



European Network of Public Employment Services

**PES staff management –
challenges in the 'new normal'**

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PES staff management challenges in the 'new normal'

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	5
LIST OF TABLES.....	6
LIST OF FIGURES.....	6
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	7
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY.....	10
1. STAFF MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES IN PES BEFORE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.....	11
2. STAFF MANAGEMENT IN THE 'NEW NORMAL' FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC...	12
2.1 Work organisation changes introduced during COVID-19 pandemic and maintained in the current practice.....	12
2.2 Performance management practices and systems - changes introduced or planned	14
2.3 Remote and hybrid work - preferences of staff, current practices, and key advantages and challenges.....	15
2.4 Initiatives to support the successful introduction of remote/hybrid work.....	20
2.5 Measures to ensure the well-being and work-life balance of PES staff.....	23
3. STAFF, KEY COMPETENCES AND PROFESSIONALISATION OF PES EMPLOYEES FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.....	24
3.1 PES Staff - changes in the number of employees, internal deployment, and new profiles/roles.....	24
3.1.1 Number of staff.....	24
3.1.2 Workforce internal deployment and new roles/profiles of PES staff.....	24
3.2 Key competencies and skills requirements.....	27
3.2.1 Key competencies needed in the future due to changes in service provision and work organisation.....	27
3.2.2 Skills requirements in PES - changes and HR measures.....	27
3.2.3 PES practices in assessing internal skills imbalances.....	28
3.3 Professionalisation of staff - new developments.....	29
3.3.1 New developments in HR/staff management system to ensure better alignment with strategic direction and organisational culture.....	29
3.3.2 New developments and adjusted approaches regarding the staff training ..	31
3.4 Practices introduced to increase the agility, flexibility, and resilience of staff.....	32
3.5 Difficulties in recruiting staff and practices introduced to increase PES attractiveness as an employer.....	33
4. STAFF AND STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT.....	35
4.1 Tools to gather and analyse staff feedback and opinions.....	35
4.2 Employees' involvement in PES - changes and new developments.....	36
4.3 Practices and tools to gather and analyse external feedback.....	38
5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	40
REFERENCES.....	42

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Changes introduced as temporary under COVID-19 and used permanently in relation to work organisation13

Table 2. Changes (including new developments and upscaled initiatives) in performance management practices in PES.....14

Table 3. Preferences of staff towards work formats.....17

Table 4. PES-level initiatives supporting the successful introduction of remote/hybrid work20

Table 5. Planned changes in the number of PES staff (Is the number of PES staff planned to decrease/increase in the next 12 months?)24

Table 6. Changes introduced to workforce internal deployment as a consequence of digitalisation / automation of PES functions.....25

Table 7. Key reasons for the introduction of new roles/profiles in PES26

Table 8. Practices used to assess internal skills imbalances in PES.....29

Table 9. Changes (new developments and/or adjusted approaches and/or new initiatives) in practical terms regarding staff training (reskilling, upskilling) in PES31

Table 10. Tools used and/or developed in PES to gather and analyse staff feedback and/or opinions.....35

Table 11. Changes related to enhancing employees' involvement in PES37

Table 12. Practices and tools of external feedback used currently or being developed in PES38

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. What are the key advantages associated with remote/hybrid work in your PES for managers and staff?*.18

Figure 2. What are the key challenges associated with remote/hybrid work in your PES for managers and staff?*.19

Figure 3. What are the key PES staff competences needed in the future due to changes in service provision and work organisation in your PES?27

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Staff management practices in PES are crucial for these organisations to function effectively in the evolving work environment. Recent developments in Human Resources Management, also in the public sector, have been greatly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the introduction of new employee management practices (for example remote and hybrid work) and initiated the development of new ones, specifically addressing the challenges of increasingly digitalised workplaces.

In previous years, the topic of staff management or Human Resources Management in PES has been analysed by a series of reports and initiatives (e.g. at the Thematic Review Workshop in June 2018). However, until recently little was known about the PES strategies and concrete activities to respond to any new trends that have been identified for staff management, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report aims to fill this gap by providing an overview based on a survey of 29 PES in Europe. The specific aim of the questionnaire and report was to get an overview of PES approaches and recent changes, and identify key challenges and promising practices related to three broad issues:

- (1) staff management in the 'new normal' following the COVID-19 pandemic,
- (2) key competences, professionalisation and training of PES staff,
- (3) staff and stakeholder involvement.

This report has been prepared based on the literature review (scientific literature, research reports and PES thematic/analytical papers related to the topic) and a survey of PES staff management practices. The survey was launched in July 2022 and responses were collected until early September 2022. Responses are based on information from PES and addressed by HR departments or other responsible bodies for internal discussions and analyses. To deepen the understanding of the post-COVID practices, follow-up interviews gathering qualitative in-depth information on PES strategies have also been undertaken.

Staff management in the 'new normal' following the COVID-19 pandemic

The survey revealed that staff management practices in PES over the last years during the COVID-19 pandemic have changed significantly. The changes stem from the unprecedented turmoil in the working environments caused by the need for social distancing while retaining full (and often increased, due to the crisis) PES operations.

During the pandemic, PES introduced different short-term measures of organisational and preventive character caused by lockdowns and the need to rearrange the service provisions in this new situation. The majority of PES (25 out of 29) used **reallocation of staff** (both spatial and between services), followed by **health-related measures** – both related to physical and mental health - and **online regular team meetings** (24 out of 29 PES), as well as **staff rotation in the office** or flexible scheduling of office work (23).

Some of these practices were retained in the long-term, including online practices to support the ongoing **digitalisation of PES** and their services (28 out of 29 PES) and further developing **online services for jobseekers and employers** (27 PES). During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of PES upscaled **online training practices** for their employees (24 PES).

Performance management practices have also been altered accordingly towards a more intensive use of digital tools and revision of workloads and targets. Half of surveyed PES (15 out of 29) introduced changes in the **use of digital/online tools supporting performance management**. This is in line with the overall digital strategy of PES, as well as the observed shift towards remote and hybrid work. The survey found that 12 out of 29

PES **revised the targets or workloads**, taking account of the post-pandemic labour market changes.

One of the most significant developments in relation to staff management is the **introduction or upscaling of remote and hybrid work** in PES. While these new work formats became a reality (which is especially evident for hybrid work), the actual work formats are not always aligned with staff preferences. More than half of PES reported that all categories of their **staff would like to work in hybrid form**. Generally, more people prefer this form of work (over office or fully remote work), but in reality, people work in the office more than they would prefer. The survey showed that these preferences are often under-researched, and many PES do not know the exact work format preferences of their staff

Remote work is both advantageous and challenging. It supports **better work-life balance, less commuting, and flexibility in scheduling work** that all positively affect performance, efficiency and employee satisfaction. However, it also challenges PES management in terms of **communication and interpersonal relations, increasing health (also mental health) problems, or involvement of staff**. The lack of direct contact and close interpersonal relations is especially burdening in functions heavily based on direct contact (e.g. employment counsellors, frontline staff). Additionally, it affects administrative and back-office functions as these are more prone to being performed remotely following the COVID-19 pandemic, with people feeling detached from their colleagues and workplace. The PES management must adjust to these new conditions, shifting from micro-management and direct control of work towards trust- and task-based management.

Due to observed challenges, almost all PES surveyed introduced **supportive tools** in the form of **communication platforms and channels** – including new platforms, internal communication tools, groups (28 out of 29 PES), **training** - including management training (25 of 29), **purchase of home office equipment** to provide staff with better opportunities to work remotely (23) and **introducing remote work cultures** (21). They also took efforts to **develop practices supporting the well-being of employees and managers**. One of the most widespread measures is training courses offered to employees, mental health support protocols (longer breaks, guidebooks, and self-help tools, along with professional support from psychologists or coaching, etc.) as well as practices to increase integration (supporting informal communication, organising integration events for staff, etc.).

Key competences, professionalisation, and training of PES staff

Changes in the labour market and related PES services enhanced the need for internal staff redeployments and reskilling. The changes in terms of the number of staff in different functions are limited. In over half of surveyed organisations (17 out of 29) **frontline and back-office staff levels will remain the same**, as is even more the case in relation to PES management – both **middle and operational** (no planned changes in 24 and 23 PES respectively).

However, the retraining and redeployment to other services, as well as the increased need for IT staff and general digital competences of employees, can be clearly marked. Digitalisation, the **introduction of new functions and services** (e.g. digital consultants/e-counsellors, data and business analysts, data scientists, etc.), and service reorganisation are also key reasons for introducing new roles and profiles in PES. Over half of PES (17 out of 29) **retrained or reskilled current staff** in order to equip them with the skills necessary to function in changing services or delivery models. A similar group (16) **redeployed some staff to provide more time on direct services** and communication with employers, including consulting on support measures. It was also found that 11 of 29 PES allocated **more people to frontline services** and 10 to **online services** (from face-to-face), as the functions became digitalised.

The need for new skills is apparent and supported internally by initiatives and investments in training that aim for better alignment with PES' strategic direction and organisational culture. PES indicated the **key staff competences needed in the future** due to changes in service provision and work organisation: **digital competences**, including data analysis and management skills, **competences related to overcoming silo thinking/mentality**, followed by a **proactive attitude**. With the changing ways the PES services are provided in general, the ability to act independently, flexibly, and responsively is becoming crucial. Self-management and remote team management skills are gaining momentum and might constitute an important element of the PES staff competence profile of the future. These new or up-scaled requirements led to changes in staff training redesign. Most notably, changes have been introduced to **practices regarding the development of staff digital competences** and **practices to develop future leaders** or new managerial skills

The PES organisations often struggle with **recruitment difficulties**, especially in IT-related areas, where they need to compete with increased demands for specialists from other organisations and the private sector. They address this issue by **increasing efforts to increase the attractiveness of PES as an employer**, using brand/image strengthening actions, but also designing new elements of an employees' offer, that make working at PES attractive and competitive.

Staff and stakeholder involvement

Staff feedback has been found to be an important factor among many PES, with a focus on **training needs** (23 out of 29 PES), **employee engagement** (22), and **health monitoring** (21). The gathered information is not only discussed but often used to improve HR services and make the working environment more attractive and supportive for employees. While employee involvement is currently challenging, PES use newly developed or upscaled **approaches enhancing employees' engagement** in the form of organisational information sharing practices (22 out of 29 PES), followed by team communication and managerial feedback (18 PES) and onboarding of new employees (17). This also covers team building/integration (11 PES), motivation/engagement (10) and celebrating successes (9).

They also seek **feedback and involvement from stakeholders**, which serve as an important source of information for service and management practice improvements.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Effective staff (Human Resources) management is essential to the overall management and effectiveness of European Public Employment Services (PES) in the rapidly changing world of work. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, PES experienced additional HR challenges and changes in staff management practices, stemming from increased workloads, changed working modes (towards remote and hybrid), and new service delivery models. Currently, there is no comprehensive source of knowledge on these new or changed PES staff management practices. Therefore, the PES Network decided to undertake a survey addressing these important issues.

The **key topic** of this study is the mapping of strategies and concrete activities to respond to new trends in staff management. This also contributes to the PES Network's mission to modernise and strengthen PES in challenges related to digitalisation, staff management and the changing world of work.

More specifically, the aim of the questionnaire and report is to get an overview of PES approaches and recent evolutions, and identify key challenges and promising practices related to:

- 1) Staff management in the 'new normal' following the COVID-19 pandemic, focused on:
 - Work organisation changes
 - Performance management practices
 - Remote and hybrid work
 - Well-being and work-life balance initiatives
- 2) Key competences, professionalisation, and training of PES staff:
 - Workforce planning
 - Key competencies and skills requirements
 - Professionalisation of staff
 - Practices to increase agility, flexibility, and resilience
 - Recruitment
- 3) Staff and stakeholder involvement:
 - Employee feedback
 - External stakeholder feedback
 - Employee involvement.

The report is organised along these three overarching topics. On the basis of the additional literature review (scientific literature, research reports, and PES thematic/analytical papers related to the topic) that was also performed to support the drafting of the report, the part on pre-COVID-19 pandemic HRM practices and challenges is included at the beginning of this report.

The survey was sent to PES in July 2022 and responses were collected until early September 2022. Responses are based on information from PES, and addressed by HR departments or other responsible bodies on the basis of internal discussions and analyses. It should be noted that PES noted a lack of internal data in a few cases, thus basing their responses on broader HR organisational knowledge or assumptions and such situations have been clearly noted in the report. A total of 29 PES responded to the questionnaire and are therefore covered by this analysis (**AT, BE-Actiris, BE-Forem, BE-VDAB, BG, CY, DE, DK, EE, EL, ES, FI, FR, HR, HU, IS, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SK, SI** and **SE**).

