Conclusions of the High-level Committee on Management at its thirty-eighth session

Addendum

Discussion paper on the future of work and its implications for the United Nations system workforce and people management practices

Phase I: Environmental sustainability in the area of management

Summary

The present paper provides a discussion of the current state of the United Nations workforce and its management, key external trends the system is facing and their implications for the future of the workforce. The paper has served to inform the discussion on the future of work and the United Nations workforce held at the retreat of the High-level Committee on Management, which was held at the United Nations System Staff College in Turin, Italy, on 15 October 2019. The analysis presented in the paper leads to considerations on possible action areas for the future of work in the United Nations system, with respect to:

(a) Future composition and management of the United Nations system workforce, namely:

(i) Amendments and revisions in desirable workforce composition, contractual arrangements and social protection;

(ii) Review of the balance between recruitment, internal development and partnerships: sourcing the right people with the right skills.

(b) Agility, efficiency and innovation, namely:

(i) Enhancing organizational agility;

(ii) Using digital technologies to enhance efficiency and user experience.

(c) The future of employee experience, namely:

(i) Building an enabling work environment and driving employee experience;

(ii) Enhancing leadership performance, engagement and organizational culture.

The following questions served to guide the discussion of the High-level Committee on Management:

(a)   Which external factors and emerging trends will the common system need to be aware of and react to?

(b)   Which key challenges can be addressed only at the inter-agency level?

(c)   Which challenges are so common across organizations that they should be addressed collectively in order to attain better programmatic impact or ensure prudent resource spending?

I. The changing external and internal environment for the United Nations system

1. Looking ahead, the broader landscape that affects the work and functions of the United Nations organizations is changing in several important ways, as indicated below.

A more inclusive, interconnected and multifaceted landscape for development

2. Increasingly, complex interlinkages between the effects of climate change, migration, demography and economic development have to be analysed and addressed concurrently. For the United Nations system, this means there is a growing interdependence between country, regional and global action, which requires United Nations system entities to further enhance synergies between the normative and operational support functions. A rethink of the means of engagement, implementation, thematic monitoring and reporting will be required, as will an enhanced focus on teamwork across locations in virtual, often inter-organizational teams.

Peace and security activities become more complex and prominent, and humanitarian operations are increasingly challenging and dangerous

3. The protracted nature of crises in many humanitarian and conflict-affected settings is creating increasing expectations for the United Nations system to be a convening platform and an active moderator in peacebuilding and peacekeeping activities. The visible move to an increasingly multipolar world presents opportunities, as well as additional challenges, to the United Nations in terms of conflict prevention and resolution.

4. In the humanitarian arena, conflict environments in a number of States bring significant challenges for the safety and security of staff, both from singular malicious events and owing to the ever-increasing stressful nature of work in these environments. The number of parallel level 3 emergencies has never been as high as in the present environment. While conflict prevention becomes ever more important, adequate provision of resources for humanitarian work and enhanced duty of care are a necessity. Workforce planning approaches will need to become more sophisticated in order to cope with frequently changing deployment needs.

The governance and stakeholder environments are likely to evolve

5. With the further development of middle-income countries and economic difficulties in a number of traditional donor countries, there is likely to be a changing balance of economic power in international relations, in general. The development of Brazil, China, India, the Russian Federation and South Africa (commonly known as "BRICS") and middle-income countries is leading to the rise of new development cooperation actors, requiring the United Nations system to strengthen its comparative advantage while entering into partnerships with them. Likewise, the desired broad coalition for advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will require the United Nations to work much closely with the private sector and with civil society, non-governmental organizations and other non-State actors. The Secretary-General, at the opening of the seventy-fourth session of the General Assembly, therefore called for a "networked and inclusive multilateralism".

6. It will be important to clarify and confirm the role of specialized agencies in their respective technical communities: is the United Nations an innovator, convener, data collector, knowledge transferrer, implementer, standard setter or something else in the respective field of work? The collaboration with science, industry and other actors will need to be intensified, and technological innovations and possibilities

require the United Nations to keep abreast of all innovations, trends and developments in its areas of work. The staff of specialized agencies must have the reputation for technical skills and the necessary competencies to bring together and guide their professional communities. Detailed skills and competency-based planning for better workforce management are a key enabler in this environment. The requisite competencies may be found both within the existing workforce and outside of the United Nations system.

7.   In this environment, organizations need to be partnership-ready and to adjust their operational systems to the evolving needs. The United Nations will also need to foster transparency, accountability, and risk and cost management, and to recognize the equally important softer skills that will better position the United Nations workforce in this ever-changing environment.

8.   Not least, the networked and inclusive approach of multilateralism may need to be mirrored and reflected in the collaboration mode among the United Nations system organizations supporting the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and other work. Notable differences in mandates and specific governance structures, such as the formal tripartite structure in the International Labour Organization, need to be duly considered.

The implications for financing of the United Nations system can be significant

9.   All of the above-mentioned developments are occurring in an overall climate that has also led to continued cost pressure and less financial predictability. The total funding of the United Nations system over the last decade has been growing, which speaks to both the increased need for humanitarian and development work and the magnitude of the tasks that Member States entrust United Nations organizations to carry out in this regard. However, the degree of earmarking of United Nations system financing, at least from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development donor countries, continues to grow and is above the level of other international organizations.

10   It is the aim of the United Nations system to diversify its funding sources by including the private sector in order to foster social and environmental impact. To be successful in those endeavours, it will be important to revise partnership and exchange arrangements and competency levels. Discussions on pooled and thematic funding may also have implications on workforce planning, staffing and deployment arrangements.

11.   Finally, in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, there is likely to be a significant broadening in implementation approaches by all actors. This will likely result in growing interest by Member States in using a significant share of assistance for national or regional implementation, rather than working with United Nations system organizations for full implementation. From this angle, the United Nations will need to continuously prove its comparative value for funding, finding itself in competition with other development partners with closer direct links to Member States.

Rapid development of new technologies, including artificial intelligence

12.   New technologies are fundamentally changing the nature of jobs, putting new demands on education systems and social security systems. They also offer vast potential in areas such as automation, research and health care, to name a few. Discussions on the future of work focus on prospective changes in jobs and required skills. Digitalization will fundamentally change processes and service delivery. From an internal management perspective, new technologies can be expected to affect work in four different dimensions:

(a)   New technology can help with process and service efficiencies (such as robotic process automation, or blockchain-based solutions for decentralized environments);

(b)   New technology can drastically improve user experience (replacement of traditional enterprise resource planning solutions by cloud-based and/or mobile solutions and integrated point solutions);

(c)   Artificial intelligence-based solutions can help with decision support, either by efficiently filtering large amounts of data or through data discovery;

(d)   Digital solutions allow for the targeting of internal communications and other measures that support employee experience in a more precise way and transform the approach to learning.

