



Europäisches
Patentamt
European
Patent Office
Office européen
des brevets

Engagement Report 2020



Executive summary

2020 was a year of unprecedented challenges for EPO staff individually as well as for the organisation as a whole. To overcome the obstacles cast up by the outbreak of the pandemic, the EPO leveraged its known strengths: the willingness of staff to go the extra mile, the commitment of managers to care for their teams, and the readiness of colleagues to reach out and support each other.

We helped our people to maintain a reasonable work-life balance during the pandemic by providing more flexible working conditions. This, in turn, leveraged strengths within the organisation. Feeling in general supported, informed and trusted, our colleagues adapted relatively fast to new digital workflows and collaborated effectively to find creative solutions to unforeseen problems. Fuelled by a strong sense of commitment to the EPO, this process generated higher levels of staff engagement, fostering a sense of community at a difficult time.

Engagement in a work context can be defined as the emotional involvement or commitment¹ to an organisation. It is an outcome measure depending on the delicate interplay of various organisational and personal factors. For engagement to be sustainable, employees need to feel empowered and enabled to do their job, while being able to maintain energy levels at the individual level.

Two pulse surveys in 2020 had a high participation rate of 80% and 86%. While these did not provide exact measurement of the engagement index as known from 2019, they included comparable questions which gave a clear indication of positive trends. Compared to 2019, in September 2020 the energy levels were at 67%, representing a 9% increase. Colleagues and managers proved essential for coping with these difficult times: line managers' perceived care for well-being was at 84% (up 15% from 2019), with 85% feeling supported by their peers and teams' ability to cope effectively with their work challenges was at 70% (up 6% from 2019).

Understanding the evolution of engagement in 2020 calls for a closer look at its six key drivers: (1) empowerment through autonomy, flexibility and creativity, (2) enablement via access to tools and resources, (3) prioritisation of well-being to balance fluctuating coping and energy levels, (4) collaboration through connection and sense of belonging, (5) development and growth and (6) quality and external reputation. This report focuses on each of these engagement drivers to tell the story of 2020 in facts and figures, as well as through personal experiences shared by staff.

Looking back, 2020 will be remembered as the year in which our employees mastered multiple challenges through collaboration, creative solutions and collective efforts. It will be the year when we all gained awareness of what being "strong together" truly means. 2021, by contrast, will be a time for seizing the opportunities that unfolded during the crisis and building on the lessons learnt. With the confidence gained from coming through a crisis stronger, the EPO can work towards shaping a better new normal and securing its long-term sustainability.

¹ Engagement: emotional involvement or commitment (source: [Merriam-Webster](#)).

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1. Introduction

"Our success, now and in the future, depends on our staff's sense of connection to each other and to the organisation. Fostering this connection is a challenging process that requires constant fine-tuning to reflect changing circumstances. Yet it is also a highly rewarding process of continuous learning and improvement."

EPO Engagement Report 2019

When this last paragraph of the Engagement Report 2019 was being written, the EPO was already navigating the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. While it was clear even then that the pandemic would have a far-reaching effect on our organisation, we had no notion of the challenges that lay ahead or how we would best tackle them. Looking back now at 2020, we realise how proud we can be of what we achieved. We delivered on our main priority of keeping our staff as safe as possible. We made remarkable progress in terms of digital workflows and creating greater flexibility for staff, while maintaining business continuity across the organisation and for our users. This report focuses on how engagement drove these achievements and at the same time was driven by our commitment to staff well-being, a deep sense of purpose and a renewed awareness of the importance of connection and belonging.










The increase in engagement observed in 2020 can be traced back to the EPO-wide staff engagement survey of 2019, which provided the baseline as to where we stood as an organisation.

In 2019 our overall score for sustainable engagement was 15% below the European Benchmark². Our aim is to increase the engagement significantly year-over year, in order to bridge the gap by 2023. The results of the survey also provided clarity on strengths and highlighted several areas with room for improvement such as focus groups, pulse and ad hoc surveys.

One example for a structured improvement plan was the launch of the DG 1 People Plan in Directorate-General Patent Granting Process (DG 1), in which cross-sector and multidisciplinary work streams combined to address a number of issues raised in the staff survey. Its main achievements in 2020 are presented in the graphic below.