To deepen the understanding of the post-COVID HRM PES practices, the follow-up interviews gathering qualitative in-depth information on PES strategies have been undertaken. Interviews were conducted with PES representatives from **Belgium-VDAB, Estonia, Lithuania** and **Sweden** on the basis of the interview scenario using an in-depth individual interview (IDI) method.

1. STAFF MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES IN PES BEFORE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The topic of staff management or Human Resources Management in PES is relatively new to the activities of the European Network of Public Employment Services. It is visible in a limited number of sources/reports on PES staff management practices. One of the first comprehensive sources is the 2012 analytical paper on **Job profiles and training for employment counsellors**¹. Analysis revealed that the changing service requirements observed in many European PES at this time posed new challenges for employment counsellors, requiring them to focus more on those client groups in need of more support, while at the same time focusing on building up relationships with employers. The paper also called for strengthening PES staff management practices in the area of development through professional training practices. These observations led to the development of the **European reference competence profile for PES and EURES counsellors**² in 2014, with the aim to describe and concretise core competences.

Boselie et al. (2021) note the increased interest in the research of Human Resources Management in public administration in recent years. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the PES Network had been very active in the field of Human Resources Management in PES, having established the Working Group that focused on the current and future challenges in this area. In 2018, a number of meetings (in Oslo and Amsterdam), as well as a Thematic Review Workshop (June 2018 in Riga), took place. A thematic paper on '**Human resources management: How to attract, retain and develop talent**'³ presents the analysis of key HRM issues in PES. This paper suggests that it is vital to further develop the HRM practices of PES, focusing on:

- developing proactive PES HRM strategies, policies, and tools to provide staff with the opportunity to grow and develop to fulfil their potential;
- increasing agility and flexibility of PES when responding to a changing labour market environment to better initiate, manage, and implement change;
- aligning HR performance management with PES strategic direction and culture;
- training and supporting PES staff to develop their skills and capabilities to use modern technologies and client engagement strategies effectively; and
- organising PES HRM activities more efficiently by using workforce planning and talent management approaches.

For the preparation of the 2018 report, the previous survey of PES HRM approaches has been prepared, making it possible to pinpoint good PES practices and identify key challenges associated with this field.

A general increase of interest in the strategic perspective of HRM has been noted, with the focus on generating organisational value added for all stakeholders (customers, social partners, employees and other actors, including PES customers) through a series of actions to develop competencies, improve employee motivation and engagement, shape organisational culture and develop leadership.

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=14102&langId=en>

² <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=14100&langId=en>

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20127&langId=en>

A follow-up visit⁴ to the Dutch PES showed in practice that a strategic HRM perspective leads to the development of a comprehensive approach to professionalism/craftsmanship, leadership, and personal skills that has steadily involved managers and all staff in changing and adopting new working methods over the past few years. These included the development of a remote working culture, which significantly helped in the (then unpredicted) changes that took place over the next two years.

The PES Network **Key considerations paper: Implications on Strategic Human Resource Management for Future PES Organisations**⁵ of 2019 notes that the world of work challenges needs to be addressed by a more strategic and proactive role of HRM in PES.

It suggests that HRM needs to develop from a traditionally supportive and reactive role (short-term, focused on current challenges in an operational way) to a more strategic and proactive one (long-term, focused on organisational level business outcomes and anticipating future challenges).

Recent developments in Human Resources Management, also in the public sector, are greatly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted by Hamouche (2021): 'The COVID-19 (crisis) has grandly shaken all organizations, creating a complex and challenging environment for managers and Human Resource Management (HRM) practitioners, who need to find ingenious solutions to ensure the continuity of their companies and to help their employees to cope with this extraordinary crisis'.

One of the unexpected outcomes of COVID-19 was the acceleration of the digitalisation processes which started in PES before the pandemic. As pointed out by Agostino et al. (2021), in an unexpected circumstance, such as COVID-19, public service delivery cannot be suspended but must be delivered online, relying on the available digital technology. Due to this, initiated changes forced organisations, including PES, to prioritise 'digital acceleration', which also related to staff management. However, the review of available sources has not led to the identification of sources (either scientific or other reports) on the developments in Human Resources Management of PES. Previous reports on Human Resources Management in PES have formed the basis of the current survey preparation, as all available materials have been reviewed and served as a starting point for the analysis.

2. STAFF MANAGEMENT IN THE 'NEW NORMAL' FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

2.1 Work organisation changes introduced during COVID-19 pandemic and maintained in the current practice

Staff management practices in PES, over the last COVID-19 pandemic years have changed significantly. These changes stem from the unprecedented turmoil in the working environments caused by the need for social distancing while still retaining full (and often increased, due to the crisis) PES operations. As a consequence, there has been a significant development of new measures (or upscaling of their use) that can be noted in EU PES (see Table 1).

During the COVID-19 lockdowns and throughout the pandemic, the most commonly used measures included (in order of frequency):

- Reallocation of staff (both spatial and between services),
- Health-related measures (both related to physical and mental health),

⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20478&langId=en>

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20660&langId=en>

- Online regular team meetings (e.g. weekly, daily),
- Staff rotation in the office/flexible scheduling of office work,
- Online employee training,
- Online onboarding for new employees (introduction and adaptation of newcomers, including initial training), and
- Online/remote services for jobseekers (e.g. rapid/fast response).

The measures which have been used most frequently constitute a natural organisational response to the COVID-19 challenges, as noted both in the public and private sectors. The need for social distancing while retaining – or as in PES even increasing due to the increased inflow of jobseekers as well as support offered to employers - the activity of the organisation led to implementing measures that allowed for the upkeep of operations in new and unprecedented conditions.

Some of the newly introduced measures were also found to be popular after the COVID-19 pandemic subsided and have been introduced as permanent measures. These include (in order of frequency):

- Digitalisation/automation of some PES services,
- Online/remote services for jobseekers (e.g. rapid/fast response),
- Online/remote services for employers (e.g. consulting on support measures),
- Online regular team meetings (e.g. weekly, daily), and
- Online employee training.

Table 1. Changes introduced as temporary under COVID-19 and used permanently in relation to work organisation

Types of changes and measures	Used during COVID-19 lockdowns/pandemic	Introduced as permanent measure/practice	Not used
Reallocation of staff (both spatial and between services)	25	10	3
Online regular team meetings (e.g. weekly, daily)	24	26	0
Health-related measures (both related to physical and mental health)	24	17	1
Staff rotation in the office/flexible scheduling of office work	23	13	3
Online training of employees	22	24	1
Online/remote services for jobseekers (e.g. rapid/fast response)	21	27	0
Online onboarding of new employees (introduction and adaptation of newcomers, including initial training)	21	11	7
Online/remote services for employers (e.g. consulting on support measures)	20	26	1
Digitalisation/automation of some PES services	18	28	1
Questionnaires on the well-being of staff with follow-up activities	14	16	10
New leadership approaches/programmes	14	14	11
Other measures/practices	1	3	3

Source: own development based on survey responses.

While there is a significant degree of commonality between the lists, one has to note that digitalisation/automation is the most prevailing and accelerating trend, along with the online/remote services for jobseekers and employers. Also, the regular online team meetings became a standard staff management practice in PES both during and after the pandemic. Some of the measures – while commonly used during COVID-19 - have experienced significant drops afterwards, and have not been widely introduced as permanent. This includes online onboarding (probably due to the low effectiveness of the measure), reallocation of staff (due to temporary characters) and health-related measures (quite surprisingly, but probably due to discontinuing some specific pandemic-related restrictions and measures, like COVID-19 testing, etc.).

Some PES (e.g. **BE-Forem** and **DK**) noted that some of the measures listed were already in place and were well developed before the pandemic, which was not a trigger for their permanent introduction. For example, in **Denmark**, these services include online employee training, questionnaires, digitalisation of services, in **Belgium-VDAB**, the process of digital transformation and hybrid working (including the online courses on digital skills) and in **Belgium-Forem**, online training, health-related measures and questionnaires on well-being. Due to COVID-19, these processes were intensified, accelerated or upscaled.

2.2 Performance management practices and systems - changes introduced or planned

Performance management is a set of organisational management practices and tools that allows managers to monitor and evaluate employees' work effectiveness. PES also reported on the changes introduced in performance management practices and systems, both in terms of new developments and upscaled initiatives (Table 2). Half of surveyed PES (15 out of 29) introduced changes in the use of digital/online tools supporting performance management. These digital tools (in the form of dashboards, performance indicators trackers, target setting and monitoring and performance review sheets) serve as a convenient source of information for managers and employees on their performance. This is in line with the overall digital strategy of PES, as well as the observed shift towards remote and hybrid work. Slightly fewer PES (12 out of 29) revised the targets or workloads taking account of the post-pandemic labour market changes. Additionally, 8 out of 29 of surveyed organisations changed their target setting (individual or for teams) and their (transparent) monitoring for individual/teams' assessments and for taking corrective measures. A similar group in terms of number (7) changed their performance management systems in relation to individual and team-based incentives (bonuses and benefits).

Table 2. Changes (including new developments and upscaled initiatives) in performance management practices in PES

Changes in performance management practices:	Changes introduced	Changes planned	No changes
Use of digital/online tools supporting performance management	15	4	10
Revision of targets/workloads accounting for post-pandemic labour market changes	12	4	13
Setting targets (individual or for teams) and their (transparent) monitoring for individual/teams' assessments and taking corrective measures	8	4	17
Individual and team-based incentives tools/practices (e.g. financial bonuses, additional benefits)	7	0	22
Changes in the performance management systems, towards execution of tasks and less micromanagement	5	5	19
Other	1	0	4

Source: own development based on survey responses.

Some PES also changed performance management systems to be more task-focused to shift from the tendency to control and micromanage. For example in **Belgium-VDAB**, managers were advised to build trust-based management practices, including building connections with employees and not to control every hour spent working.

Changes introduced to the performance management system can be only partially attributed to changes caused by COVID-19 and post-COVID, relating to delivery models, new tasks, new working methods or changes in the environment in which PES functions. Some changes are part of a wider reform or stem from shifts in strategic priorities.

A number of PES report a stable performance management system (**BG, FI, PT**), with changes (if any) stemming from other strategic decisions. Some countries (**AT, BE-Actiris, BE-Forem, BE-VDAB, CY, EL, ES, HR, IS, MT and SE**) point directly to wider reforms or changing delivery models as the source for changes that were, in some cases, sped up by the pandemic (**FR**).

PES practice box. Changes in the performance management system in PES as part of wider reforms

In **Sweden**, several changes in the performance management system have been implemented. Changes to the system of target setting have been made.

To clarify priorities, there are fewer goals than before. Goals are based on an analysis of what is possible to achieve based on the labour market, capacity, finances, target group and priorities. The goals are broken down at the local and regional levels, and there is a process where underlying levels provide a response to goal levels before they are decided. The individual goals are agreed accordingly.

Source: own development based on survey responses.

A few countries (e.g. **HU**) report changes linked directly to the COVID-19 emergency period, but that may be further pursued due to reforms (**IT** and **SK**). In **Luxembourg**, new Dashboards have been made available in order to better monitor the activities, but the changes in the performance management system are a part of a wider reform (Strategy programme 2025).