Changing employment landscape in the external world

13.   Technological and societal changes are having a profound impact on a rapidly changing employment landscape in the external world. While there is a trend towards more project-based employment (often referred to as a "gig economy"), there is, on the other hand, a clear trend of new entrants in the labour market seeking to better combine personal and professional life, and cultural fit is of higher importance than it was for earlier generations.

14.   A hyper-connected world requires a more agile work environment. Technology is changing jobs at an unknown pace, so that new skills will be required that are typically not known today. Organizations are becoming more data- and analytics-driven. At the same time, while technology enables work processes and environments, there is still broad consensus that a more human-centric workplace is needed.

15.   In a rapidly moving world where more than 30 per cent of the jobs of tomorrow have not yet been invented, the differentiating factor for the future will be the non-technical or so-called soft skills. Notably, in a time where artificial intelligence is coexisting with humans in the workplace, the aspects that are truly "human" are increasingly important. The top 10 skills of the future, according to *The Future of Jobs Report 2018* by the World Economic Forum, are:

(a)   Complex problem-solving;

(b)   Critical thinking;

(c)   Creativity;

(d)   People management;

(e)   Coordinating with others;

(f)   Emotional intelligence;

(g)   Judgment and decision-making;

(h)   Service orientation;

(i)   Negotiation;

(j)   Cognitive flexibility.

16.   These are equally important for the United Nations context and need to be as high on the agenda of skills development or hiring as technical skills and field experience.

17.   Finally, modern employers are changing how they work to attract and retain talent, rethinking employer branding and engagement strategies, and focusing on

employee experience, including office settings and supporting technology, in order to cater to changing demands in the workplace.

II. The current state of work in the United Nations system

18.   An adequate structure and composition of the United Nations system workforce, both in qualitative and quantitative terms, is a critical underpinning for programmatic success and needs to balance programmatic alignment with specificities in mandates, structures and funding patterns.

19.   At present, on a system-wide level, the percentage of permanent or continuing contracts has increased over the last decade (see figure I).

Figure I
Appointment types of United Nations system staff from 2006 to 2018
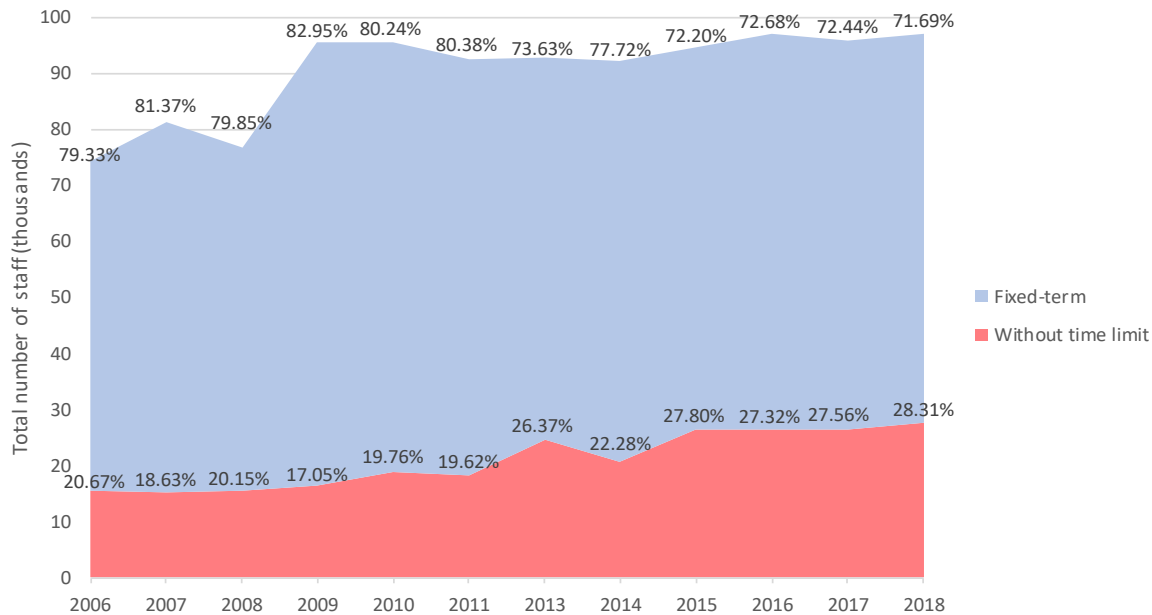
Source: Annual human resources statistics of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB).

20.   The trend towards more continuing contracts has, on the other hand, led to further diversification of staffing arrangements, including consultants and service providers. As at 31 December 2017, affiliate work arrangements – local and international consultants, holders of service contracts administered by the United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Volunteers and individuals hired under $1 contracts – made up for about one third of the total United Nations system workforce (see figure II).

Figure II
United Nations system total workforce composition
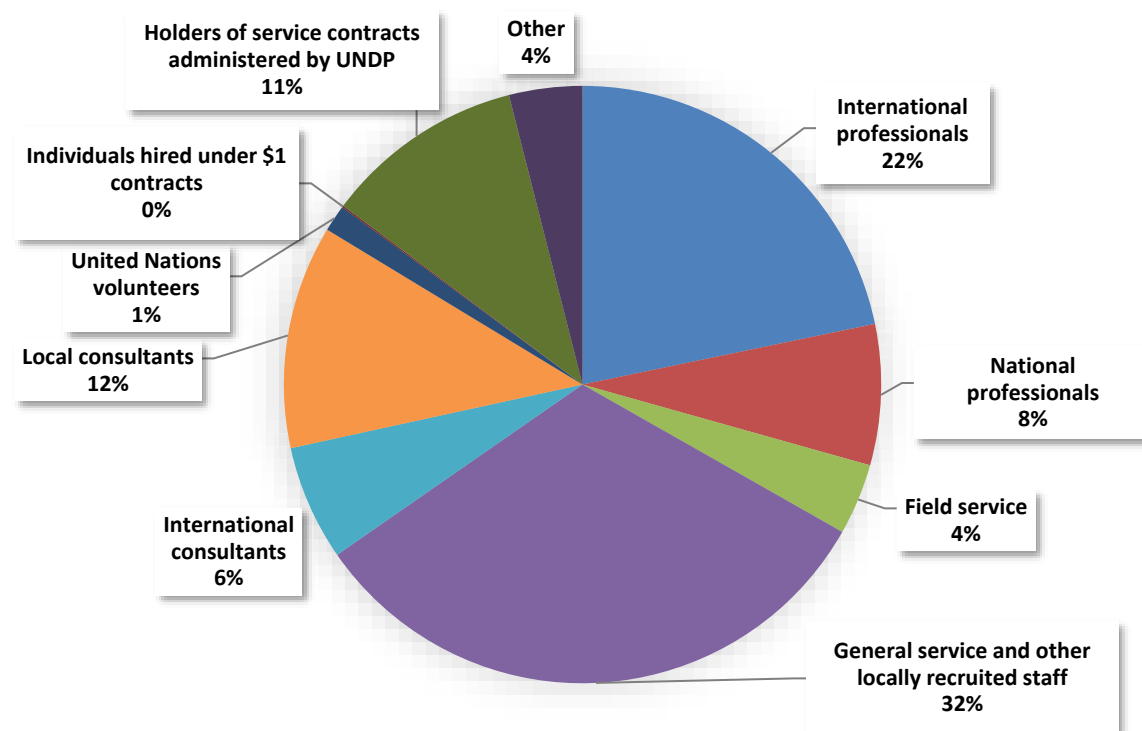