Figure 1 – People plan

People plan – Major 2020 achievements

| | | |
|---|--|---|
|  Work Stream 7.1 Workforce planning and talent acquisition |  Work Stream 7.5 Support rollout of tools for talent management |  Work Stream 7.9 Performance development |
|  Work Stream 7.2 Foster professional mobility within and beyond DG 1 |  Work Stream 7.6 Virtual working – health and well-being |  Work Stream 7.10 Collaboration 2.0 |
|  Work Stream 7.3 Review DG 1 job profiles and career paths |  Work Stream 7.7 Engagement survey follow-up |  Work Stream 7.11 Enhancement of communication |
|  Work Stream 7.4 Review strategic development programmes-related training for DG 1 roles |  Work Stream 7.8 Diversity and inclusion | |

Source: EPO

² See Engagement Report 2019

2020 also saw an improvement in how staff feedback was used and in the closure of feedback loops. The improvements with the greatest reach included targeted survey reports made available to various units and departments, the launch of intranet sites dedicated to follow-up actions such as DG 1's "You said, we did" and the campaign "From survey to action" presenting the actions following the EPO's pulse surveys in 2020.

However, our intended course of action was obstructed by the unexpected events of 2020.

1.1 The challenges of 2020: opportunities for engagement

By March 2020, it was clear that earlier plans would have to be adjusted. The pandemic proved to be a massive stress test for the organisation and all its staff. It shifted the focus to caring for health and well-being, fostering collective resilience for coping during the crisis and imagining a common "future beyond".

Within weeks, with so many of the established parameters changed, flexibility and adaptability had been offered to and required from all. The average percentage of colleagues teleworking daily jumped from 15% to over 80%. Exceptional teleworking guidelines were drafted overnight, laptop deliveries were fast-tracked, and a massive transformation was set in motion to replace paper-based workflows with remote digital ones. Almost from one day to the next, the question switched from whether the transition to a fully digital workplace would be possible, to how we make it happen.

Staff engagement was a key factor in weathering the storm faced by the EPO and the whole world around us. The 2019 staff survey had told us that 75% of our staff and 94% of our managers were willing to go the extra mile. That was borne out by the massive group effort observed in response to the crisis. It was the underlying premise that enabled the EPO to meet the challenges it faced and think creatively and collaboratively about ways to maintain business continuity. In May, 74% of our colleagues are positive on the EPO's response ensuring that we can work as effectively as possible. Engagement was demonstrated by the care shown by managers for their people and the support shown by peers for each other. It was in turn fuelled by the empowerment granted through the flexibility to work from home or even away from the place of employment, by the trust shown in waiving core hours as well as by the increased development opportunities delivered through online training via dedicated digital platforms.

Throughout the year, there were many practical examples of engagement, some of which are outlined in more detail later in the report alongside each of the key engagement drivers. Evidence of engagement was also gathered in two pulse surveys conducted in May and September 2020, each with a high participation rate of 80% and 86% respectively. These surveys measured a number of engagement-related aspects, both direct (enablement, empowerment and energy levels) and indirect (coping with challenges, support and care for the well-being of others). Both surveys attracted considerable interest, providing tens of thousands of comments expressing their gratitude, needs in practical terms, giving feedback and sharing wishes and visions for the future.

Even though the staff surveys in 2020 did not provide exact measurement of the engagement index as known from 2019, comparable questions provided clear indication of positive trends. Firstly, the energy levels, an important proxy to sustainable engagement, showed 9% improvement, taking the total to 67% and beyond the 2019 score. The importance of colleagues and managers in coping with these difficult times proved essential. Being supported by the colleagues was up to 85% compared to 2019, when 71% agreed that people in the unit were being attentive to each other's wellbeing. Equally, colleagues assessed their team's ability to cope effectively with their work challenges, which is another engagement index indicator, as being significantly higher than in 2019 (70% up from 64%).

2. Key drivers of engagement in 2020

Engagement in a work context can be defined as the emotional involvement or commitment to an organisation. As mentioned above, engagement is an outcome measure that depends on a delicate interplay between various organisational and personal factors. For engagement to be sustainable, it needs to be supported by clear goals, efficient teamwork and for staff to feel empowered and enabled to do their job, while being able to maintain energy levels at the individual level. The table below summarises the Willis Towers Watson model of sustainable engagement.

Figure 2 – Sustainable engagement model

Engaged + Enabled + Energised = Happier colleagues, users and customers

| Sustainable staff engagement | Engaged | Enabled | Energised |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|
| What it means | To believe in where we're going and be proud to work at the EPO | To have the tools and opportunities to do good work | To have a workplace that supports healthy and inspirational ways of working |
| What it measures/analyses | Rational, emotional and behavioural attachment to the company | In how far does the work environment support productivity and performance | Individual physical, interpersonal and emotional well-being at work |

Source: Willis Towers Watson 2019 report

Challenges and lessons learnt in 2020 forced us to think more broadly about engagement, beyond the model presented above and the key drivers derived from statistical analysis. We were able to see in practical terms how engagement as the rational and emotional connection to the organisation and its people was evident and tangible in the efforts and contributions made.