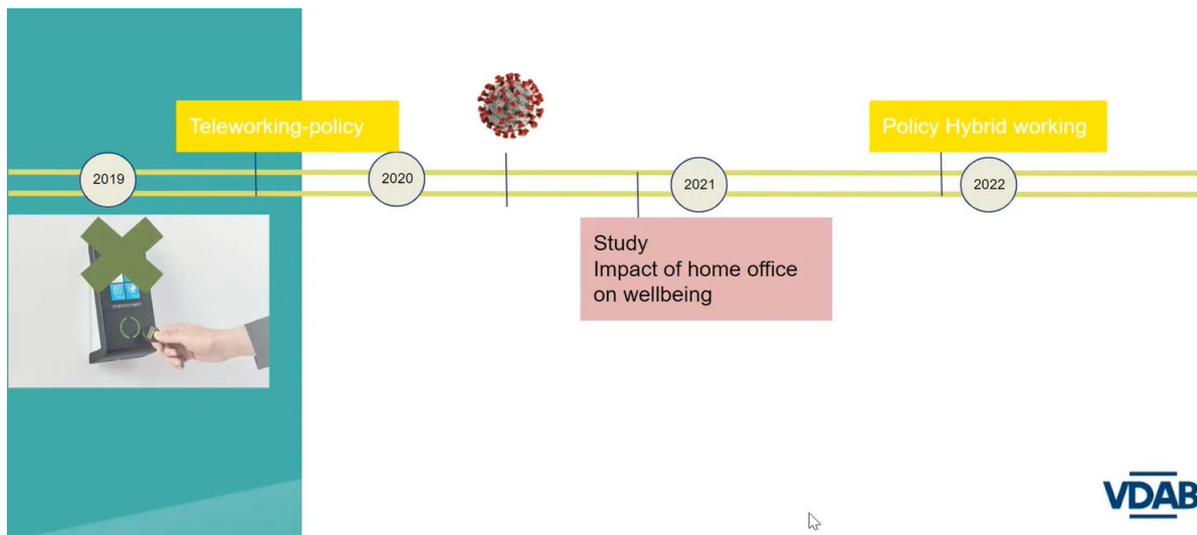
2.3 Remote and hybrid work - preferences of staff, current practices, and key advantages and challenges

One of the key developments in relation to staff management is the introduction or upscaling of remote and hybrid work in PES. In some PES even during COVID-19, the operations and services were offered face-to-face. In **Bulgaria**, frontline staff provided face-to-face services throughout the critical period of crisis, and all managers were on the spot, as people preferred direct contact despite the fear of the disease, especially in conditions of complicated preventive measures. At the same time, the PES implemented six electronic administrative services ('Acceptance of applications and registration of jobseekers', 'Acceptance of requests from employers for vacancies', 'Issuance of a decision to terminate registration', 'Issuance of a decision to restore the registration of jobseekers', 'Inclusion in the training of adults', 'Issue of official note for registration of job seekers'), that will continue in 2021 and 2022.

Analysis of staff preferences towards different work formats versus their actual work format (Table 3) reveals that over half the PES reported that their staff would like to work (and often actually perform work) in hybrid form. This is true for all categories of staff. In fact, in relation to some categories – like back-office staff – a higher proportion of PES (17 versus 22) report that more people work in a hybrid form than would be their preference. However, they would prefer to work in remote form rather than in the office, which is the least preferred format, not counting the lack of data columns.

In all other staff categories (PES operational management, middle management, and frontline), a higher number of PES report that it is the case that more people actually work in the office than they would prefer. However, there is not a clear preference to work remotely in these categories. In any case, one should note a clear shift in PES from traditional work settings towards hybrid/remote after COVID-19.

It should be noted that data in this table must be treated cautiously, as PES reported in the survey responses that, in many cases, the preferences are not exactly known, and are rather assumptions that stem from employee data. Some PES, for example **Belgium-VDAB**, have carried out actual staff preference surveys regarding remote and hybrid working. A study of the impact of home office work on well-being was also performed and covered questions on the preferred number of days to be spent working at home and at the office.



These surveys have been a part of the broader 'Hybrid Working' strategy implementation. Before the pandemic, the general rule required daily attendance in the office. The 'Teleworking policy' had been implemented already in 2019, with the general aim of allowing for one day per week of working from home. During the COVID-19 pandemic, PES realised that more work could be done from home so the hybrid working rules were established and tested, with the focus on department-level and team-level agreements. The 'Hybrid working policy' is based on self-organising ability and the application of a so-called **pentagon** as a compass to define the number of remote working days for each individual. It aims to find the balance between five perspectives: clients, results, team, well-being (yours and people you work with) and infrastructure. Agreements must be made at the team level, balancing these five perspectives, without the specified number of days to be worked remotely (although it is not possible to work full-time remote).

However, in the case of other PES which did not use the survey of actual preferences, one can assume that the trends noted by respondents actually reflect their aggregated knowledge of employees' opinions or preferences, as they come from HR/staff-related departments. These assumptions (despite the fact that information comes from HR) and the number of non-responses could mean that feedback/information on preferences or other aspects is not collected systematically in many PES. This can, to some extent, cause issues like weak PES staff involvement/engagement and a lack of ownership, as these are important for strengthening employees' voices in the organisation.

Table 3. Preferences of staff towards work formats

Staff group/preference and actual work format		Fully remote	Hybrid	Office	No answer
PES operational management staff	Preference	2	17	4	6
	Actual work format	1	18	10	0
PES middle management staff	Preference	1	17	5	6
	Actual work format	1	18	10	0
Frontline staff (counsellors, psychologists, etc.)	Preference	2	15	6	6
	Actual work format	1	17	11	0
Backoffice staff	Preference	3	17	2	7
	Actual work format	1	22	6	0
Other		1	1	1	26

Source: own development based on survey responses.

PES reported on different pre-COVID-19, current (at the time of surveying) and planned practices in terms of staff coverage by forms of work (remote/hybrid/from the office). Before the pandemic only a few PES used remote/hybrid work arrangements (**EE, FI, LT, NL, PT** and **SE**), but these were typically only available for a small number of staff and only for specific reasons and purposes (e.g. during pregnancies), these work arrangement were not available to all staff. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the approach towards remote and hybrid work completely; first as a necessity (due to lockdown and social distancing), which later became the widely available work format that can be used by a broad range of staff.

Currently, only few PES do not apply remote or hybrid work (**BG, CY, HU** and **EL**) at all. However, the scope of applications varies significantly between PES. Some PES report to not currently apply **fully remote work** for any of their staff (**BE-Forem, DK, DE, ES, IE, PL, PT** and **SK**). A significant group of PES reports using remote work to a limited scope, not exceeding 10% of all staff (**AT, EE, IS, LT, LV, LV, MT, NO** and **SI**). Some countries report the broader use of remote work arrangements, with this policy available to around 30% of all staff (**BE-Actiris, FR** and **NL**). Only a few PES stated that remote work is currently available to larger shares of their employees (**BE-VDAB** – 93%, **HR** – 50%, **FI** – 50%).

For the majority of PES, the use of **hybrid work arrangements** is more widespread. In the case of hybrid work, the availability to less than 10% of staff is rather rare (e.g. **PT** and **SK**). For most PES, this form of work is available to majority of staff (**BE-Forem** – almost 100%, **BE-VDAB** – 95%, **DK** – 90%, **BE-Actiris** – 85%, **IS** – 85%, **NL** – 82%, **IE** – 80%, **LT** – 80%, **FR** – almost 80%, **EE** – 75%, **FI** – 60%, **AT** – 51%, **DE** – 50%, **NO** – 50%, **MT** – 47%).

In **Sweden**, 100% of staff have the opportunity to work in the hybrid mode⁶, as the 49-51 rule applies (49% of the time can be spent remote and 51% from the office) in many public agencies, including PES. In the latter case, the actual working time spent working remotely is calculated on the annual basis (actual working hours⁷). These arrangements are agreed with managers.

Similarly in **Estonia**, all PES staff can use flexible working arrangements, on the basis of agreements with direct supervisors/managers. However, flexible working arrangements

⁶ There are some functions excluded from the possibility of remote working, e.g. some IT functions, internal services (mail service).

⁷ Reporting system is trust-based, honesty system, focused on the task and results, rather than monitoring of working hours.

are an option and not an obligation or a right. The direct manager has to evaluate and decide the extent of flexible working arrangements in teams/departments. In the case of a 100% home office arrangement, a separate contract with an employee is drawn up. Everybody in PES has the possibility to work a maximum of 3 working days remotely in a week, but not more than 10 working days in a month.

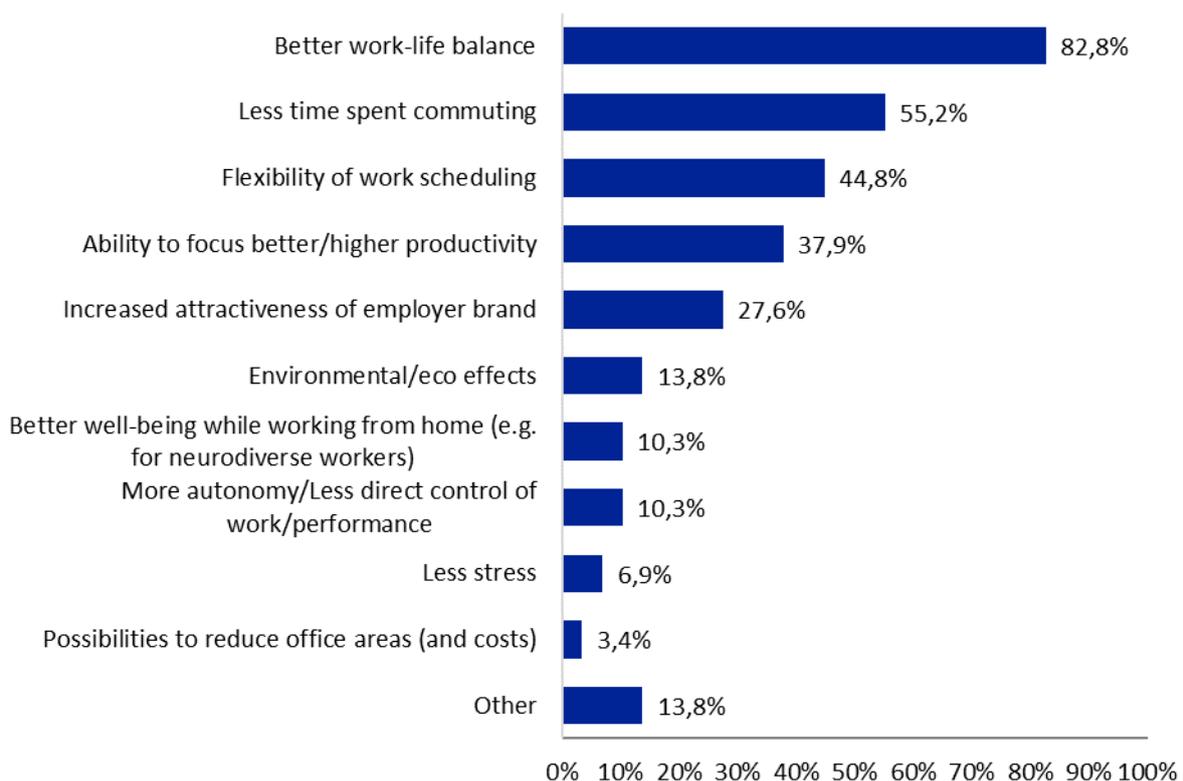
In some countries, there are no general rules for the application of remote or hybrid work, and each case has to be discussed with the direct supervisor or at the team level. For example, in **Poland** currently, each employee at the Ministry can work remotely four days a month, but in terms of local labour offices, the decision regarding remote work is made by the office director. In **Sweden**, staff can work from home, but there is no set number of days for the remote work and it has to be cleared with a manager beforehand.

In **Lithuania**, the remote/hybrid work preference is determined during discussions with department managers, not through the formal survey. New legislation covering civil servants determines 'at least one day a week remote work' as a general rule in the Labour Code. The Code is aimed at special groups of people (e.g. pregnant and people with small children). However, PES chose everyone to be covered by this rule, with all the functions covered.

A shift towards remote and hybrid work, especially in traditional work settings, imposes a number of challenges, both of organisational and managerial nature. Key advantages of remote/hybrid work (Figure 1), that the survey revealed include:

- Better work-life balance,
- Less time spent commuting,
- Flexibility of work scheduling,
- Ability to focus better/higher productivity,
- Increased attractiveness of the PES brand as an employer.

Figure 1. What are the key advantages associated with remote/hybrid work in your PES for managers and staff?*



Source: own development based on survey responses.