Source: CEB census.
Note: Headcount in all countries as of 31 December 2017.
Abbreviation: UNDP, United Nations Development Programme.

21. This share of the affiliate workforce has been relatively constant, with some variations over the past couple of years. Between 2011 and 2015, the percentage of affiliate workforce arrangements increased from 34.6 per cent to 40.2 per cent in non-OECD countries (for which data is systematically collected), within an overall stable growth trend of personnel (the total number of personnel with staff contracts continued growing). Between 2015 and 2017, the percentage of affiliate personnel dropped below 35 per cent.

22. Over the past decade and the past couple of years, in particular, the average age of the United Nations system workforce has further increased (see figure III). The reasons for the increase could be manifold, ranging from the increase in the mandatory age of retirement to 65 for existing staff to internal restructurings leading to downgrading of positions that increase competition in a younger, less experienced workforce.

Figure III
Demographic development of United Nations system staff from 2006 to 2018
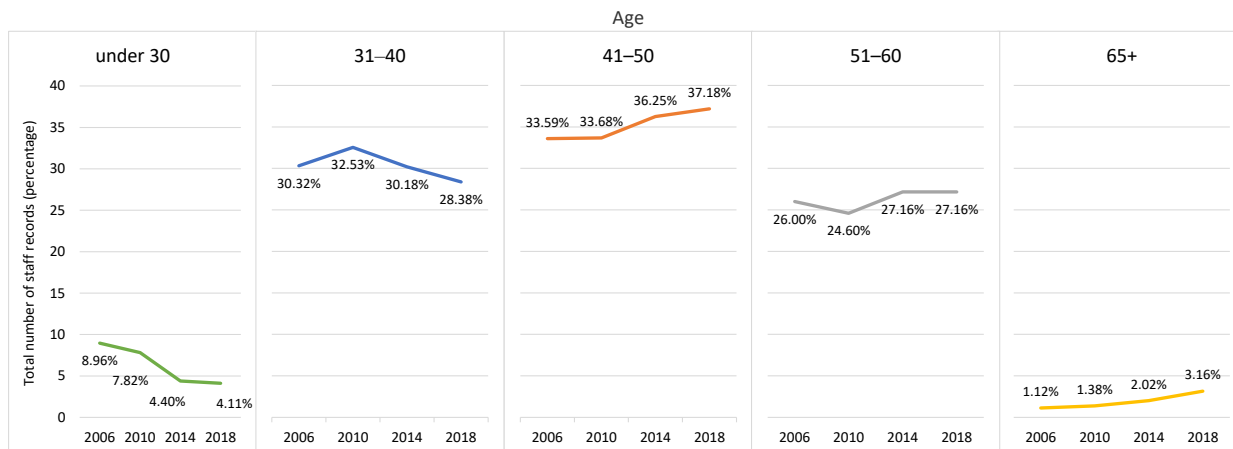
Source: Annual CEB human resources statistics.

23.   In general, annual attrition rates vary largely across United Nations system organizations but are, on average, relatively low, which in combination does not facilitate rejuvenation of the staff cadre (see figure IV).

Figure IV
Attrition rates of the organizations and entities in the United Nations system
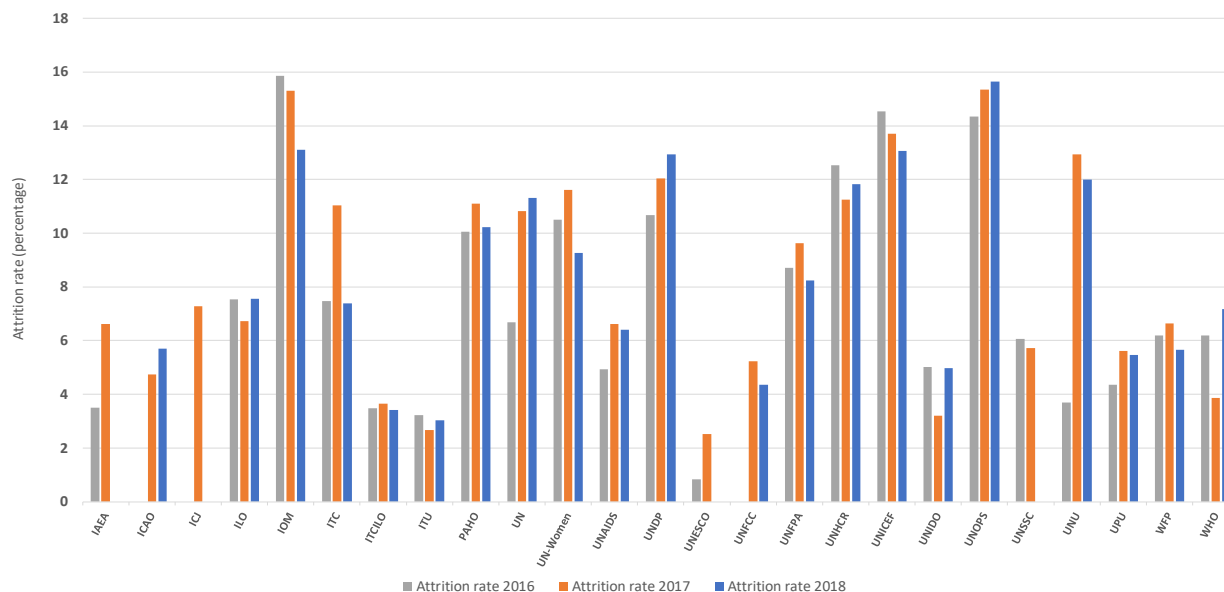
Source: Annual CEB human resources statistics.

Note: Attrition rate is defined as total number of staff having left the organization in a given year, as a percentage of total number of staff in that year, all staff with contracts of at least one year.

