



Issues in public sector workforce management in the recovery from the coronavirus disease pandemic*

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the trend of digitalization and flexible work in the public sector and has opened up possibilities for new work modalities, with the use of technology, and new types of contracts. Benefits and compensation schemes and reasonable work contracts for all types of frontline workers should reflect the changing nature of public sector work and the risks that frontline workers face. For sustainable recovery from the pandemic, public services should be delivered with a focus on citizen-centricity and workforce management in harmony with people's expectations. In addition, promotion of gender equality is another area that calls for attention.

Recommendations

The Committee recommends that the Council encourage governments to develop appropriate schemes for managing flexible work and contract work in the public sector, review public sector labour laws to reflect flexible work arrangements, develop protocols and guidelines for performance assessment in flexible work regimes, and accelerate

efforts to enhance digital skills in the context of public sector workforce planning at both the national and subnational levels. (Paragraph 12)

► See: [ECOSOC resolution 2021/12](#)

* Excerpt from Committee of Experts on Public Administration, Report on the twentieth session. See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2021, Supplement No. 24 ([E/2021/44-E/C.16/2021/7](#))

Discussion

Conditions of service of frontline workers

The Committee recalls that the COVID-19 crisis has exposed risks and vulnerabilities of Governments in terms of their unpreparedness for crises and inadequacies in public infrastructure investment. The pandemic has put the most visible pressure on the health sector, but workers performing many other essential functions that could not readily be carried out remotely have been affected, for example in public safety, education, social welfare, transport and sanitation. In addition, many frontline workers are under temporary contracts, which contributes to job insecurity.

In the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, greater attention could be paid to ensuring that such

jobs remain sufficiently attractive with adequate working conditions, respect for human rights and, where needed, alleviation from physical strain. Benefit and compensation schemes and employment contracts for all types of frontline workers could better reflect the risks that such workers faced. Adequate remuneration, based on competencies and effort, could also be given additional emphasis in strategic human resources management and would be essential to attracting competent workers to the public sector. Adequate remuneration could in turn contribute to the provision of high-quality public services.

Emergence of new work modalities

The Committee notes that a further lesson drawn from the pandemic is the need to broaden the scope of public sector labour relations and consider the changing nature of work, for example towards more flexible work arrangements and enhanced use of information and communication technologies, which could be observed in both the public and private sectors. The advent of alternate working arrangements continues to shed light on digital divides in the public sector. The Committee notes that public sector workers do not always have access to adequate equipment and infrastructure to perform their functions effectively. This raises a practical question as to whether expenses related to equipment, utilities and office space borne by public sector workers under new work arrangements should be compensated and, if so, under what conditions. Particular attention could be paid to public sector workers in low-income and conflicted

countries and in rural and remote areas where digital gaps are most pronounced.

Differences in digital competencies are observed across hierarchical levels, for example in situations where higher-ranking officials rely on technical support from more junior staff. Given that an information and communications technology - enabled public administration is part of the foundation of sustainable development, digital literacy could be a helpful criterion in the recruitment of public sector workers while ensuring substantive equality of opportunity for all. Special attention could be paid to the local level, where the workforce as a whole often lags behind the national Government in terms of digital literacy.

Promotion of gender equality is another area that called for attention. Women working from home often perform multiple tasks during the pandemic,

for example working as a public servant, supervising children and managing housework all at the same time. While questions of gender equality and women's advancement go beyond conditions of work and contractual arrangements, nonetheless flexible work arrangements in the public sector could usefully take prevailing conditions into account and set an example for equitable inclusion of women in the broader labour force.

The Committee reiterates that governments could benefit greatly from digitalized services and a strong

online presence, acting in a timely fashion and expanding coverage of public services to all groups and geographic areas in the recovery to the pandemic. Advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and big data, with adequate regulatory, administrative and security safeguards and the capacity to manage and analyse information could help Governments improve their understanding of people's needs. Many Governments could accelerate efforts to strengthen the requisite information and communication technology capabilities in the public sector workforce.

Towards a humanistic style of leadership and management

A growing lack of trust in government can be observed in many countries in the wake of the pandemic. Regaining public trust could be fostered through capable leadership, dedication, empathy and professionalism in the public sector. The Committee emphasizes that a sustainable recovery from the pandemic calls for public services to be delivered with a focus on citizen-centricity alongside

workforce management that is in harmony with people's expectations. A more humanistic style of leadership and management in government, putting a premium on empathy skills and emotional intelligence, is needed to address the complex challenges of sustainable development and achieve results under these conditions.

Technical guidance for government officials



[CEPA strategy guidance note on promotion of public sector workforce diversity](#) (draft)

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See also:

-  UN/IASIA Initiative on Public Administration Education and Training for the Current and Next Generation of Government Leadership ([Aide-memoire](#))
-  Enhancing the Competence of Government Leadership: New Approaches to an Old Problem - A Report on the Joint "UN/IASIA Initiative on Public Administration Education and Training for the Current and Next Generation of Government Leadership" to the First Meeting of CEPA ([Report](#))