To understand the evolution of engagement in 2020, it is important to analyse this outcome from the perspective of the various elements driving it. In 2019, analysis of the key drivers showed that empowerment, external reputation and training and development were areas with the greatest potential to increase staff engagement. However, looking back at 2020, it is clear that collaboration, caring for health and well-being and enablement through tools and resources were key in driving engagement. The diagram below visually summarises what we have learned about our engagement in 2020:

Figure 3 – Key drivers of engagement



Source: EPO

In essence, all these elements are based on a simple yet powerful narrative that holds true in any work environment. The events of 2020 shifted our focus more to the health and safety of staff and the support and care shown by managers and staff for each other's well-being.

The following sections explore in more detail the various aspects that contribute to engagement.

2.1 Empowerment – autonomy, flexibility, and creativity

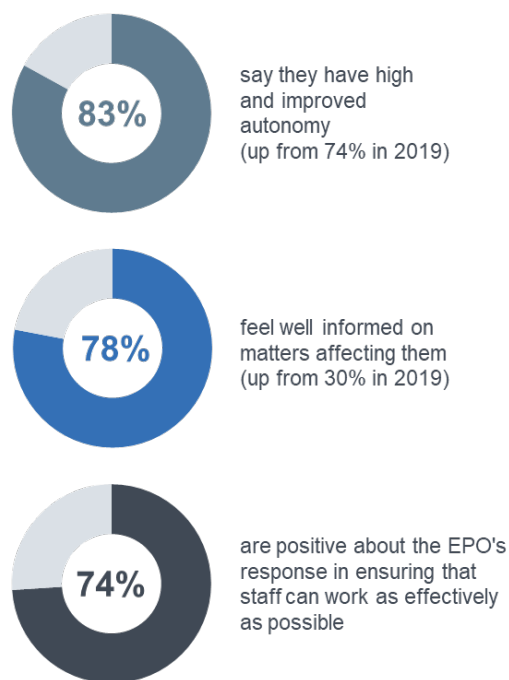
From working in the EPO buildings to making space for the EPO and our colleagues in our homes

The number of EPO "sites" grew within the space of a few weeks, with more than 80% of us switching to working from home in the weeks following March 2020. We went from having an office with ergonomic desk and chair, big screens, coffee on tap and colleagues just metres away to vying for space at the kitchen table, working with a laptop and VPN connection and doing our best to keep family members and pets out of meetings. Improvised offices could be found in attics, basements and even bedrooms. Six-and-a-half thousand different situations transformed into a new kind of engagement: trying to make things work despite the challenges. The keyword was flexibility. We tried to help as much as possible by no longer insisting on core hours, enabling everyone to make optimal use of the time to juggle responsibilities such as home-schooling and taking care of sick relatives or friends. Working at the office, working from home or teleworking from some other place – there was no one-size-fits-all solution, just whatever was most helpful for each individual staff member. We had to learn to adapt and did so with amazing energy and inventiveness. In March, staff were given permission to take home their office screens and peripherals. In the course of the year, desks, extra-wide screens and office chairs were provided to ensure staff had the ergonomic tools they needed for work. Beyond the tools and equipment provided, 2020 provided a window into the new working environments of staff, including their living rooms and kitchens. This gave more opportunities than ever to be authentic and to get to know colleagues better, allowing for greater openness. It was an experience that forced us to see each other as people, seeing the total person, beyond the colleague at work.

In the course of 2020, our guiding principle was putting the health and safety of staff first. This was achieved by giving a great degree of flexibility to staff from where and when to work, which in turn contributed to an increased sense of autonomy to balance the demands of work and home life. Hence, it is not surprising that perceived autonomy increased significantly from 74% to 83%. Despite the challenges brought by the lockdown and the closure of schools, 78% of staff conceded that their work schedules allowed sufficient flexibility to meet their personal/family needs, similar to 77% in 2019. It became apparent from the open comments that staff appreciated the new levels of flexibility and expressed the wish to maintain and increase them beyond the crisis.

The ability to work from home, or even abroad in another EPC member state, was made possible by the technical and regulatory solutions explored during the Ad Hoc Teleworking pilot project and the subsequent adoption of exceptional teleworking guidelines under Art 10 EPC, along with ongoing initiatives on digital workflows.