Abbreviations: IAEA, International Atomic Energy Agency; ICAO, International Civil Aviation Organization; ICJ, International Court of Justice; ILO, International Labour Organization; IOM, International Organization for Migration; ITC, International Trade Centre; ITCILO, International Training Centre of the International Labour Organization; ITU, International Telecommunication Union; PAHO, Pan American Health Organization; UN, United Nations; UNAIDS, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS; UNDP, United Nations Development Programme; UNESCO, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; UNFCC, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; UNFPA, United Nations Population Fund; UNHCR, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; UNICEF, United Nations Children's Fund; UNIDO, United Nations Industrial Development Organization; UNOPS, United Nations Office for Project Services; UNSSC, United Nations System Staff College; UNU, United Nations University; UN-Women, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women; UPU, Universal Postal Union; WFP, World Food Programme; WHO, World Health Organization.

24. In order to bring people at the beginning of their professional careers into the workforce, the employer attractiveness for this age group needs a more careful examination. The latest global employer branding survey by Universum indicates the countries and professions in which the United Nations figures among the top 100 desirable employers. With regional variations, graduates in the humanities and related subjects consider the United Nations an attractive employer, while this is far less the case among graduates in information technology, engineering, medicine or other areas.

25. In general, a recent survey by Young UN: Agents for Change[1] points to the appreciation of the values and international work environment in the United Nations system, while highlighting challenges with the predictability of employment and the ability to plan personal and professional life only at very short notice (see figure V). While there is no expectation for lifelong employment, key areas of concern are purpose, the opportunity to influence and shape their environment, predictability, portability (of skills and benefits), and transparency and support.

Figure V
Time of obtention of contract extension before starting date
(Percentage)
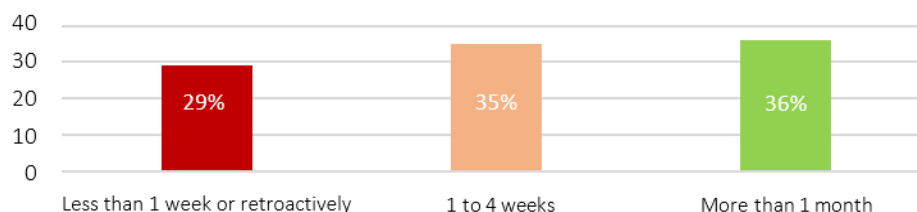
Source: Young UN survey, further details in CEB/2019/HLCM/31.

26. Currently, internal talent development and skills-based planning are a focus of discussion in many of the United Nations system organizations. Naturally, business models of United Nations system organizations vary considerably. Organizations with structured, regular reassignment instruments are in a better position to systematically develop internal talent, as are organizations that are not obliged to externally advertise every vacant position.

27. In order to steer learning and reskilling efforts, future workforce planning approaches need to pay greater attention to changes in skills demands. In particular, in technological areas and in management, different skills to the one currently in use may be required in the future. Further sections will elaborate more on the need to increase a focus on soft skills, in general, and people management skills, in particular. Currently, qualitative workforce planning seems to be at its infancy in the United Nations system, although rich structured data on available skills of United Nations personnel are already available today on open external platforms.

28. While the present employer attractiveness of United Nations system organizations, in particular for young people, may still leave room for improvement, it should be noted that the average number of applicants for United Nations system vacancies continues to be on the rise.

29. Current processes largely rely on a partially manual screening for formal eligibility, followed by a largely manual compilation of a longlist and subsequent written tests and interviews. It is clear that this approach will not be sustainable in the long term.

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[1] "Future of Work survey", in Young UN: Agents for Change, *Navigating to the Next U.N.: A Journey Full of Potential* (2019), annex 2.

III. Action areas for the future of work in the United Nations system

30.   Individual United Nations system organizations, as well as the system as a whole, have advanced their understanding of how to tackle the challenges described above through a number of fundamental discussions and initiatives. These include, among others:

(a)   The reform agenda of the Secretary-General, including the strategy on new technologies, as well as the reform initiatives of all member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB);

(b)   The CEB discussions on innovation, artificial intelligence and the future of learning and education, as prepared by High-level Committee on Programmes;

(c)   The work of the Global Commission on the Future of Work commissioned by the International Labour Organization, and the United Nations system-wide strategy on the future of work developed through the High-level Committee on Programmes.

31.   Against this background, the High-level Committee on Management has identified the need to discuss the implications of these developments and initiatives in a more comprehensive and integrated way, in order to determine key areas of action to ensure the future United Nations system workforce is adequately staffed, equipped, managed and supported.

32.   The recently published report of the Global Commission on the Future of Work, *Work for a Brighter Future*, is a main reference for the Committee's reflections on the future United Nations system workforce. The human-centred agenda proposed in the report is anchored in three pillars of action, namely:

(a)   **Increasing investment in people's capabilities**. This includes the call to embed lifelong learning, investing in support for people through future-of-work transitions and fostering gender equality;

(b)   **Increasing investment in the institutions of work**. This includes expanded time sovereignty and ensuring social dialogue as a public good;

(c)   **Increasing investment in decent and sustainable work**. This includes looking more at the design of national labour markets and the design of fiscal and accounting systems.

33.   The report of the Global Commission calls for particular attention to be paid to learning and development for staff to support continued employability, and to ensure conducive work environments and internal dialogue.

34.   In the sections below, suggested action areas for the future of work in the United Nations system are explored, namely: (a) amendments and revisions in desirable workforce composition, contractual arrangements and social protection; (b) agility, efficiency and innovation; and (c) enabling environment, culture and employee experience.

A. Future composition and management of the United Nations system workforce

Amendments and revisions in desirable workforce composition, contractual arrangements and social protection

35. The United Nations system is aimed at finding the right balance between a more stable, long-term career cadre at the heart of the independent international public service and more time-bound project staff to ensure operational agility and responsiveness. Both elements are critical, the first one in ensuring impartiality in order to gain trust among the various constituents and enhanced knowledge retention, and the second one in ensuring targeted service delivery for the mandates of Member States. It is worth having a discussion on what the adequate balance is for individual agencies and the system as a whole to ensure the best possible programme delivery, while also keeping in mind the volatility of funding and the changing expectations and requirements of the workforce. To what extent should and can funding be borne by the employing organization (through the granting of long-term contracts with the imperative to find alternative posts when time-bound assignments expire), and where should such risk be borne by the staff member through time-bound contracts, albeit with an adequate time horizon and management of expectations? And in what critical programmatic areas is a stable, long-term cadre a matter of programmatic necessity?

36. The results of the Young UN survey point to the fact that key motivational drivers on the contractual side consist of better ability to plan ahead and an enhanced portability of social security and benefits across organizations within and outside the United Nations system, in line with frequent notions of "portfolio careers" across various employers during the employment lifetime.