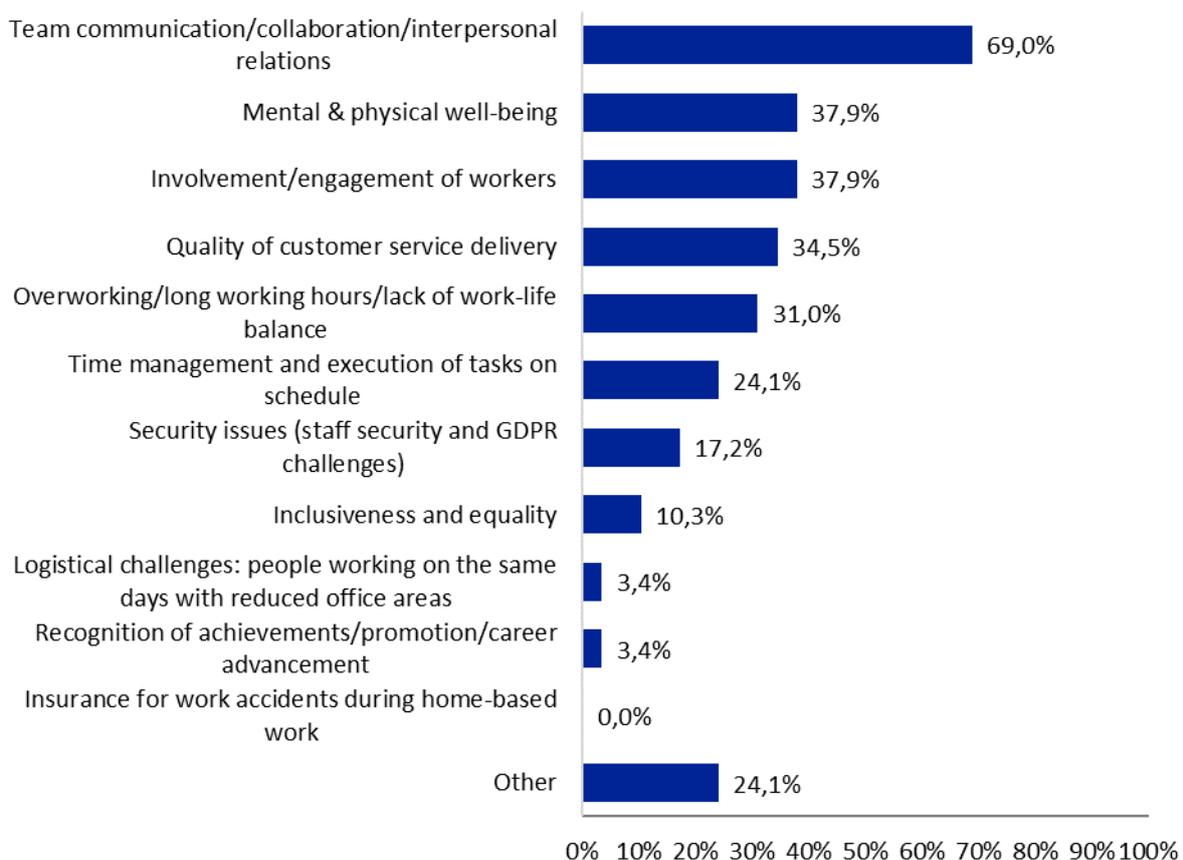
* The values on the figure do not equal 100%, as the respondents could select up to three key advantages.

Other advantages (e.g. environmental effects, better well-being, more autonomy of work, less stress and the possibility to reduce office areas) were deemed of less importance⁸.

On the other side, the key challenges associated with remote/hybrid work include (Figure 2):

- Team communication/collaboration/interpersonal relations,
- Mental and physical well-being,
- Involvement/engagement of staff,
- Quality of customer service delivery,
- Overworking/long working hours/lack of work-life balance.

Figure 2. What are the key challenges associated with remote/hybrid work in your PES for managers and staff?*



Source: own development based on survey responses.

* The values on the figure do not equal 100%, as the respondents could select up to three key challenges

Other challenges turned out to be of less importance (including time management and execution of tasks on schedule, security issues, inclusiveness and equality, logistical challenges, recognition of achievements, and insurance for work accidents during home-based work)⁹.

Some other examples of challenges reported include: involvement and commitment of employees (**FR**), achieving the expected performance outputs for tasks that are difficult to

⁸ It is important to note that some countries (e.g. BG, HU) have not introduced the remote work system, and their operations are based on physical presence in the office.

⁹ It is important to note that some countries (e.g. BG, HU) have not introduced the remote work system, and their operations are based on physical presence in the office.

time and hence difficult to calculate (**MT**), sufficient break time between digital meetings, and less variety in activities because they no longer move between different work spaces (**SK**). In **Estonia**, the challenge is how to find home office and work office balance between the expectations of individual staff members, teams and the organisation in general.

2.4 Initiatives to support the successful introduction of remote/hybrid work

As the challenges of the shift towards remote/hybrid work varies, PES in EU introduced a number of initiatives to support the successful introduction of these work formats (Table 4).

Table 4. PES-level initiatives supporting the successful introduction of remote/hybrid work

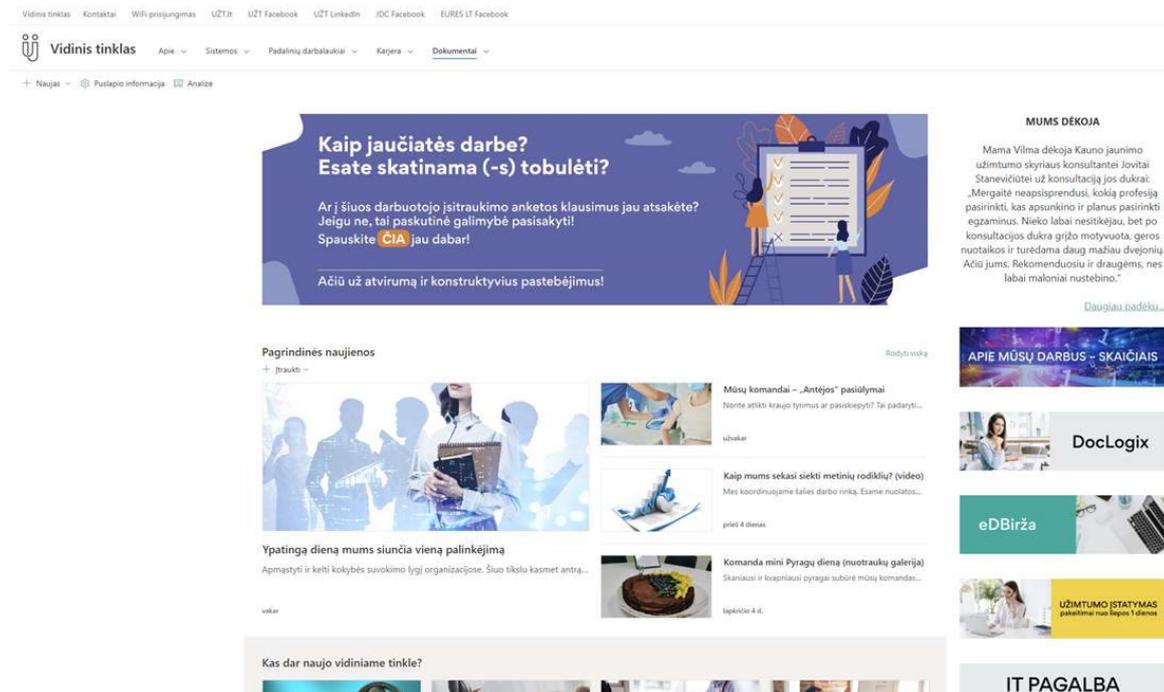
Initiatives supporting remote/hybrid work	Yes	No
Introduction of new communication tools/channels (e.g. new platforms, internal communications tools, groups, etc.)	28	1
Specific training on the use of communication platforms	25	4
Purchase of home office equipment to provide staff with better opportunities to work remotely from home	23	6
Introducing the culture of remote work	21	8
Management training on remote team management	16	13
Development/introduction of new task/team management tools	15	14
Other	3	0

Source: own development based on survey responses.

The vast majority of PES (28 out of 29) introduced new communication tools/channels (e.g. new platforms, internal communication tools, etc.), supported by specific training to use these platforms. The majority (25) also purchased home office equipment to support working from home, which was an important measure during lockdowns and the later shift towards remote/hybrid working. For example, in **Norway**, financial assistance was provided to employees who needed to buy office furniture for their home, and home delivery of office equipment (screens, office chairs, etc) was offered.

In **Lithuania**, a new communication strategy and channels have been implemented. One of the new tools, was a new concept of the intranet, which was introduced in 2020. It is based on the Sharepoint.com platform. The intranet is set up as an employee start-up website. It runs internal news, staff surveys and serves as major work tool. The intranet also has links to a document management system, databases, knowledge centre, statistics, IT-help and so on. Apart from the intranet, the strategy encompasses: an internal newsletter, video address 'The First Day' (leadership virtual messages to the team), 'The Compass' – a monthly newsletter for executives, meetings with labour unions, anonymous phone line and message box on the intranet, and psychological support platform on the intranet. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the fully online selection procedure for public servants (including PES staff) has been introduced in Lithuania, which has been streamlined into a permanent measure.

Illustration. Intranet website of Lithuanian PES



Three out of four PES have undertaken efforts to introduce the culture of remote work, which may be challenging as seen in the box below.

Challenges of introducing remote work culture

E. Schein (2004) defines *organizational culture* as ‘a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems’¹⁰. These shared patterns exist in all organisations, both in the private and public sectors, and constitute an important point of reference for current and new employees. In the last few years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the prevalence of non-physical work, the development of coherent organisational culture proved to be even more challenging.

The challenges of establishing remote work culture are manifold. According to a recent study of HR practitioners by the Society of Human Resources Management¹¹ the most pressing challenges include – among others - maintaining the current organisational culture in a remote setting, enabling and fostering collaboration, and fostering creativity and innovation. Other sources also mention challenges of organisational trust, effective communication of organisational values and mission, the meaningfulness of work, and organisational engagement.

Source: own development.

Half of surveyed PES also provided management training on remote team management, and developed or introduced new task and team management tools. For example, **Sweden** started working on the replacement of currently used tools (including Miro, Collaboard, and Skype), to provide a comprehensive communication and collaboration platform.

Some other developments included the introduction of new principles in the work agreement between employees and PES as employers for hybrid working (as an appendix to the work contract) in **Norway**, and weekly online information meetings to ensure that everyone is up to date in **Iceland**.

¹⁰ Schein, E. H. (2004). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Third Edition, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, p.17.

¹¹ <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/spring2022/pages/remote-work-challenges-company-culture.aspx>

PES responded to the shift towards remote and hybrid work on the team management side in various ways. The most common example is how arising issues in the management of remote and hybrid work has been addressed in PES by the provision of training on how to manage performance, supervise and provide managerial support.

For example, in **Latvia**, all PES staff (including managers) participated in remote work and remote management training, in **Spain**, online training in communication tools and team management has been provided, in **Malta**, several online training courses were held to train managers in how to manage remotely while being effective in ensuring good performance and employee well-being, and in **Denmark**, there have been courses covering leadership in hybrid organisations and how to lead online meetings. Some PES also plan to train managers in these themes in the future. In some PES, this training was limited, as only a certain number of staff had an option to work remotely (e.g. in **CY**). Some PES did not offer specific training, but provided other support options. In **Belgium- Forem**, a series of tools/toolkits were designed for managers to help with remote/hybrid management, as was the case in **Belgium-Actiris** and the **Netherlands** (where an online 'toolbox' was made available for managers with information and guidelines regarding work agreements, health aspects, information security and maintaining contact with employees). Additionally, surveys were carried out and the results were taken into account to organise remote work in the best possible way. These activities (apart from training) also covered workshops, seminars, webinars, one-on-one discussions, etc. (like in **EE**), development of staff well-being services, like discussion groups, psychological support unit, interventions, and events to socialise (**BE-Actiris**). In the **Netherlands** as an additional tool for management, 'dilemma cards' were made available to discuss the 'new normal' way of working within teams and with individual employees. In **Belgium-VDAB**, the official guidelines for hybrid working have been issued, approved and signed by the general manager.

PES practice box. Training of managers in remote/hybrid team management issues in PES

In **France**, several actions have been carried out in order to:

- enable managers to familiarise themselves with the content of the new agreement on remote work: web conference for managers, material to present the agreement, material for unit meetings, practical sheets and user guides on how to apply for remote work, checklist of points to be secured by managers before the remote work campaign, etc.;
- help teams to define their remote work organisation: introductory video by the Deputy Director General in charge of HR on the new concept of 'Working together differently within Pôle emploi', collective support for teams 'Building how our team operates in a new environment' (otherwise known as 'Remote work Booster');
- support managers by developing their skills (training modules, coaching, exchange of good practices, etc.);
- enable managers to fully adopt remote work tools and develop co-operation in new hybrid formats (trainings, webinars, development of learning communities, sharing practices, etc.).

In **Belgium-VDAB**, executives improved their understanding of COVID-19 themes of remote leadership, digital collaboration, and well-being with high need and priority. Training offers for team leaders contained supervision sessions on the topics 'Working in the new normal', 'How do I communicate as a leader with my new team in the new normal?'. The offer for leaders was rapidly digitalised, such as the 'Start2Lead' programme for new leaders. The blended form with self-study packages, group training, intervision (knowledge sharing in small groups) and Google Classroom assignments was updated in 2022 with current themes.