Figure 4 – Key strengths



Source: Willis Towers Watson "Strong together – working during COVID-19" report

Our efforts to inform everyone on matters affecting them during 2020 were appreciated by 78% of staff, up from approx. 30% in 2019. A dedicated taskforce met regularly to decide on the course of action, and information was systematically distributed via all management layers, as well via designated web pages (Strong together). There was a multidisciplinary team updating the information daily at the peak of the crisis. The speed at which decisions were taken and implemented was unprecedented. The units bearing most responsibility for ensuring business continuity by delivering equipment and new electronic tools and by ensuring health and safety and providing HR support exhibited high levels of engagement in the survey in May. This was due to both an increased sense of purpose and a strong sense of autonomy and empowerment to deliver the support needed.

Another pivotal element was the surge in innovation from staff to make online working a reality in a matter of days, and then to follow up with incremental improvements ever since. With everybody needing to find new ways to get the work done and stay in contact with each other, it is hardly surprising that the score for encouragement for coming up with innovative solutions to work problems would outstrip the level of 2019 (49%). The experience of increased flexibility and autonomy six months into crisis brought an interesting reflection on the potential impact on our overall culture. The fact that we were able to achieve it so quickly gave everyone a sense of pride in our incredible agility. Adaptability as a value saw the greatest growth in 2020: 58% of respondents were of opinion that it strengthened how the value of adaptability was lived.

2.2 Enablement – provision of tools and resources

How we managed to work from home so quickly

We are an ambitious organisation and we are forward-looking. It is perhaps because of this that we were able to shift so quickly from office-based work to full-time telework. In March 2020, a number of essential building blocks were already in place: 35% of the staff were already equipped to work from home on the basis of the PTHW (part-time home working) scheme. Further, a successful pilot project into (ad hoc) teleworking using laptops had just concluded and the roll-out of laptops to all staff across the EPO had already begun. With this, the key technological and procedural cornerstones had been established, as had the processes within BIT and HR to allow staff to work anywhere.

As the first lockdown approached, the deployment of laptops accelerated considerably. Electronic Digipass apps for authentication via mobile phone were issued to all staff virtually overnight. This allowed staff to log on to the EPO network and to work using either their EPO laptop or existing PTHW equipment. The VPN bandwidth to connect to the EPO was dramatically increased by moving the connection to new purpose-built digital gateways in Luxembourg.

By means of these actions, most staff were able to transition near seamlessly to working from home virtually overnight. But that wasn't all. For those who hadn't yet received a fully personalised laptop, an unconfigured laptop was issued that could be used to log on to their existing workstation at the EPO. In the small number of cases where it wasn't possible to deliver a laptop in time, the staff members concerned received support in using their private computer equipment to log on to their existing workstations again via an electronic Digipass app.

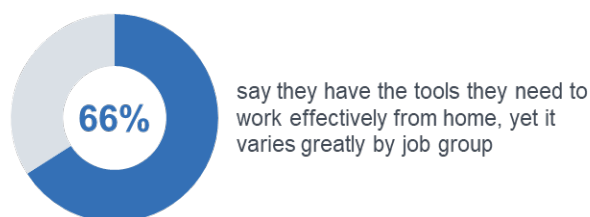
In conclusion, the fortuitous coming together of circumstances and a pragmatic and practical approach to dealing with problems enabled near 100% of staff to shift their workplace from office to home in a few short weeks in March 2020.

Despite the challenges of having to respond instantly to changes in the way of working, tools and systems, the EPO managed in the first survey to match the 2019 score for "obstacles to work", despite the massive changes faced, 65% of staff reported no substantial obstacle to performing their work well. While most had the tools in mind when replying, the challenges were coming from a multitude of sources, as for example the still to be adapted workflows and processes. In May, 78% of staff were positive about the EPO's overall response to the crisis and to ensuring that everyone could continue to work as effectively as possible. About 70% were confident that the EPO was managing the crisis well.

These results were supported by feedback on the tools for remote working, i.e. the surveys in May and September reported that 66% of staff had access to the systems and tools they needed. However, we knew that did not reflect the experience of everyone.

In the September survey, whilst 35% reported that their work situation had improved since May, 27% still stated that they did not have all what was needed in the current crisis situation (systems, tools and relevant access) to work effectively from home or remotely. Given that equipment was still being delivered and improvements were still underway during the survey, it was positive to see a slight upward trend in DG 1, where the view had been more critical in May. A comprehensive analysis of the feedback received on these aspects, including all the remaining pain points, was provided to BIT and DG 1 for further action.