37. One of the main discussion areas for the future of the United Nations system workforce therefore constitutes finding the right organization-specific blend of contractual modalities and determining whether the existing ones are sufficient. This conversation is driven by the need for United Nations organizations to attract talent from outside of the system, sometimes for short terms or for the duration of projects. A project-based staff contract modality would enable those organizations that opt to use it to attract talent from the national public sector, academia, the private sector, etc. without a contractual framework or incentives for a longer-term career contract. Other stakeholders have argued that an additional modality would not be needed if a more rigorous administration of fixed-term arrangements were applied, to cater to their original intention as time-bound arrangements. Any new project-based modality would need some minimum standards around ethical labour practices, with an overarching framework for decent work in place. The requirements for such arrangements and their mindful implementation and use will need further reflection among the membership of the High-level Committee on Management. For field-based organizations, the discussions on the recruitment, use and development of local versus international staff, including a rethink of the underlying concept, are pertinent aspects in the light of enhanced required agility and better global talent management.

38. Elements for the Committee's reflection include:

(a) Recognizing the importance of a flexible set of contractual arrangements that still facilitate a consistent employee experience for the entire workforce;

(b) Defining what a modern delineation between local and international staff should look like;

(c) Considering whether a new contract modality for time-bound project work should be further explored and developed, in particular noting the emerging needs for the future of work and portfolio careers;

(d)   Identifying parameters and conditions to ensure the correct application of any new arrangements for their intended use, as a complementary alternative to the existing contractual solutions.

Reviewing the balance between recruitment, internal development and partnerships: sourcing the right people with the right skills

39.   While the United Nations system overall is seen as a good employer, it doesn't figure in the top ranks among graduates that constitute the workforce of the next generation in a range of countries. In a number of donor countries, in particular, the United Nations is not listed among the top employers at all. This raises the question of why that is the case and what the specific value proposition of the United Nations system as an employer may be. Research on the expectations of younger generations shows an increase of value-driven employment choices (where the United Nations has a clear advantage) but also a significant decrease in work-related international mobility and the search for a good cultural fit.[2]

40.   The inter-agency environment may potentially offer good opportunities for developing curricula and exchange modalities for development (stretch assignments, project assignments, inter-agency teams) for specific profession groups, and for utilizing talent pool approaches more broadly, beyond the management level. Some United Nations organizations have already started exploring partnership arrangements with external stakeholders as an effective means to bring in external talent and knowledge, including for shorter-term or project arrangements.

41.   Workforce planning of the future should not be confined to quantitative aspects of position planning. Rather, and in particular given the stated importance of soft skills, a skill- and competency-based planning component needs to be introduced, in alignment with external trends and demands. This is an area still in its infancy in the United Nations system. In partnership and collaboration between programme units, a methodology would have to be devised to define the need for specific skills (and headcounts) to deliver mandated programmes – to anticipate which roles are needed in which geographies, with which particular attributes in what numbers for how long. Addressing this issue will be an important underpinning for more targeted planning of learning, recruitment and partnership efforts. One possible avenue is to rely more systematically on self-reported information through external platforms. The underlying analytics tools allow for in-depth analysis of available, growing and in-demand skills in certain organizations, industries or regions. Developing a closer partnership with such external platforms would allow for such sources of data to be systematically tapped into. It should be noted that there may be some limitations on the applicability of such self-reporting through external platforms in some regions and segments of the typical United Nations workforce.

42.   Another approach would be to rely on internally available skills information, in particular as indicated in curricula vitae and the personal history forms of staff. The use of artificial intelligence tools by human resources is currently being piloted by some organizations and should be further explored to allow for more systematic analysis of information from applications. Those pilot projects show that there is an opportunity to reinvest the human time in improving relationships with candidates and employees.

43.   Elements for the Committee's reflection include:

(a)   Partnering with sources of outside expertise more closely to understand future skills;

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[2] Boston Consulting Group, "Decoding global talent", June 2018.

(b)   Developing internal skills databases;

(c)   Further expanding the use of artificial intelligence-based or similar digital data analysis tools;

(d)   Leveraging solutions for recognizing and developing future-proof soft skills;

(e)   Developing practical approaches to workforce planning;

(f)   Designing successful partnership arrangements.

B.   Agility, efficiency and innovation

Enhancing organizational agility

44.   Given the volatility in external factors, expected programme areas and related funding, it will be even more important in the future to ensure that organizations are able to adjust to those changes. Over time, the staffing size of organizations may vary for a few selected agencies (see figure VI).

Figure VI
Number of staff members of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations Children's Fund and the United Nations Development Programme, per year

Total number of staff records (thousands)
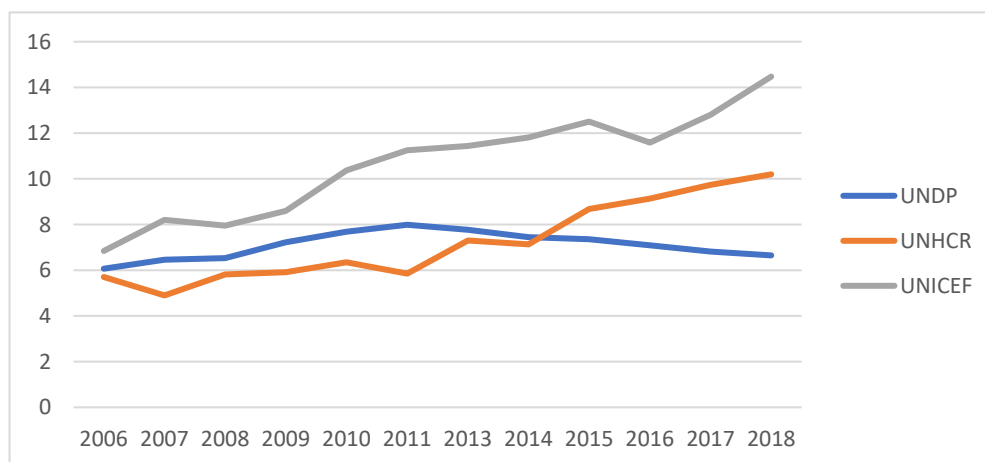
Source: Annual CEB human resources statistics.
Note: Data only include staff members with contracts valid for one year or longer.
Abbreviations: UNDP, United Nations Development Programme; UNHCR, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; UNICEF, United Nations Children's Fund.

45.   Many organizations have embarked in recent years on restructuring and transformation projects. Ensuring that the organizational structures are dynamic and fit for purpose, with the ability to provide surge capacity and to downsize or realign according to emerging priorities will be increasingly important. Understanding the emerging best practices of such restructuring and ensuring that organizations are able to exchange and learn from each other is a critical starting point for this reflection.