In **Finland**, the KEHA Centre organised workshops on remote management when the recommendation of remote work entered into force. The workshops were organised both on a custom-made basis and on a voluntary basis, as the managers could apply for the workshops published in the training programme. The workshops were organised in Teams and they lasted for three hours. This year, an online study module has been drawn up in the digital development programme. In addition, the first version of the onboarding/orientation for new staff material was

published after the recommendation of remote work came into force. Instructions for online onboarding were included (including data protection), as a considerable number of recruitments were carried out during the pandemic and the orientation was organised online.

Source: own development based on survey responses.

2.5 Measures to ensure the well-being and work-life balance of PES staff

As retaining a high level of well-being and work-life balance is challenging in recent years, PES took a number of steps to address this issue. One of the most widespread measures is training courses offered to employees covering these topics. For example, in **Portugal**, an online programme on Health and Well-being and training (on e-learning platforms) on telework was disseminated. In **Iceland**, online courses and awareness about well-being issues are offered, as was the case in **Austria** (courses on health issues during the pandemic), **Slovakia** (specific training on relaxation techniques), **Latvia** (training on work-life balance, stress reduction), and **France**. In **Malta**, online training was organised for staff and management to cover well-being issues and the people management department created new procedures which it communicated to all staff. The people management department served as the contact point whenever an employee was sick with COVID-19 or quarantined due to contact with potentially infected persons. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of employees using a hybrid system of work remained high. Employees can still raise any well-being issues with their immediate superiors or the people management department.

There are examples of other initiatives related to work-life balance and well-being. In **Norway** 'meeting invitations' to all employees to reserve time for a '25-minutes' stretch per week' and a policy to encourage all employees to go out for fresh air and take necessary breaks during COVID/home office periods. In **Belgium-VDAB** during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, an offer of both additional and existing support for mental well-being was set up. This offer ranged from self-help and/or non-urgent needs to urgent needs for support through internal or external channels. It is available on the intranet and has been made known to staff and managers through various channels. In **Iceland**, employees are allowed to visit external specialist psychologists, coaching, etc. In **Belgium-Actiris**, discussion groups, psychological support units, interventions (knowledge sharing in small groups) have been used as well-being services.

Communication with employees is seen as an important factor in retaining their well-being. For example in **Belgium-Forem**, new communication channels have been set up (webinars, radio channel, etc.), and after the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, some festive events for the staff have been organised and some are foreseen (BBQ, after-work drinks, etc.). Through this, bottom-up communication has been reinforced. Open and frequent communication has been mentioned by a number of PES (e.g. **CY**, **HR** and **NL**).

PES practice box. Addressing work-life balance and employee well-being issues in PES by using employee surveys

One of the important aspects of employee well-being is effective communication, including direct relations with the manager, but even more important are regular employee surveys. These tools have been effectively used by some PES during and after the pandemic.

In **Finland** well-being and helping staff to cope at work have been the priority areas, especially during the pandemic but also after the pandemic. Team managers have been easily available, communication has been increased and up-to-date communication and instructions have helped the staff to direct the activities. In addition, questionnaires on the well-being of staff have been made on ad hoc basis during the pandemic. In addition, a regular staff satisfaction barometer is carried out yearly and the results are handled together with the staff.

In **Sweden** work-life balance and well-being issues are discussed in meetings between managers and staff and in staff surveys every week (same questions) and in-depth surveys on organisational and social work environments twice a year. These issues are also addressed in the social dialogue

meetings between union representatives and the employer on a regular basis. There is a well-developed structure for collaboration between unions and the employer at the PES.

In **France** an internal survey is conducted twice a year among all employees to measure their quality of life at work, their satisfaction regarding their job, and their commitment to their work. The results are shared with managers and, if necessary, actions are decided together within the teams.

In **Belgium-VDAB**, an analysis of the possible risks of long-term homeworking was carried out, as well as monitoring through questionnaires such as the PTOW questionnaire on the digital bridge day. The output of this analysis, information from external surveys, and co-ordination with various internal stakeholders in 2021 led to an upgrade of the hybrid work policy that was implemented in 2022 and also includes attention to well-being. Management was recommended to communicate (effectively and clear) on the regular basis, to create transparency on the priorities and direction of the organisation in order to give clear purpose to employees and to enhance their engagement, ensuring there will be many occasions to connect with teams, colleagues and the organisation.

Employee surveys are also used in **Denmark, Iceland and Norway**.

Source: own development based on survey responses.

3. STAFF, KEY COMPETENCES AND PROFESSIONALISATION OF PES EMPLOYEES FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

3.1 PES Staff - changes in the number of employees, internal deployment, and new profiles/roles

3.1.1 Number of staff

The majority of PES do not plan to change the number of staff in various operational functions (Table 5). As reported in over half of surveyed organisations (17 out of 29) frontline and back-office staff levels will remain the same. It is even more evident in relation to PES management – both middle and operational – where the majority of PES do not plan to make a change in staffing (24 and 23 respectively).

Of the surveyed PES, 7 out of 29 plan to increase the number of frontline staff, but at the same time, 5 PES are planning reductions in this staff category. The reductions are planned in 10 out of 29 PES in relation to back-office employees. This might be attributed to the accelerating digitalisation and automation, which in the first place affects supportive organisational functions.

Table 5. Planned changes in the number of PES staff (Is the number of PES staff planned to decrease/increase in the next 12 months?)

Change in PES staff:	Increase	Decrease	Remain the same
PES middle management staff	2	3	24
PES operational management staff	1	5	23
Back-office staff	2	10	17
Frontline staff	7	5	17
Other	3	1	3

Source: own development based on survey responses.

Some other increases are planned by PES, most notably in IT/ICT staff (**Austria, Italy**, and also **Luxembourg**, which also plans to employ more project managers).

3.1.2 Workforce internal deployment and new roles/profiles of PES staff

As presented in Table 6, PES in the EU have introduced a number of changes related to workforce internal deployment as a consequence of digitalisation/automation of PES

functions. Over half of those surveyed (17 out of 29) retrained or reskilled current staff in order to equip them with the skills necessary to function in changing services or delivery models. Almost the same group in terms of number (16) redeployed some staff to provide more time on direct services and communication with employers, including consulting on support measures. This can be greatly attributed to crises stemming from the pandemic and other market disturbances, in which employers require direct support. However, it also indicates the possibility to relocate some employees towards direct contact, thanks to digitalisation of the back-office, while retaining the levels of employment without having to resort to other actions. For example, in **Sweden**, the new role of 'decision-making officer' was created, with lower requirements than employment officers, in order to speed-up the decision-making process during COVID-19 crisis in the customer flow. However, the effectiveness of this role in making justified and effective decisions is now being discussed, with noted need to increase the skills of employed individuals.

Table 6. Changes introduced to workforce internal deployment as a consequence of digitalisation / automation of PES functions

Changes in staff internal deployment:	Yes	No
Current staff retrained/reskilled to reflect changing service needs and/or delivery models	17	12
More time spent on direct services/communication with employers, including consulting on support measures	16	13
More technical/IT/programming staff employed to support digitalisation of services	13	16
Allocating more people to frontline/client services as back-up functions are automated	11	18
Allocating more people to online services from face-to-face delivery, as functions are digitalised	10	19
Internal redeployment of staff from front-line/client services to back-office	6	23
Other	5	1

Source: own development based on survey responses.

These service changes also require the employment of more technical/IT or programming staff, to support the digitalisation of services, which is another visible trend. In some cases, this internal redeployment and increase of the IT workforce has been backed up by further procurement of external supports. This has specifically been reported by **Ireland**, where as a consequence of PES digitalisation, the Information Systems Division (ISD) has procured additional external IT resources to support the delivery of the digital PES project including user experience (UX) designers, business analysts, and technical developers.

Furthermore, 11 of 29 PES allocated more people to frontline services and 10 to online services (from face-to-face), as the functions become digitalised. The smallest group (6) report the adverse move – from frontline and client services to back-office.

The prevailing reason for the introduction of new organisational roles or profiles in PES is the digitalisation of services (Table 7), which is relevant for 26 out of 29 surveyed PES. This also leads to the introduction of new functions and services, also an important trigger for new roles, followed by general service re-organisations, changing clients' needs, and wider PES reforms.

Table 7. Key reasons for the introduction of new roles/profiles in PES

Reason for changes:	Yes	No
Digitalisation of services	26	3
Introduction of new functions and/or services	24	5
Service re-organisations	21	8
Clients' needs	20	9
Wider PES reforms/reorganisations	18	11
Shift towards/from remote work	12	17
Redeployment of staff after the COVID-19 pandemic	7	22
Other	2	1

Source: own development based on survey responses.

As reported by PES, there are various new roles introduced in the service, both covering new job positions, and changes to the scope of tasks performed on already existing ones. Examples of new or developed roles include:

- digital consultant and researcher (**BG**)
- self-services for clients; new tools in finding a job or new employees, new tools for informing the public, new statistics (**AT**)
- jobs related to data security, construction of AI solutions (data management, development of use cases, etc.) (**FR**)
- jobs in IT Department to digitalise services (**MT**)
- technical and co-ordination profiles (**IT**)
- positions of mediator and instructor (**BE-VDAB**)
- business analysts (**BE-Actiris**)
- e-counsellors, account managers, data management profiles (**BE-Forem**)
- scanning agents, business analysts, and project Managers with relevant qualifications, product/process/solution owner capable staff, recruiting of senior profiles with preliminary management or business experience (**LU**)
- specialists of the frontline, employees able to take decisions on a legal basis, and managers capable of managing remote employees (**IS**)

Some of the PES reported not having introduced new roles (e.g. **HU**), while others reduce some roles internally (e.g. reception staff) and decide to outsource these activities (**BE-VDAB**¹²). Some PES also report the development of new departments or the strengthening of current departments, which will lead to the development of some roles (**CY**, **EL** and **HR**).

PES practice box. Development of new positions in PES

Due to the reorganisation of counselling levels in **Estonia**, PES eliminated one level and created a combined position of two previously separate case managers positions. In different departments, they have created methodologist positions to support a systematic approach to their core tasks/fields. In connection with the growth of the need for digitalisation and in order to strengthen these competencies in view of the future, PES have created special positions - managers of digital solutions (for example, in the case of internal services, and career services). They have also created a separate position to strengthen the employer's brand. In the big picture, there is a

¹² Belgium-VDAB will reduce the number of reception staff due to the imposed staff cuts. Instead, they will use kiosks at the reception. Some services that were currently performed by employed staff (e.g. cleaning, catering) will be outsourced.

greater focus and attention on the health of employees (both physical and mental) - first of all in raising awareness and also promoting different ways to deal with it.

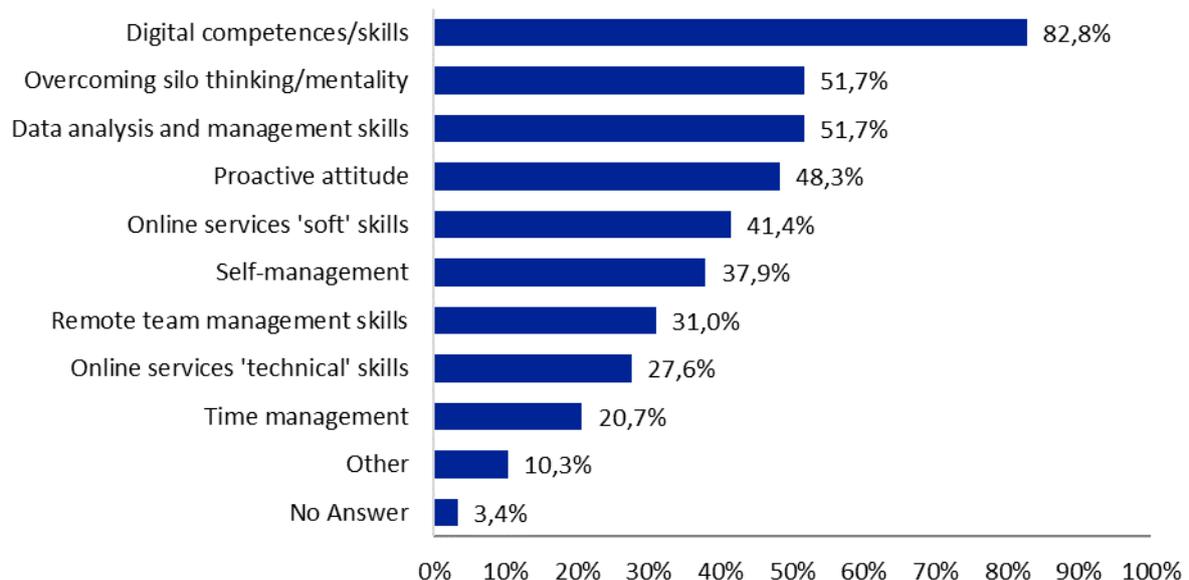
Source: own development based on survey responses.