Figure 5 – Availability of work equipment



Source: Willis Towers Watson "Strong together – working during COVID-19" report

We have made many efforts to improve and extend the availability of collaborative tools and platforms to allow teams to work together, host large meetings and events and provide user training and support.

2.3 Well-being – prioritising well-being to balance varying coping and energy levels

A comprehensive approach to supporting staff health and well-being

Throughout 2020, the health and wellbeing of staff was the number one priority. Since the onset of the pandemic, information published by the WHO, ECDC and national authorities was regularly collated and updated. Comprehensive hygiene measures were immediately put in place and capacity limits were set for the office buildings. Prior to returning to the EPO's premises, all colleagues had to take a special online training course to learn essential health and safety rules.

In addition to providing information on the COVID-19 response and following up on those affected by the virus, new services were quickly established, including meetings led by the health experts with groups of team managers to advise on teleworking, communication and how to support staff working from home or remotely. Three hundred and forty team managers were included in this popular exercise. It became clear that different teams had different needs, so the Health Advisory Team meetings held with management teams (ca 400 managers) helped to identify common themes and respond with tailored interventions. Additional offerings such as morning routines, active breaks, mindful moments, online ergonomic advice are running to further support staff using proven wellbeing strategies. Informative lectures on topics ranging from coping in a crisis to dealing with the demands of home-schooling were commissioned and well attended. A range of social/participatory activities were organised to encourage people to connect, move, exercise, relax and focus. In total, more than 20 additional initiatives were developed and implemented and continue to run in 2021.

Prioritising the well-being of staff and providing additional flexibility and support resonated with our colleagues. Our response to the current situation in taking care of the well-being of our colleagues received a 56% approval rating. The comments provided insight into the concerns of our people and the kind of support they required: the main difficulties related to distractions due to COVID-19 (a reality for 46% in May); balancing home-schooling and work, concerns about performance targets and coping with the many changes including new technologies and paperless procedures. To support staff, we relaxed the rules on parental leave, encouraged managers to adjust performance targets and introduced a phased implementation of paperless procedures.

Top management also took time to meet with as many teams and individuals as possible, listening to their concerns and ideas and providing answers to the questions raised. These encounters, whether planned or not, helped management to keep abreast of the issues preoccupying staff and identify important points that needed to be addressed. It was a chance for management to ask people how they were feeling and what they were dealing with. From the responses, it was obvious that while staff were doing their very best, many were also struggling.

It is clear from the survey that line managers were essential in caring for their people. We observed a significant increase in line managers' perceived care for well-being, which rose to 84% compared with 69% in 2019. We know from 2019 that our managers are very committed and engaged, with 94% going the extra mile for their team. They did an excellent job in very challenging circumstances.

Figure 6 – Caring for and supporting staff



Source: Willis Towers Watson "Strong together – working during COVID-19" report

The importance of colleagues and peer support became apparent in the results, where 85% stated receiving the support they needed from their team and colleagues. This showed an increase in general attentiveness to the well-being of others from 71% in 2019. There were many stories of colleagues supporting each other by helping to deliver furniture or equipment or early adopters helping others to cope with the new digital workflows or new programs. In the New Normal survey, more respondents expressed concern for their colleagues' well-being than for their own. The wish to support others was demonstrated by active use of and contribution to the Strong together web pages and local unit-level initiatives. The Amicale team made a significant contribution to ensuring that contact was not lost. Despite the fact that all facilities were closed and staff was scattered, very inventive ways were found to keep the bonds of community strong and stay in touch.

The importance of communication and connection

It became evident very early on that a primary need for staff was being kept informed about the crisis and all its aspects. With the situation evolving rapidly, a decision was taken to create a dedicated area on the intranet with a direct link from the home page. The area was aptly named Strong together to bring awareness to what was a fundamental premise as well as a shared need. With incredible speed, the Strong together web pages quickly became a central hub for information relevant to staff in these times, e.g. health and safety information and guidelines, travel advice, as well as a comprehensive overview of all measures put in place to support staff. Within a few weeks of its launch, the Strong together web pages were the most visited in the history of the EPO's intranet, with more than 100 000 visits and it was still the most visited site in December 2020.

The site kept evolving and adapting to the needs of staff. It became a platform for connecting on a more personal level. The President and the VPs got the ball rolling by sharing their own personal thoughts and experiences during the early days of the pandemic. Soon after, staff joined in, posting video messages for their colleagues. Whether it was providing words of encouragement or tips on what worked well for them, or even playing music or singing a song, what mattered to all was reaching out, being there for each other, being "strong together". A number of social channels were created for people from all areas of the organisation to connect around their joint interests.