46.   Organizations may want to reflect on how to better use inter-agency mobility tools, including to establish surge capacity, and to create cross-organizational talent pools, rosters and professional groups. This practice may not only address agility

challenges but also contribute to cost-effective and mutually beneficial learning and career development approaches.

47. How to ensure that current administrative policies and processes become more agile and efficient, using automation and artificial intelligence as complementary tools, is a question that also merits the Committee's discussion and exchanges of experience. Pooling the abilities of multi-skilled staff to ensure workload balancing and rapid allocation to priority projects, the efficient use of standby partnership arrangements in crisis situations and the general acceleration of processes also merit deeper consideration, as do the issues of revising policies from a risk aversion and compliance culture to controlled risk management. Where possible, joint resource pools for specific functions and professions could be tested.

48. Elements for the Committee's include:

(a) Assessing what good practices exist in the United Nations system for policies and methodologies for transformation, restructuring, managing surge capacity and downsizing;

(b) Seizing opportunities for automation, streamlining and the use of complementary technology in relation to organizational agility;

(c) Analysing obstacles or disincentives for organizational agility that merit policy reviews from a risk management perspective;

(d) Leveraging mobility within and outside of the United Nations system to enhance organizational agility.

Use of digital technologies to enhance efficiency and user experience

49. The rise of artificial intelligence and cognitive solutions, in general, together with the further mainstreaming of mobile and could-based solutions provide ample opportunities for not only enhancing process efficiency significantly but also for enhancing and customizing user experience and establishing real two-way communication channels within the organizations.

50. Beyond the incubating or piloting of innovations, a solid business case and investment rationale needs to be worked out. The example of recruitment may illustrate such a case for change. While for several key positions there is anecdotal evidence that it is difficult to find suitable candidates, the average number of applicants for vacancies in the United Nations system continues to be on the rise, as previously illustrated.

51. Earlier findings in the area of recruitment point to increasing numbers of applications that call for the enhanced use of technology to make assessment and selection processes both more efficient and more robust.

52. Artificial intelligence-based and other digital tools are being used by certain agencies, and the exploration of further expansion may be useful to not only automate part of the longlisting process but also to implement a more structured assessment of candidates. While the implementation of advanced testing and piloting, in particular, may initially require investment, it is clear that from a risk management perspective, such an approach would be suitable, and it would also underpin any efforts to create more inter-agency talent pools and mobility.

53. Elements for the Committee's reflection include:

(a) Launching innovative pilots using digital tools and artificial intelligence to enhance selection processes, taking into account the experiences of early adopter agencies;

    (b)   Engaging in joint activities for enhanced assessment and selection approaches, including at the inter-agency level;
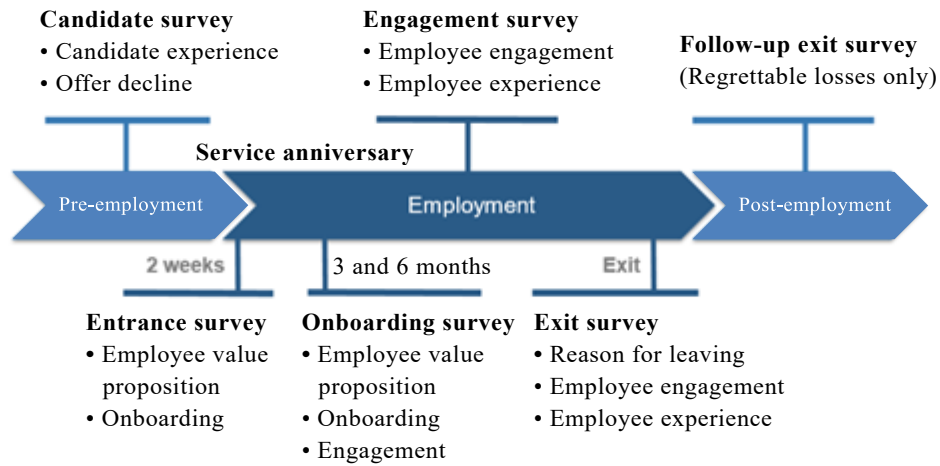
    (c)   Identifying priority processes in which piloting of artificial intelligence-based and digital tools may be warranted.

C. The future of employee experience

54.   Much has been said about the different expectations of a younger workforce and the centrality of human interaction in the era of artificial intelligence. It is part of the everyday experience that digital tools are increasingly used to extrapolate personal preferences for targeted offers by private companies, and the levels of user experience known in personal life are starting to be expected in a work environment, as well. United Nations system organizations have unique opportunities to become employers of choice, not only for younger generations, by upholding their universal values and mission, fostering an environment of appreciative diversity in the broadest sense, including striving for gender parity, and by modelling exemplary workplace ethics free from harassment of any kind, bullying and abuse of power.

55.   Traditionally, human resources offices have addressed such issues as employee engagement, culture, performance management, rewards, and learning and career development as separate, independent topics, with solutions designed and delivered by different human resources divisions and accompanied by a set of tools and programmes to drive and measure the impact. Recent research suggests, however, that employees today see the picture differently. Starting as potential hires and recruits, employees look at everything that happens at work as an integrated experience that affects daily life in and outside of the workplace, including overall physical, emotional, professional and financial well-being. Candidates assess future employers from the very start of the talent acquisition experience and make quick judgments about what life will be like for them in the organization, based on how they interact with the organization during the recruiting cycle. In fact, a positive employee experience starts before a candidate even joins an organization and moves through all the stages of recruitment, individual growth and development in various jobs until he or she leaves and becomes an alumnus or alumna, recommending the organization as an employer of choice for the next generation, starting all over again in an eternity loop (see figure VII).

Figure VII
Systematic approaches to measuring employee experience across the employment life cycle

Candidate survey
• Candidate experience
• Offer decline

Engagement survey
• Employee engagement
• Employee experience

Follow-up exit survey
(Regrettable losses only)

Service anniversary

Pre-employment   Employment   Post-employment

2 weeks   3 and 6 months   Exit

Entrance survey
• Employee value
  proposition
• Onboarding

Onboarding survey
• Employee value
  proposition
• Onboarding
• Engagement

Exit survey
• Reason for leaving
• Employee engagement
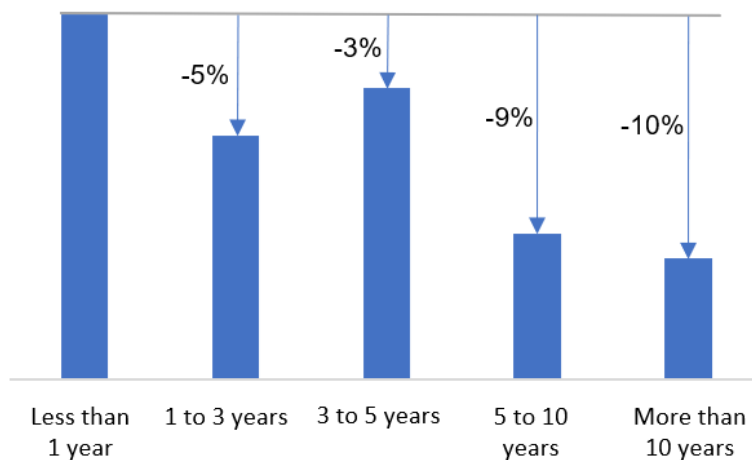• Employee experience

Source: Aon Hewitt.

56.   Each person working for the United Nations system contributes to shaping an employee experience: employees, colleagues, managers, leaders and human resources. In many ways, this experience is shaped by the organizational culture. As such, it is critical to ensure that employee experience is designed through the lens of people in the United Nations system workforce, with respect to the alignment of their jobs with the purpose of the organization, the development and growth opportunities employees are afforded, how they are rewarded and how their well-being is cared for, the work environment, their perception of fairness, diversity and inclusion, and authenticity among management and leadership.

57.   At present, the employee experience, as expressed through employee engagement measurements, seems to negatively correlate with tenure in United Nations system organizations (see figure VIII). This situation calls for dedicated discussions around the enabling environment of the future.

Figure VIII
Engagement variation across the United Nations system, based on length of service

-5%   -3%   -9%   -10%

Less than
1 year   1 to 3 years   3 to 5 years   5 to 10
years   More than
10 years

Source: Agenda Consulting and CEB cross-organizational engagement study of the United
    Nations system.

Building an enabling work environment and driving employee experience

58. Employee experience is central to how people engage and deliver for the organizations they serve. A positive employee experience leads to an engaged employee who is fulfilled in his or her role, has a good work-life balance, gives to the organization, and serves the mandate. When an employer takes better care of its staff, they are better equipped to focus on what matters most. Key elements of an enabling work environment include a collaborative and innovation-friendly workplace culture, and flexibility in working arrangements.

59. A recent Young UN survey raised issues that do not, in fact, pertain specifically to a younger generation, but are shared by colleagues across backgrounds, locations or age groups, as evidenced by the results of many staff engagement surveys throughout the United Nations system.

60. Colleagues who have recently joined the United Nations are asked to promote a culture of collaboration. Only 26 per cent of survey respondents are currently satisfied with the culture of collaboration in their organization, while 31 per cent do not feel empowered to share and collaborate within their own organization, 50 per cent do not feel empowered to share and collaborate across the United Nations system and 51 per cent do not feel empowered to share and collaborate beyond the United Nations system. Given the expectation that career opportunities within the employee's own organization are limited, such collaboration is seen as a crucial component for career development.

61. Flexible work arrangements are in high demand and are highly appreciated: a good third of respondents are using teleworking within the duty stations and a quarter engage in co-working or use flexitime. There is a strong desire to expand flexible work arrangements to work outside the duty station and to use flexitime to balance professional and personal commitments. However, the lack of awareness and insufficient availability of such options and the lack of support by supervisors are seen as key barriers.

62. Closely related to this topic is another key aspect of the employee experience: the ease with which employees are able to do their work, which encompasses a range of factors, from the location and comfort of the workplace to how the physical work environment is organized. Research on factors that affect whether employees actually want to be at the workplace shows that it is less about bean bags and free food, such as Google provides, and more about how much opportunity for informal collaboration a modern workplace offers. In fact, in the case of knowledge workers, whether they have a choice of where they do their work is increasingly important. Also, empowering employees with possibilities to manage where, when and how they work best is a strong trend in the modern workplace that increases ownership, accountability and productivity.

63. Strongly related to this aspect is the technology experience. In their personal lives, employees are wirelessly connected with multiple devices at the same time, offering a seamless and usually smooth user experience before they come to work and after they return home. They would reject and replace any technology that did not do so. At work, the experience is not always quite as smooth, as they must deal with a variety of challenges, often making the 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. technology experience less attractive than the 5 to 9 p.m. experience at home. Increasing the awareness of this impact on the employee experience is essential in today's competitive talent market.

64. Almost two thirds of respondents to the Young UN survey indicated that they do not consider that their organization has a culture of innovation and risk-taking, and 38 per cent feel that they are not encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things. These results suggest that further action is needed to address these areas

in order to avoid young colleagues with strong motivation and alignment to United Nations values becoming disengaged over time. Cross-organizational analysis among United Nations organizations clearly shows a correlation between age and tenure, hierarchical level and engagement. Clearly, the call here is to mainstream innovation, rather than reserving it a place in major, often top-down projects and initiatives.

65. Lastly, 52 per cent of survey respondents noted that they are lacking career support. Career guidance by supervisors, mentoring (formal and informal) and professional career coaching are considered important by more than 70 per cent of respondents, yet are not available in most cases. These results emphasize the need for better relationships between managers and employees and show that there is a need for more investment in people management and coaching skills across the board.

66. It should be noted that expectations and priorities of staff may vary, and there is no "one size fits all" solution. This point is illustrated by research done by Boston Consulting Group.[3] The importance attributed to individual work preferences (such as good relationships with colleagues or supervisors, good work-life balance, learning and career development opportunities, job security, compensation, and work content and recognition) varies largely across countries of origin. The challenge, therefore, is to provide the necessary flexibility in managing the workplace and work conditions to ensure an optimal employee experience for a diverse, inclusive, intergenerational and multinational workforce.

67. Elements for the Committee's reflection include:

(a) Assessing good practices and practical steps to further promote flexible working arrangements, including the necessary technological underpinning for virtual teamwork and the requisite culture and leadership support;

(b) Devising adequate approaches to implement more systematic skills enhancement and career advice, even within limited budgetary envelopes.

Enhancing leadership performance, engagement and organizational culture

68. In addition to the "harder" factors such as workplace design, flexible working arrangements and other human resources policies, active shaping of the culture of organizations and leveraging the potential of higher staff engagement requires regular tracking of organizational culture and engagement levels, as well as acting systematically upon results. Currently, not all United Nations system organizations even conduct regular staff engagement surveys, while good industry practices suggest a more systematic monitoring of the overall engagement and holistic approach to employee experience. Increasingly, the norm in the external world is to look into more agile pulse surveys, frequently run for relevant subgroups of the organization, and for instant actionable feedback rather than regular large surveys.