3.2 Key competencies and skills requirements

3.2.1 Key competencies needed in the future due to changes in service provision and work organisation

PES indicated the key staff competences needed in the future due to changes in service provision and work organisation (Figure 3). It is not surprising, that the vast majority of respondents pointed to digital competences, which are by far the most needed skills of the future. This is also linked to data analysis and management skills, which have been assessed by PES as important. Interestingly, this factor is considered equally as important as the competences related to overcoming silo thinking/mentality, followed by a proactive attitude. With the changing ways the PES services are provided in general, the ability to act independently, flexibly, and responsively is becoming crucial. Online services 'soft' skills were also deemed important. Self-management and remote team management skills are gaining momentum and might constitute an important element of the PES staff competence profile of the future.

Figure 3. What are the key PES staff competences needed in the future due to changes in service provision and work organisation in your PES?



Source: own development based on survey responses.

* The values on the figure do not equal 100%, as the respondents could select up to three key competences.

3.2.2 Skills requirements in PES - changes and HR measures

PES predict significant changes in skills requirements based on their internal discussions and analyses. There is no doubt that current trends towards digital skills will remain strong or accelerate. This drive towards digital skills is visible in PES recruitment and development practices. For example, the **Estonian** PES created a separate training and test for employees to assess their level of digital competences. When recruiting, they use tasks that require certain modern digital skills (video interviews) and try to recruit people who are already digitally literate or have the potential to develop their skills. In **Belgium-VDAB**, when recruiting new employees, the focus will be put on future-proof competencies (along with the provision of post-employment development programmes). When screening, the following characteristics will be more important than immediate

employability: availability of basic competencies that are difficult to develop, employability, learning capacity, motivation and fitting into the (desired) organisational culture. In **Belgium-Forem**, a large-scale assessment of digital skills has been launched in five phases among the staff and related training has been proposed.

Other competences gaining importance, as reported by PES, include: readiness to adapt to changes (**EE**); problem-solving (**FI** and **NL**); interpreting data and data security, creativity, personal leadership, and personal responsibility (**NL**); service orientation (**FI**); direct communication, including new channels (**HR** and **LV**); emotional intelligence, client's motivation, solving conflict situations (**LV**); legal knowledge to back-up decision making in casework (**IS**); teamwork/co-operation (**BE-Forem**, **FI** and **IS**); flexibility/agility (**IS** and **NL**).

It is however important to retain 'traditional' skills, required in many administrative posts (**BG** and **IE**) while allowing people to grow internally and prepare for future challenges. In this respect, **Belgium-VDAB** for example developed a career campus where current administrative staff can learn and grow to be able to take on other positions in the future. Existing administrative positions will increase in complexity and this has also been taken into account. It is also important to retain the balance between technical and soft skills (**FR**).

PES practice box. Updating competency models in PES toward digital competences

In **Germany**, the BA updated its competency model in 2021 with a view to addressing the changed requirements of the working world. The update was developed with the help of internal/external practitioners and experts and, with a view to 'eSkills', was also scientifically accompanied by the BA's university. The updated competences are currently being implemented and will then form the basis for personnel development/qualification and recruitment.

As part of the update, some competences have been included, e.g. 'IT and media competence' and 'self-organisation'. Furthermore, digital aspects were also included in other competences, e.g. shaping digital change in 'employee-oriented leadership', virtual 'co-operation' or media-oriented 'communication'. In addition, cross-cutting competences such as 'resilience' (especially in the context of the dissolution of boundaries between working and professional life) and sensitivity (empathic interaction with one another, self-reflection, diversity) were included, which the BA believes will become even more important in the future. Implementation of the updated competences in recruitment, appraisals/staff appraisals, staff development, and qualification is currently taking place.

Source: own development based on survey responses.

3.2.3 PES practices in assessing internal skills imbalances

In order to assess the internal skills imbalances, PES uses a number of varied practices (Table 8). The most commonly employed methods include:

- Using the results of performance assessments/reviews,
- Interviews with employees and managers,
- Using information from external sources,
- Analysing the achievement of KPIs/targets, and
- Using employee and management surveys/questionnaires.

Other, especially more complex and demanding methods (like assessment centres, design thinking, and scenario development) are visibly rarely used.

Table 8. Practices used to assess internal skills imbalances in PES

Practices of assessing skills imbalances	Yes	No
Results of performance assessments/reviews	23	6
Interviews with employees and managers	23	6
Information from external sources (e.g. clients' or stakeholders' feedback)	22	7
Achievement of KPIs/targets	19	10
Employee and management surveys/questionnaires	18	11
Time needed to solve internal/clients problems or cases	14	15
Experts' assessments (workshops/ meetings/panels)	11	18
Assessment centres/Development centres	7	22
Design thinking methods	7	22
Scenario development methods	7	22
Other	4	1

Source: own development based on survey responses.

There are also examples of other approaches to internal skills needs assessments. In **France**, this process is based on self-assessment of core competencies, managerial skills, and technical skills available to employees and managers. In **Denmark**, needs are assessed on the basis of continuous dialogue between local leaders and management.

3.3 Professionalisation of staff - new developments

3.3.1 New developments in HR/staff management system to ensure better alignment with strategic direction and organisational culture

The surveyed PES reported on new developments in HR/staff management to ensure better alignment with strategic direction (including new challenges) and organisational culture (e.g. diversity/inclusion, new employees' values, changing clients' requirements).

In **Ireland**, a new HR Operating Model has been introduced to reflect the changing roles/operating environment within the HR arena. Communities of expertise have been established to share knowledge and to become more transparent/accessible to all staff. Business relationship managers have been established and there is a key focus on the development of talent across the organisation. In **Denmark**, the PES has an increased focus on recruitment, branding PES as an employer and retainment due to high turnover. To mitigate this, they are introducing new initiatives such as exit surveys, leadership seminars focusing on recruitment, strengthening of employer brand, and retainment as well as more professional onboarding procedures. In **Belgium-VDAB** all departments are currently evaluating or drafting their strategic planning using the OGSM (Objectives – Goals – Strategies – Measures) methodology. Examples of projects aimed at ensuring better alignment are: Your Talent Matters (Jouw Talent Telt), the Customer Experience project (including the aspect of hiring sustainable profiles), the professionalisation of a project-based way of working (within the HR department), the (improved) implementation of organisational changes, the project 'career activation'.

In **Germany**, the introduction of a new understanding of leadership with a special focus on ambidexterity is currently taking place. It is aimed at creating structure and securing results in terms of the BA's goals, but also actively shaping the common future and

supporting and promoting employees. Ideally, BA managers should be able to switch flexibly between these expectations according to situational necessity.

Cyprus is also educating customers regarding the PES move towards the provision of Digital Services (Rights and Obligations within a digital environment of online/distant services and the adoption of a hybrid service model of PES Services. Moreover, emphasis is given to any staff requirements in terms of digital training (formally or informally) to respond adequately and effectively to the newly emerging needs of the Labour Market due to digitalisation and the digital transformation of services.

Inclusiveness and diversity are important goals of Human Resources Management development. In the **Netherlands**, the key focus is on stimulating diversity and inclusion. The PES adopted and customised a recruitment and selection method that was developed by a thinktank of employees and employers' organisations and focuses on inclusion and diversity. Training and a manual are available for management. The managers (and HR staff) are trained in (among other aspects) using inclusive language and how to objectively select from application letters. The PES is also beginning research into more inclusive working conditions. Furthermore, the target for women in management positions is increased to 50%. There are examples from other countries, like Gender Equality and Diversity Training (**Portugal**) and policies of equality and attention to diversity (**Spain**). Also, **Luxembourg's** ADEM 2025 strategy programme includes a modern HR management concept and approach and a minority awareness culture (LGBTQI+, persons with disabilities, etc.).

Other examples include:

- new developments linked to the organisational changes - new customer service model, local government pilots on employment (**FI**);
- new co-worker criteria (**SE**); faster recruitment, changing according to demographic changes and more people looking for work-life balance (**AT**);
- remote work agreement, job mix (women and men), access of women to senior management positions, recruitment of people with disabilities, use of video conferencing (**FR**);
- more employees trained through online training programmes (**MT**);
- more focused hiring process, more frequent and focused staff interviews, involvement of employees in early planning and strategy, training in new technology, and frequent information meetings (**IS**);
- creation and provision of a dashboard for the members of the Management Committee to ensure they manage their resources efficiently, digitalisation of several HR processes (recruitment, training, onboarding, performance) (**BE-Actiris**).

There are also some organisational changes that foster the development of modern Human Resources approaches. In **Greece**, a Department of Planning and HR Development was introduced as part of the new organisational structure, aiming to foster a holistic HR management, better aligned with the PES' strategic objectives and culture.

Some PES report only having started the discussion on how to better align the HRM to strategic direction for the future of PES (**BG**). Other PES are not reporting new developments. However they prepare to take proactive actions in response to possible changes or emerging challenges. This is the case of, for example, employer branding strategies (**EE**). There are also countries that report no new developments in this area (**HU** and **NO**).

PES practice box. Values-based strategy development in PES

In **Belgium-Forem** a developed comprehensive strategy is based on the following fundamentals:

1. Transparency (jobseekers' access to the information that Forem holds and clear information about their rights and obligations),
2. Equal treatment (jobseekers benefit from identical services throughout Wallonia, and services offered must be consistent with the pathway and specificities of each jobseeker),
3. Effectiveness (from the moment of registration, capitalisation of information, and Forem's interventions + counsellors' upskilling + swift orientation towards actions adapted to the identified needs),
4. Efficiency (reduction of costs thanks to digitalisation, better allocation of resources, and better synchronisation of stakeholders in jobseekers' pathway in order to avoid dispersion of public resources),
5. Trust (the citizen develops confidence in PES and the people involved in his or her path to employment, and the employer has confidence in the quality of the applications that are sent in response to his or her job offers).

All HR management fields are in line with these goals (recruitment criteria, training of newcomers and older staff, etc.).

Source: own development based on survey responses.

3.3.2 New developments and adjusted approaches regarding the staff training

PES also reported on the changes (either new developments, new initiatives or adjusted approaches) in practical terms regarding staff training (Table 9). Most notably, changes have been introduced to practices regarding the development of staff digital competences. This is in line with previous observations of the survey. Generally, there is a trend of going digital – at least partly – in training and development approaches. For example, **Belgium-VDAB** uses blended learning and gamification, which are linked to project-driven and organisation-driven training offerings.

Table 9. Changes (new developments and/or adjusted approaches and/or new initiatives) in practical terms regarding staff training (reskilling, upskilling) in PES

Changes regarding staff training	Changes introduced	Changes planned	No changes
Practices to develop staff digital competences	21	6	2
Practices to develop future leaders/new managerial skills	13	7	9
Practices to link staff feedback to training and development for staff and managers	13	5	11
Practices to develop skills related to greening and/or sustainability issues	9	9	11
Practices to identify talents/high-potential employees and support their development	9	9	11
More proactive/predictive workforce needs planning, addressing the future skills requirements	6	10	13
Other	3	1	0

Source: own development based on survey responses.

Less than half of PES pointed to changes in practices to develop future leaders or new managerial skills (with another one-quarter planning to do so), and practices to link staff feedback to training and development for staff and managers. With the changing labour market causing a limited availability of talent – including managerial talents – these initial initiatives seem highly relevant and timely. However, practices to internally develop talents

from other workforce groups are less widespread, as are those linked to the development of green skills and sustainability. More actions are planned or under way. In **Sweden**, in the coming year, Arbetsförmedlingen plans several educational investments concerning sustainability, for example, tools for planning and pursuing sustainable public procurement; tools for linking the Sustainable Development Goals to the yearly organisational planning, and an updated environmental training (digital) for all employees.

3.4 Practices introduced to increase the agility, flexibility, and resilience of staff

PES reported on practices introduced to increase the agility, flexibility, and resilience to respond to changing and challenging operational environments and labour market needs.

In **Belgium-VDAB** there are several projects and initiatives aimed at responding to labour market needs and changing operational needs. Examples are: installing a Business Operating Model including the subprojects, and support programmes for customer consultants and trainers; a capacity model for internal staffing; installing a PMO to better manage means and people and to improve management alignment.

