disengagement
Emotions are overreactive	Emotions are blunted
Produces urgency and hyperactivity	Produces helplessness and hopelessness
Loss of energy	Loss of motivation, ideals, and hope
Leads to anxiety disorders	Leads to detachment and depression
Primary damage is physical	Primary damage is emotional
May kill you prematurely	May make life seem not worth living

[Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A., Jeanne Segal, and Lawrence Robinson.
<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm>