

Paper 1. The need for a consistent and coherent approach on working arrangements during the partial Palais closure

UNOG Staff Union, March 2024

This paper has been prepared following a meeting with the Director-General of UNOG on 14 March and a subsequent Joint Negotiation Committee meeting on 18 March at which the Union was informed that as a result of cash-saving measures stemming from the liquidity crisis, significant parts of the Palais office space could be closed for a considerable period.

This would put significant pressure on office space, leaving one open-plan hot-desking workstation for two staff, well below any ratios approved by the General Assembly.

The situation means that the Organisation is not able to provide the needed workspace and equipment to staff as they would normally expect. In light of this, the Union argues for the need for alternative working arrangements for affected staff, similar to what was in place for the COVID-19 pandemic.

The basis of this paper is the legal framework established in ST/SGB/2019/3, which reads (our emphasis):

Preamble: "The Secretary-General, recognizing the importance of flexible working arrangements **in balancing the demands on staff while at work with life outside the office** and the challenge of finding new and better ways to manage people, time, space and workloads effectively"

1.3 "In line with the policy on the organizational resilience management system and in order to facilitate business continuity during crises, staff members may be requested to work from an alternative work site. **Such situations are exceptional and shall not be considered as flexible working arrangements.** During such exceptional situations, the Organization shall, to the extent possible, provide affected staff members with the equipment and resources required to discharge their official functions."

2.1 b) "Flexible working arrangements are **voluntary arrangements agreed between staff and managers**, such as first reporting officers".

3.8 "In cases where there are **compelling personal circumstances**, consideration may be given to allowing staff members to telecommute within the duty station for more than [3 days]".

In this regard, staff are being required by the Organisation to make changes to their working arrangements due to a liquidity crisis, which is seen as an **exceptional** situation and through which the Organisation must facilitate **business continuity**, as per paragraph 1.3 above.

It is only possible to squeeze all staff into the remaining workspace if staff are required to telecommute and on days that are not necessarily suitable to them and their managers. This will not

be a **voluntary** choice based on **agreement with their managers**, but a necessity imposed by a situation of crisis. And even then, the H building does not lend itself to all types of work, particularly multiple Teams meetings, as witnessed by the strain on bookings for meeting rooms. The situation would be made much worse were the building to be used at full capacity.

Flexible working arrangements only allow for more than three days a week of telecommuting for compelling personal reasons. However, those staff members whose functions are incompatible with the conditions in the H building would not be working away from the office due to compelling “**personal**” circumstances, but due to compelling **organisational** financial circumstances. For the same reason, they would not be able to avail themselves of reasonable accommodation.

Taking the above together, it is apparent that flexible working arrangements do not apply to a situation where staff members will be required by the Organisation to work away from the office due to a reduction in office space.

At the same time, it is important to have a consistent approach across affected entities in order to prevent wide disparities of treatment and reduce the burden of coordination work falling on individual staff and managers.

Having consulted with staff, the Staff Union requests that alternate working arrangements (AWA) be implemented.

It was stipulated in the AWA policy guidance regarding COVID-19 that “This is neither optional nor a voluntary telecommuting arrangement (...) but a mandatory requirement by the Organisation”; a similar approach would reduce the scope for disparities. It would also avoid exaggerating real staff demand for telecommuting, thereby pre-empting damaging narratives that deny the need for on-site presence.

Paragraph 1.3 of ST/SGB/2019/3 as well as the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic show that AWA can apply to a broad range of modalities, taking account of both staff functions and staff preferences.

Accordingly, we propose that AWA in this instance consist of allowing affected staff for whom on-site presence is not mission critical and who can reasonably perform their work remotely to telecommute for more than three days per week on a voluntary basis.