In **Latvia** several services have been transferred to remote communication, for example, instead of face-to-face counselling for a job seeker, they were replaced by phone calls during the COVID restrictions. Career counselling was organised on online platforms, while for employers, the online recruitment services were more actively offered by PES counsellors.

Other examples include:

- a coaching programme (**PT**),
- allowing more home offices as a health programme (**AT**),
- Provision via the Pôle emploi e-university of e-learning training modules (on all topics), open to all staff (**FR**),
- Diversification of training delivery methods (distance learning classes, blended learning) (**FR**),
- Enrichment of skills development mechanisms (on-the-job immersions, coaching, etc.) (**FR**),
- New distribution of tasks, incentives for staff, reinforcement of user service profiles (**ES**),
- Training and tutorials on remote working tools (**LU**),
- Increasing the attractiveness of PES as an employer is one of the objectives for 2022-2027, improving working conditions, fighting against absenteeism, and adjustment of service offered to the local needs (more autonomy to the territorial directorates in line with central monitoring principles) (**BE-Forem**),
- Strengthening of mental health of the PES staff in the time of crisis through instruction notes by the HR Department and clear internal instructions on working roadmaps and procedures (**HR**),
- more systematic use of internal mobility with access to training and internal training for jobs that are difficult to staff (ex: business analyst) (**BE-Actiris**),
- Implementation of new IT system (**IS**).

Some countries report not having introduced such practices (**BG** and **HU**).

PES practice box. PES response to crisis situations

In **Estonia** due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the rapidly increasing number of clients, PES had to quickly recruit more counsellors. PES hired students who had not yet graduated, who did remote counselling, and who worked part-time. They created a (initially) temporary position to advise the Ukrainian clients where recruited Ukrainians or people who could speak the Ukrainian language could support this target group. At the height of Russia's unprovoked invasion

of Ukraine, PES temporarily opened an office on weekends to register new clients. They put in place an operative replacement system, i.e. the principles of how departments support each other in the event of a rapidly increased number of customers or an unexpected need for replacement.

Source: own development based on survey responses.

3.5 Difficulties in recruiting staff and practices introduced to increase PES attractiveness as an employer

Due to observed trends in the labour market, a significant share of surveyed PES (19 out of 29 PES) recently experienced difficulties recruiting staff. Some have undertaken actions to increase PES' attractiveness as an employer.

One of the examples of new approaches in employer branding comes from the Estonian PES, with the creation of a new strategy, value proposition, and communication channels, including a new career website¹³.

Illustration. Estonian PES career website as part of employer branding.

What makes working at the unemployment fund special:

We are experts in our field

We know the labor market and understand the needs of our clients. Let's talk together about how to make the world of work better. We value the knowledge-skills, empathy and diverse work experience of our employees. We support continuous self-improvement - we make it possible to attend school alongside work and offer internal training. We create opportunities to learn from each other.



Source: <https://meietootukassa.ee/> (website translation by Google Translate).

The majority of PES actions focus on strengthening the image of PES as an employer (so-called 'Employer branding strategies'). In **Sweden**, due to the generally low confidence and trust rate in public services¹⁴, PES actions on branding and being an attractive employer has been a value goal for a long time. The campaign of **Belgium-VDAB** as an employer was accompanied by the initiatives taken by the general agency for personnel of the Flemish Government (Ago) to promote working at the government. The VDAB campaign emphasised the added value employees offer to job seekers and employers. They also did a campaign in collaboration with **Belgium-Actiris**, to enhance interregional mobility. In the **Netherlands**, due to recruitment difficulties experienced in specific functions (especially in IT) a campaign called 'Zinhouder' has been launched, which refers to 'meaningful work'.

In **Italy**, a national PES strengthening plan was launched in 2019 to increase the staff number by 11 600 new recruits. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the process has been delayed and is still ongoing. Also in **France**, projects to strengthen the employer brand have also been undertaken, along with efforts to reinforce work-related training and internships. In **Denmark**, actions focus on an increased social media presence, more focus

¹³ <https://meietootukassa.ee/>

¹⁴ The Swedish PES - Arbetsförmedlingen - has long struggled with low confidence rate in public trust/confidence surveys (partly due to political debate about the PES, need for PES reform, etc.), however there are often very many candidates for each vacancy.

on the strengths and benefits of working in public organisations and recruitment skill development for managers. **Bulgaria** is also making more efforts to achieve greater transparency and publicity about the work at PES. Some PES report that this is a new phenomenon, and they will launch new PES as employer brand programmes soon (**AT**).

PES also resort to other actions that can support PES as an employer and make recruitment easier. The **Netherlands** makes more use of recruitment services and co-operates with a network of universities of applied sciences. **Latvia** focuses on making job advertisements more attractive (e.g. by making videos about the vacant job) as well as calling candidates individually and offering to the possibility to work in the PES.

PES also note that the remuneration package is often not competitive in the market, especially for some positions (e.g. in **IT**). Therefore, they take measures to improve that offer. For example, they focus on offering an attractive system of bonuses, including non-financial bonuses (**BG**) or improving remuneration packages for software developers (**MT**). **Spain** is also strengthening monetary incentives, along with the promotion of teleworking. In **Slovakia**, the attractiveness of PES as an employer is promoted by presenting employee benefits in the area of working time, paid leave, job stability, etc.

PES note that the legal restrictions imposed on salary scales make it harder to compete for sought-after employees (e.g. IT Developers, and middle managers in **LU**). **Croatia** made it easier to progress on salary scales by adopting a new rulebook on the systematisation of jobs and it has decreased the conditions under which employees move to a higher salary class (from five to four years of working experience). In this way, the Croatian PES wants to attract a larger number of new employees.

A number of PES do not report such actions (**NO**) or note that the process is not possible to change due to legal restrictions (**PT**).

PES practice box. Examples of PES as employers actions

In **Germany**, as it is becoming noticeably more challenging to recruit suitable skilled and junior staff, various measures have been undertaken, including:

- Development of a professional employer brand – with the aim to bundle the values and attractive features of the BA as an employer, to clearly emphasise these by means of suitable communication measures and to enable a high degree of differentiation from other employers.
- The selection procedures are designed to be more applicant-oriented. The PES takes care to treat applicants with respect and professionalism and to present themselves as an attractive employer. They use feedback from applicants to further optimise the selection process.
- PES careers page was redesigned to make it more modern and appealing.
- The social media presence was expanded.
- The PES is also looking into the possibility of replacing the current IT support in the recruitment process with a modern solution. This would also further improve the application process and increase employer attractiveness.

To solve the recruitment problem, **Estonia** started to systematically develop an employer brand by creating an image both internally (for their employees) and externally, in order to be an attractive employer for the target groups of interest (counsellors, specialists). PES has formulated the employer's tagline, described its distinctive strengths, created a landing page and a group of ambassadors, and performed various activities throughout the year to strengthen the employer's brand. When recruiting externally, PES used new different channels, with recruitment processes designed to be fast and transparent, and used software that helps them to make recruitment attractive and organise it internally more easily. It undertakes other proactive activities to stand out as an employer (articles, presentations at conferences, through ambassadors). As a result of the systematic work done over three years, PES won the Dream Employer title at the national competition. When recruiting, it uses remote channels and appropriate methods (video introductions, video interviews, information sessions on FB, group works, and conversations in Teams).

Source: own development based on survey responses.

4. STAFF AND STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

4.1 Tools to gather and analyse staff feedback and opinions

PES use a wide range of tools to gather and analyse staff feedback and opinions (Table 10). The most common tools are: training needs surveys (23 PES), satisfaction/engagement surveys (22), feedback/opinions from trade unions or staff representatives (22) as well as health/well-being monitoring practices (used in 21 PES). There are also 19 out of 29 PES that use employee opinion surveys, with no significant plans to introduce it. The lack of the use of employee opinion surveys has already been pointed to as a possible influencing factor for limited staff involvement, as it is highly relevant to employee empowerment and participation.

Table 10. Tools used and/or developed in PES to gather and analyse staff feedback and/or opinions

Tools to gather staff feedback	Introduced/ used	Developed/ planned	Neither used nor planned
Training needs surveys	23	2	4
Satisfaction/engagement surveys	22	1	6
Feedback/opinions from trade unions/staff representatives	22	0	7
Health/well-being monitoring	21	1	7
Employee opinion surveys	19	2	8
Other	2	0	1

Source: own development based on survey responses.

As noted by **Estonia**, information is also gathered directly from employees during development and quality interviews and one-to-one conversations between managers and employees. The information collected covers various types of feedback, employees' opinions, suggestions and map development wishes and needs. Analysis of training needs for the upcoming period and feedback on completed training enhances understanding of how the gained skills and knowledge are used at work. In **Cyprus**, regular online meetings between all managers and selected employees of PES Network Offices with the Headquarters (Director and PES Network Co-ordinator) are being organised.

Information acquired from the above-mentioned sources was used to improve overall and individual performance, loyalty, and job satisfaction.

Some countries focus on discussing the results of surveys and other forms of feedback with managers and staff. In **Sweden**, dialogues in the workplace are being held based on the acquired information. In the **Netherlands**, results of the surveys are discussed with employees (within each team) and employee council representatives. In **Latvia**, the information is presented to the management of the institution, as well as to the direct managers. If possible, the suggestions are taken into account. For example, the employees expressed their desire to continue working remotely even after the pandemic. The management took this into account, and currently 40% of the working time is permitted to be done remotely. Establishing online meetings for brainstorming and feedback is appreciated by all staff members in **Cyprus** because this allows their voices to be heard and their opinions and suggestions can be examined to improve certain aspects of service delivery and address specific problems and/or complaints. In **Denmark**, employee satisfaction and well-being are assessed four times a year. After each assessment, the results are presented and discussed through dialogue between managers and employees in each local office/centre. Also, the overall results for the PES are discussed strategically at a top management meeting as well as a meeting for all managers.

Other PES also use this information to prepare action plans and take measures to improve the situation. In **Estonia**, the results of the satisfaction survey are presented to the entire PES. Each department receives its own performance report and they support managers in analysing reports and preparing action plans. Departments share the best practices (in workshop series) covering how the areas of improvement have been addressed and which actions have led to results. These results are used to develop PES training plans. From the conversations with employees, the PES also collects information about their development potential and tries to find suitable new challenges for them within the organisation (in other positions, including horizontally), so that valuable competence is not lost. Also in **Germany**, based on employees' feedback information, areas of action and opportunities for improvement are systematically identified and concrete measures are derived, implemented, and tracked. This process takes place at all levels in the organisation, from individual teams/areas to departments and regions to a nationwide process. In **France**, the results of the surveys are analysed and are subject to action plans, adapted to each Pôle emploi site, and monitored over time (indicators). In **Ireland**, performance is routinely monitored at both individual and group levels and the findings are reflected in policy and practices, the Department operates a broad range of Engagement and Innovation (E&I) initiatives such as staff fora and E&I project teams involving representatives from across the organisation including the head of the Department (Secretary General). In **Iceland**, there is a defined plan based on the result of the satisfaction survey as well as based on the result of health monitoring.

In **Bulgaria**, the employees' suggestions to improve the working environment, distribution of bonuses, to improve the microclimate are taken into account each time. Employees also participate in training, according to researched areas. In **Luxembourg**, the collected information is useful for more targeted/tailor-made approaches to leadership health monitoring is based on the monitoring of illness-related absence and is used to detect, staff members in difficulty at an early stage, so that discussion can be started in time. In **Belgium-VDAB**, the information is integrated into a standard PDCA-approach depending on the topic. As an example, information gained through the satisfaction/engagement survey has been combined with the obligatory health/well-being monitoring to inspire the main targets and related actions for the five-year psychosocial well-being programme. Action plans in **Belgium-Actiris** are put in place following internal surveys with special emphasis on topics less highly rated by employees. In **Belgium-Forem**, the top management (central and local) has weekly meetings where notably these issues are discussed and decisions are taken about action plans to put in place. The follow-up of the surveys' results is key.

Some PES report training to be one of the key measures to be taken on the basis of information acquired. In **Slovakia**, the information is used to prepare an education plan, but also in employee evaluation, in the introduction/revision of new/existing employee benefits and procedures, etc. In **Poland**, training is organised in accordance with the needs of employees and the designated path of education/qualification improvement. In **Croatia**, TNA is used to develop the curriculum and the implement training in accordance with the needs for the development of competences. In **Spain**, information allows for preparatory training that is more adjusted to the needs, evaluation of psychosocial risks and implementation of measures for their control.