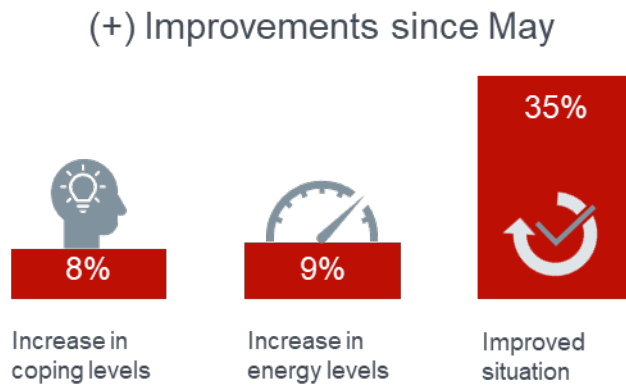
Beyond the support provided by expert units, the Amicale has been a great partner throughout. Courses that were previously delivered in person on site (yoga, Pilates, mindfulness, etc.), shifted online with staff members' living rooms and bedrooms doubling as gyms. Cooking courses, language cafés, Christmas parties were all hosted online with good participation from staff. An example of how distance was overcome by connecting through art was the amazing online performance of the Ode to Joy by the EPolyphony choir together with the Patent Orchestra.

Last but certainly not least, staff with children were able to count on support from the Kids Club, which continued to offer a wide-ranging programme of activities both online and on site. In Munich alone, 125 courses were organised with more than 1 400 children participating.

Well-being, measured by energy levels, is an integral part of sustainable engagement. Looking back at the first few months of the crisis, there was a lot of excitement and a sense of common purpose in coping with the first wave of COVID-19. This seems to have helped maintain energy levels through the very demanding first lockdown. We were happy to witness a 9% improvement in energy levels in September, taking the total to 67% and beyond the 2019 score. This coincided with increased coping levels over the summer, with 74% confirming being able to cope with challenges and stress related to COVID-19, up from 66% in May. Unfortunately, 21% still reported not coping well in September, with the same percentage reporting that their individual work situation had deteriorated since May. It is important to remember that the average energy level measurements represent a snapshot in time and are useful for monitoring overall well-being. What the survey showed was that not everyone was coping equally well, and that a staff member's condition fluctuated depending on how their individual situation changed.

While we do not have exact figures for coping and energy levels in the last quarter of 2020, there were more and more signals from staff, line managers and senior management about overall fatigue and lagging energy levels across the organisation. A review of the leave status revealed the level of unused leave in 2020. Measures to prolong the office closure in January and permit increased annual leave carry over with a dedicated plan were put in place to ensure proper rest and recuperation for all staff.

Figure 7 – Changes from May to September 2020



Source: Willis Towers Watson "Shaping the New Normal" report

The following word cloud of staff comments made within the context of the September pulse survey gives clear insight into what was essential for staff during this time.

Figure 8 – Word cloud from staff comments



Source: EPO. Based on "Shaping the New Normal" survey comments analysis

2.4 Connection, collaboration and sense of belonging

One story out of many on keeping the energy going: Team Piston Pumps and Inertia Motors

In the second part of 2020, the team reported feeling increasingly foggy, cranky and fatigued. The brand new home fitness gear was gathering dust and no one got a kick anymore from yet another virtual "happy hour" at work. The adrenaline rush of the first wave had worn off and, while some good news about lower coronavirus case numbers and vaccines was on the horizon, getting through the rest of the year and the winter was clearly going to be another tough challenge. What could we do as a team when feeling nothing but scepticism and annoyance at assurances that "we're all in this together" and when each of us would rather snuggle up in bed instead of finding the mental strength to (tele)work effectively?

As a team, we identified two key aspects to focus on:

- 1. Sustaining energy levels within ourselves and within our team*
- 2. Helping fellow team members build resilience*

The more we as individuals identified with the team, the more likely we were to show engagement towards it. The feeling of belonging together as a team created a supportive environment consistent with the organisation's objectives and energised us. The idea of belonging led us to develop a team logo for our MS Teams channel.



We came up with a positive motto that we use like a brand for our virtual team meetings: ITWORKS – Improving TeleWork by Online Reconnection and Knowledge Sharing.

The key aspect of building a culture of resilience in the team was achieved by giving everyone the opportunity to learn, by identifying areas of growth and also by having chances to challenge ourselves. At first, the huge changes involving the introduction of digital workflows was perceived as complex by many, and the risk of making mistakes was considered a threat to the quality of work. Learning from colleagues was crucial in dispelling these unhelpful notions.

The aspect of challenge and growth was tackled by empowering team members to take an active lead in virtual team meetings, sharing knowledge and practical tips such as how to handle PDF documents, ANSERA annotations, printer settings at home, efficient use of the new large screens, etc. Having to prepare for such meetings, speak in front of everybody and answer questions was daunting for some, but the sense of accomplishment and positive feedback afterwards were always very energising.

While help from the support services was important, support from managers and colleagues played an essential role in 2020. Despite the many technical challenges, staff assessed their team's effectiveness, which is an engagement index indicator, as being significantly higher than in 2019 (70% up from 64%). We also learned in May that 83% felt connected as part of a team during this period.

The importance of collaboration, maintaining a personal relationship with colleagues (albeit mostly in digital format) and the sense of belonging to the EPO were raised throughout the surveys.

The importance of social connection was expressed in the September survey, while exploring the prospect of a future with more extended teleworking and its potential impact: 70% expressed concerns about their future relationships with colleagues, 59% had concerns about collaboration and 48% about the sense of belonging. Meeting colleagues and managers face to face was the predominant reason for coming to the office, regardless of the preferred working pattern or location.

A number of activities organised under the Strong together banner provided peer-to-peer support above and beyond the normal professional offerings. These informal activities were echoed by a multitude of peer-based networks created in 2020, including diversity and inclusion (D&I) champions and the Communication Intelligence Network (CIN). Other networks adapted to the new online reality: the Continuous Knowledge Transfer team (CKT; see the Quality report 2020), the Asian Patent Expert Group (APEG; see the Quality report 2020) and the Personal Growth Group (PGG). These networks continued offering their collaborative services to staff despite the extra hurdles created by the pandemic.

2.5 Development and growth

In order to stay across all the rapid changes in communication technology and the digital procedures needed to keep the patent grant process and corporate areas running as they should, our staff had to acquire a range of new skills and knowledge. We had to learn to cope in a very short space of time with new tools and new ways of working. For the most part, staff maintained their levels of performance, despite 50% finding it more difficult to perform their job remotely.

A relevant offering came from the EPO Talent Academy which provided additional online resources to all staff for the development of relevant skills. During 2020, EPO staff followed 111 067 hours of instructor-led courses (75% as virtual sessions), 11 734 hours of internal eLearning courses, and 18 236 hours of external online learning courses (LinkedIn Learning, Udemy for Business, Coursera). Particular attention was devoted to developing the following skills: adaptability, flexibility and resilience, time management, well-being and stress management, virtual collaboration and communication. The launch of iLearn, a new learning gateway making the full range of learning resources easily accessible to EPO staff, has been a milestone in the creation of learning activities at the Office. It was made possible through the effective cooperation of different partners. A special tribute also goes to the volunteers in the CKT and APEG groups, who ensured the continued availability of peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Finally, line managers were instrumental in pointing out learning opportunities to their staff.

Some staff members and groups were more stretched than others. About 50 new managers took office in 2020, some of whom had never met their team live and had to face the difficulty of learning to manage a remote team under challenging circumstances. The leadership development programme for new managers was improved to include individual and group coaching for all the new managers. While the EPO did not have many new recruits in 2020 compared to previous

years, we did receive a record number of Pan-European Seal trainees. The onboarding process for the trainees was mainly conducted online, providing an essential learning experience for them, as well for their tutors and the EPO in general.

More far-reaching opportunities for development involved reskilling, upskilling and redeployment to other areas. Examples of these opportunities included roles as project managers or as members of strategic projects under SP2023, as well as those advertised on the Digital Talent Marketplace. In total, 517 people took on new roles in 2020.

Whilst it may have been overwhelming at times to keep up with all the new tools and developments (as reported in the surveys), it was a year of unprecedented growth not only in our digital dexterity, but also in our overall confidence in our ability to balance the demands of work and home life and face the challenges ahead.

2.6 Quality and external reputation

A common thread through all of the surveys was the emphasis placed by staff on the importance of having a sense of pride in our external reputation based on our quality, our integrity and our environmental awareness as an organisation. The Quality and Environmental Reports give a detailed review of 2020 and the efforts and achievements of staff, as well as individual departments and the EPO as a whole in these specific areas. The focus of the present report is on how we, the staff, can be proud not only of how we as an organisation responded to the crisis, but also of our continuing drive for excellence and our focus on business continuity for all our users.