4.2 Employees' involvement in PES – changes and new developments

PES reported on changes – either new development or upscaled approaches in terms of staff coverage and frequency – related to practices enhancing employees' involvement (Table 11). The most popular changes regarded the organisational information sharing practices (22 out of 29 PES), followed by team communication and managerial feedback (18 PES) and the onboarding of new employees (17). As an example in the **Netherlands**, digital employee meetings for all employees are held to share important information about

the direction the PES is going. These meetings are very well attended because employees do not need to travel to participate.

Table 11. Changes related to enhancing employees' involvement in PES

Changes related to staff involvement practices	Changes introduced	Changes planned	No changes
Organisational information sharing	22	0	7
Team communication practices/managerial feedback	18	2	9
Onboarding of new employees	17	4	8
Team building/team integration	11	2	16
Motivation/engagement tools	10	6	13
Celebrating successes/special occasions/overperformance	9	4	16
Co-operation with trade unions/staff representatives	9	0	20
Other	3	0	2

Source: own development based on survey responses.

Less popular were changes in the approach to team building/integration (11 PES), motivation/engagement (10), celebrating successes/special occasions/overperformance (9) and co-operation with trade unions/staff representatives (9). For example, in **Denmark** during the pandemic, a podcast was made with co-workers as well as video greetings from co-workers in an attempt to mitigate the detachment of the PES staff.

It should be noted that these practices were already in place in many PES, but the changes regarded frequency or coverage. For example, in **Sweden**, the need for more regular but shorter department meetings or get-togethers (in person, for coffee and just chat in general) was noted. It addresses the social aspect of integration, which is a key challenge of remote work. Managers have initiated more and more frequent follow-ups but at individual and group levels. Also, the issue of accessibility is discussed more in this PES to ensure that everyone is involved in all meetings (remote, hybrid, and in-person). As noted by **Sweden**, *'Before the pandemic, those who had another location and always participated in meetings by Skype were a sort of tail that were not as involved in the planning of the meeting or in the actual meeting. This is not the case anymore'*.

Generally, PES take a number of actions to support team-building and new employee onboarding to increase organisational inclusiveness. Some PES indicatively note that the onboarding of new staff intends to be done in a physical way, even during restrictions (e.g. **Malta, Austria, Denmark**). Other PES resorted to organising onboarding entirely digitally (**BE-VDAB** and **SK**), as well as other team-building activities (e.g. yoga classes, and cooking classes in **BE-Actiris**). This last organisation created a smartphone application containing useful information for onboardees, and organised a welcome day in Teams with presentations to improve the new employees' onboarding experience. In **BE-Forem**, team building during COVID-19 was also virtual and diverse, including remote tossing, virtual escape games, etc.

However, COVID-19 influenced this modality in many cases and prompted the introduction of a remote delivery channel for onboarding (**IE** and **NL**). After the pandemic, some PES opted for the use of the blended model, covering both offline and online events and practices (**BE-Forem, BG, IE** and **PT**). For example, in **Sweden**, a mix of physical and digital activities is used, including 'back-to-the-office' week with different events to get people familiar with the office building again, along with tours of the buildings for new staff.

In terms of integration and inclusiveness, some other actions were undertaken by PES. In **France**, managers are provided with integration kits. In **Belgium-VDAB**, within the

context of inclusiveness, people with back problems could receive an adapted office chair for the home workplace provided that it followed the correct procedure for colleagues with recognised disabilities already existed before the pandemic .

Some PES team building and other team events have not been implemented during the pandemic (**HR** and **SK**). Some PES also report no specific actions in this area (**HU**).

PES practice box. Onboarding and team building

In **Cyprus**, the COVID-19 outbreak and the resulting emergency situation with the need to provide, as PES, alternative customer services using online and other distant options of communication and service delivery necessitated the development of a fast staff integration system for new employees. New employees that were hired during the pandemic outbreak and with certain strict distance measures in place were given the opportunity to be trained and be taught basic service procedures online or through modifying the working stations to adhere to the COVID-19 preventive measures in the workplace. Moreover, the Electronic System Administrator of PES provided ZOOM training sessions with all the new employees regarding system specifications and functionality. All these actions helped the new hires to smoothly integrate into an inclusive work environment.

In **Estonia**, the PES has shared practices and experiences of other organisations on how to maintain a sense of team and involvement in the conditions of remote and hybrid work. They have suggested managers hold regular virtual meetings also on non-work topics to stay connected with each of their employees. The PES has launched several activities with the aim of creating inclusiveness, for example, a health club on FB, an anniversary game, charity bingo, a shopping bag auction, etc. They also encouraged virtual activities that invite people to get involved and thereby create a sense of unity. They organised webinars - a regular voluntary opportunity of learning from everyone on important topics (for example, physical and mental health, environmental protection, combining work and private life, and lifelong learning) and they included their own employees as speakers. The PES also created several e-training programmes, in which completion is not limited by location or time, and conducts hybrid training exercises. In regard to the onboarding of new employees, when preparing the induction plan, they take into account the employee's previous experience. Induction training is also partly in an e-environment.

Source: own development based on survey responses.

4.3 Practices and tools to gather and analyse external feedback

PES also reported a number of practices used to gather external feedback (Table 12). Almost all PES use customer satisfaction surveys (both jobseekers and employers). The majority also gathers information from social partners (employers' organisations and trade unions). Feedback from co-operating institutions and local municipalities is performed in more than half of surveyed organisations.

Table 12. Practices and tools of external feedback used currently or being developed in PES

Tools of external feedback	Introduced / used	Developed / planned	Neither used nor planned
Customer (jobseekers and employers') satisfaction surveys	27	1	1
Feedback from social partners (employers' organisations and trade unions)	25	0	4
Feedback from co-operating institutions (NGOs, education institutions, service providers, etc.)	16	2	11
Feedback from local municipalities	15	0	14
Other	2	0	2

Source: own development based on survey responses.

PES reported on different ways in which PES stakeholders have been involved in the development of the HR strategy.

In some cases, this involvement is organised through the Governance Board or Councils of Social Partners (e.g. in **AT**, **BE-Actiris**, **BE-Forem**, **IT**, **FR** and **HR**). In **Portugal**, an Administrative Board/Council is involved, with a tripartite composition, as it includes representatives of trade unions and business confederations with a seat on the Permanent Commission for Social Dialogue, as well as the public administration. In **Belgium-VDAB**, the quality department provides a list of recommendations in which all feedback from all surveys, audits and quality checks are gathered and prioritised. All topics concerning the development of the PES HR/staffing strategies are discussed with the syndicates on the work council and with the boards of the respective hierarchical levels and alignment is reached by frequent consultation.

In **Cyprus**, PES stakeholders can make suggestions and express their opinions regarding service delivery components or certain aspects of PES procedures and certain policies that in their opinion need to be revisited and/or modified or changed. These suggestions can be materialised via the Provincial Employment Committees that are composed of representatives of local Trade Unions, local Employers Unions, local Municipality, and other synergy departments of the Ministry of Labour (Labour Relations, Welfare, and Social Insurance).

However, approaches in some PES might differ. For example in **Sweden**, the Council of Social Partners is not involved in the development of PES HR/staffing strategies, being informed of the proposed changes. The governing board of the PES has however been involved in re-organising and merging operational areas. There is also a long-standing co-operation between the PES as an employer and union representatives (representing three umbrella union organisations). Also in **Estonia**, PES stakeholders are not involved in the development of the strategy, but the results are being presented to the PES Supervisory Board. In **Slovakia**, PES stakeholders' feedback can have an influence on benchmarks and performance measurement.

There are also examples of the leading role of employee representation bodies to be consulted in HR strategy-related issues. In the **Netherlands**, the employee council has a direct influence and advisory role in the process. In **Spain**, union representation of the staff through the negotiation tables are involved. There are also examples of other bodies influencing the HR strategy, including advisory or expert groups (e.g. **Finland**).

PES practice box. Use of external feedback in PES

In **Sweden**, Arbetsförmedlingen carries out customer surveys regularly. Employers that have published vacancy ads are asked a few questions, including about digital services. They also gather feedback from local municipalities. The municipalities are one of PES' most important partners. How well the co-operation works with them is an important element in the local presence and in improving the results for jobseekers who are far from the labour market. It is therefore important to take advantage of their perspective on how PES business in this area develops. Every year, Sweden's Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR/SKR) conducts a survey of the heads of the municipalities' labour market units, where questions were asked about how they experience the PES presence and how they believe that co-operation with PES works in their municipality. The results from these surveys are used in the PES in order to develop co-operation.

Feedback from social partners is also important. There are regular meetings with the Council of Social Partners. They have a set item on the agenda at each meeting for evaluation. This is an opportunity for honest and useful input. There is also a long-standing co-operation between the PES as an employer and union representatives (representing three umbrella union organisations). Each unit or section has a representative for each union (usually), and they represent their members in different forums within the union organisation but also in social dialogue with the employer that is scheduled regularly.

Apart from the above, feedback is also gathered from co-operating institutions, e.g. co-operation with disability organisations, Krami (Prison and Probation services), sector organisations, etc.

Source: own development based on survey responses.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, PES experienced additional HR challenges and changes in staff allocation practices, stemming from increased workloads, changed working modes (towards remote and hybrid), and new service delivery models. These, in turn, resulted in the introduction of new or enhanced staff management practices, which have been significantly developed in the majority of surveyed PES. Short-term COVID-19-related measures focused on the reallocation of staff, health-related measures, and online work practices (including online services, online training, onboarding, etc.). In the longer term, an acceleration of digitalisation of PES was noted, which also resulted in the development of online services for PES clients, but also dissemination of online meetings and training for employees.

PES staff expectations towards work formats show that hybrid work (and to a lesser extent remote work, which has been used much more during lockdowns) became an everyday reality. It has significant benefits, affecting work-life balance positively, allowing for less time spent commuting, increasing the flexibility of work scheduling, the ability to focus better, and higher productivity. Still, online work also poses challenges for work communication, collaboration and interpersonal relations, mental and physical well-being, involvement of staff and overworking. As the remote/hybrid work trend seems to become a permanent feature of the working environment, it is crucial to focus on solving the evident problems associated with distant working.

PES responses to challenges bear a high degree of similarities, as new communication tools and channels are introduced followed by training (both on the use of these new tools, as well as management training on remote team management). As the changes required to go deep into organisational 'tissue', they also require cultural transformation that pushes towards a new culture of remote work. The PES put a lot of effort into supporting these transformations with the use of specific training, workshops, webinars, individualised support, and other activities. Observed developments also covered the areas of employee well-being and work-life balance as well as performance management practices. It is crucial to build the culture of trust between the employees and managers in order to shift from micromanagement and control towards task- and results-oriented management. This in turn requires the development of self-management and time-management competencies of staff and well as general feeling of collegiality and meaningful purpose of work.

PES' future is marked by the development of key staff competences. Most notably digital, but spanning over a number of soft skill areas and management competences. Due to this, PES expect organisational roles to be redefined, with some internal redeployment of staff and an increased need for training (reskilling and up-skilling of staff). Furthermore, new positions linked to digitalisation but also services or strategy changes, emerge and need to be weaved into current organisational structures. These required developments need to align with organisational-levels strategies, as well as PES values, like inclusiveness and diversity, transparency or trust.

Communication is of utmost importance. It is also important to analyse the employee needs and motivations and to address them accordingly. PES use various forms of feedback, both internally (from staff and managers) and externally (from PES stakeholders). Staff surveys are most common and serve the purpose of monitoring opinions and work-related attitudes that influence their involvement level. Retaining staff engagement in changing work environments and models becomes one of the ultimate goals of Human Resources Management in PES. It is supported by transparent communication, team building and integration practices, and motivational support. Onboarding and team-building practices in virtual settings are especially challenging. Social partners and stakeholders are also involved in providing feedback. It is advised to strengthen the role of employees' representation and empowerment in the process of change.

There are fields of possible improvement in the functioning of staff management in PES. The most significant is gathering employees' feedback and assuring their involvement by empowering employees and supporting their voices. An example of this is the *actual-versus-preferred* work format (remote-hybrid-office), which is not adequately researched. Staff preferences should be known and embedded into the developed practices to the extent which they are beneficial for both the employees and PES as organisations. Increased efforts should also be made in relation to PES attractiveness as employers, as the competitive fight for employees with sought-after skills (e.g. digital) is going to increase in the years to come.

HR and management need to co-operate and support each other in the increased efforts towards not only compliance with organisational policies or the law, but also in achievement of organisational transformation in the digitalised future that starts with the 'new normal'. Co-operation and effective communication are key in developing policies that can contribute to the development of staff and organisations that can cope with future challenges of PES.

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