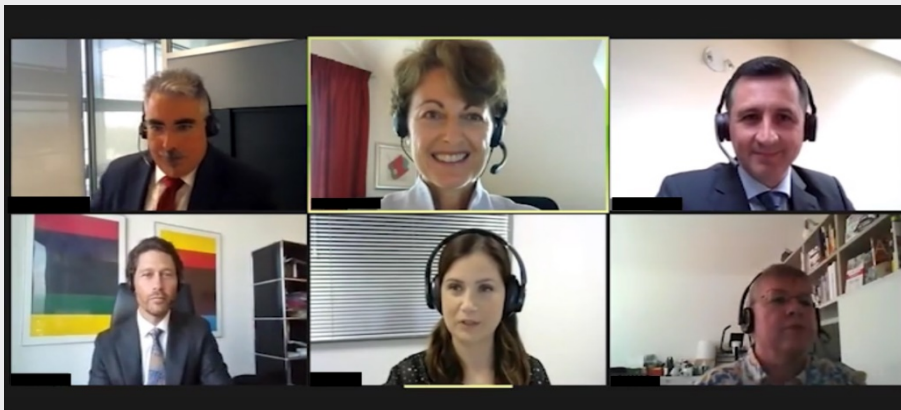
Continuing to strive for excellence at oral proceedings

Opposition proceedings were held via videoconference (VICO) from May 2020. At first, however, they were subject to limitations, in particular because the platform in use did not allow simultaneous interpretation (something that is needed in around 30% of cases). An alternative platform was sought, and from the beginning of October 2020, Zoom-based videoconferencing technology was used for oral proceedings (OP) in opposition.

Following the agreement of all parties, an opposition division in the healthcare field held oral proceedings via VICO, with interpreters, with two opposing parties from the UK and Germany.

Given the serious and formal nature of opposition proceedings, all participants were keen to see what they would be like when held via VICO. In the event, the atmosphere was good and the oral proceedings were conducted in a manner that reflected the high professional standards and commitment to excellence of both the division and the legal representatives. Communication between the parties and the opposition division was smooth and professional thanks to the stable connection, the video and sound quality and the excellent interpretation provided – which was easy to access for both the parties and members of the public (a new feature not offered in face-to-face opposition proceedings). During the OP, despite having to deal with the main request and several auxiliary requests, the division still managed to finish well in time. The feedback received afterwards from the patent attorneys involved was very positive overall, with one party reporting that the OP via VICO had felt very "real", although the opposing parties reportedly missed having the chance to meet during the breaks to come up with a joint strategy.

Figure 9 – Screenshot from a mock session of oral proceedings in opposition



Source: EPO

Open comments revealed many accounts of gratitude and pride in how the EPO was coping with the pandemic, how much support staff had received from management and peers alike compared with the situation in the world outside and at other IOs, and our resilience as an organisation.

3. The journey ahead from challenges and opportunities to realities

The EPO achieved a lot in 2020 and was successful in turning many challenges into opportunities. The challenges cast up by the pandemic forced us to find ways to work together, while maintaining and even increasing the engagement of our staff. We will continue striving to improve our engagement levels year on year.

The crisis and the resulting sense of being "in it together" seems to have contributed to the development of a greater awareness of and sensitivity towards topics relevant for staff engagement, such as well-being, diversity and inclusion and collaboration. It has opened up a new level of empathy never seen before between management and staff and among colleagues.

As 2021 dawns and the pandemic continues to linger on and delay the return to the new normal, it is clear that there is still work to be done to reach the balance needed between all the drivers of engagement to deliver outcomes that are sustainable beyond the crisis and in the long run. In the coming years, we will build on the important lessons learnt and bring them to bear in whatever opportunities that the future may bring to ensure long-term sustainability and balance.

While getting to grips with new tools and digital workflows, we must continue to adapt to the emotional challenges that are every bit as profound as the practical ones but often much more complex and fundamental to a true sense of belonging, connection and engagement. In the process, we not only have to continue to meet immediate needs, we also need to unlock our collective human ingenuity to transform possibilities into realities. Over the past year, we have been relearning the value of creativity, fluidity and adaptability. We have found ways to get past unimaginable challenges, relying on our own resourcefulness and that of our teams. When so much is still unknown, there is no one "right way" – only a mix of ever evolving possibilities and our determination to build a better future. The goal is to propel those possibilities towards a vision of tomorrow. This crisis will pass. What comes next is up to us.

As one colleague said, quoting Haruki Murakami³, in a Skype chat early in the crisis: *"And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm is all about".*

³ [Haruki Murakami](#) (1949) is a Japanese writer.