69. When conducting cross-organizational analysis on engagement, organizational culture and perception of leadership, it is important to understand what the commonalities across organizations are and where differences persist. Among the commonalties across a range of United Nations organizations are the systematic differences in engagement levels between female and male staff, a pattern that is reportedly inverse to what is mostly observed in private sector organizations. Furthermore, there are even more palpable differences in engagement levels between internationally recruited staff and locally recruited staff groups, and the engagement gap between headquarters locations and field locations is even larger. A management approach that is committed to enhancing staff engagement will therefore, in order to be credible, need to look further into these trends and to put a dedicated focus on the

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[3] Boston Consulting Group, "Decoding global talent" (see footnote 3).

work environment and culture for women working in the United Nations system, as well as in particular locations (such as headquarters) and contract modalities (see figure IX).

Figure IX
Common engagement patterns across various United Nations system agencies
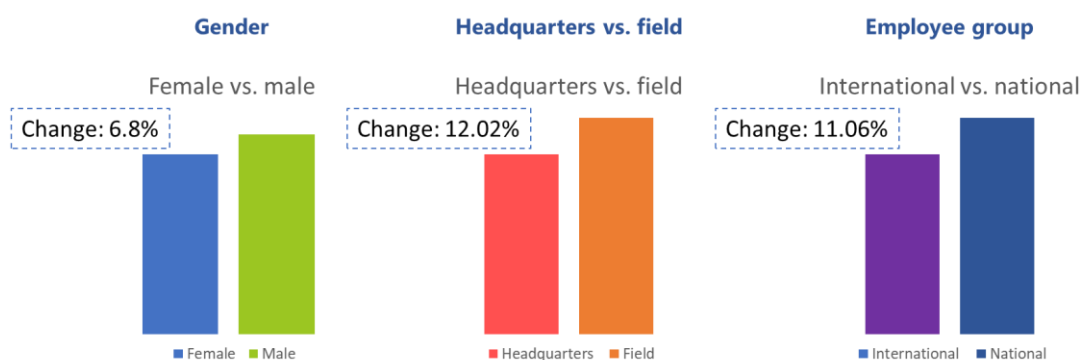
Source: Joint analysis by CEB human resources network and Agenda Consulting.

Note: Initial data set including nine organizations: International Labour Organization, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Office for Project Services, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Secretariat and World Food Programme.

70.   While these commonalities are striking and indicative of common challenges for an enabling work environment, it should be noted that there are significant differences in survey participation rates. In the future, a focused experience exchange among the management of different agencies on adequate interventions to improve engagement, employee experience and corporate culture may benefit from larger sets of harmonized survey items that allow for direct benchmarking. Some agencies have demonstrated that systematic and inclusive action planning and implementation and strong sponsorship from the executive head may yield high participation rates in follow-up surveys and improved engagement over time. Further in-depth discussion may be needed on how to further tailor the measurement and improvement of staff engagement to individual organizations.

71.   With a younger generation entering the workforce, different expectations with regard to feedback, management style and internal communication are being raised. The results of the Young UN survey support this trend.

72.   About 45 per cent of respondents feel that they do not have a voice of opportunity to shape decisions in their organization, while 53 per cent indicate that they would like to have the opportunity to provide formal upward feedback to their supervisor and over one third would like to have more feedback on their performance from their supervisor. Clearly, a culture of continuous dialogue is expected and embraced by younger United Nations staff. Self-reflection and openness to feedback is expected, including from executive management. Active internal two-way communication will have to be a focus area in order to maintain and enhance employee engagement.

73.   Sound people management practices are the foundation of a good employee experience, and they depend, to a large extent, on a mutually productive and engaging relationship between the manager and the staff member, supported by human resources. Achieving good people management also relies on structures being in place around performance management, development, learning and career planning that

foster such a relationship with managers, which, in turn, enables staff to grow and develop in order to deliver results for the organization.

74. Given the holistic nature of the employee experience and good people management, managers play a key role in fostering staff engagement. It is for this reason that people management must be seen as a critical corporate priority. People management must be prioritized in operations rather than being something that happens at the end of the day, when all other operational priorities have been completed and everyone has gone home. Good people management is, by its very nature, a partnership in which manager and employee lean into the relationship, supported by human resources. If this doesn't happen or if relationships go wrong, the price is high, resulting in tensions and stress in the workplace at best, and serious misconduct at worst. For the United Nations system to empower managers to step into this responsibility, significant investment in improving the people management skills of current and aspiring managers must be a priority, alongside enabling more junior colleagues the space and abilities to actively co-create the relationship with their managers.

75. Elements for the Committee's reflection include:

(a) Opportunities to develop a broader base of common survey items for enhanced inter-agency benchmarking and experience exchange;

(b) Suitable approaches and pilots to move from or complement regular all-staff surveys to pulse surveys, gathering immediate actionable feedback;

(c) Rethinking of investment in better people management skills, setting of common standards for people management and prioritization of people management as equally important to technical skills and experience;

(d) The importance of future leadership competencies being valued and prioritized in selection, recruitment, performance assessment and development.

Annex

Summary of elements for reflection by the High-level Committee on Management

Future composition and management of the United Nations system workforce

How can the United Nations system align its contractual arrangements and social protections for the future of work?

The Committee was invited to reflect on the following:

(a)   The importance of a flexible set of contractual arrangements that still facilitate a consistent employee experience for the entire workforce;

(b)   What a modern delineation between "local" and "international" should look like;

(c)   Whether a new contract modality to support time-bound project work should be further explored and developed, in particular noting the emerging needs for the future of work and portfolio careers;

(d)   The identification of parameters and conditions to ensure the correct application of any suggested new arrangements for their intended use and as a complementary alternative to the existing contractual solutions.

How can the United Nations system achieve the right mix between external and internal recruitment and sourcing the right skills?

The Committee was invited to reflect on the following:

(a)   What practical approaches to workforce planning exist and can be expanded;

(b)   What successful partnership arrangements exist and can be expanded;

(c)   How can the United Nations system:

(i)   Partner with sources of outside expertise more closely to understand future skills;

(ii)   Develop internal skills databases;

(iii)   Further expand the use of AI-based or similar digital data analysis tools;

(iv)   Leverage solutions for recognizing and developing future-proof soft skills.

Agility, efficiency and innovation

How can the United Nations system enhance organizational agility?

The Committee was invited to reflect on the following:

(a)   What good practices for policies and methodologies for transformation, restructuring, managing surge capacity and downsizing exist in the United Nations system?

(b)   How is the United Nations system seizing opportunities for automation, streamlining and the use of complementary technology in relation to organizational agility?

(c)   What concrete policy areas can act as obstacles or disincentives for organizational agility and merit policy reviews from a risk-based angle?

(d)   How can mobility within and outside the United Nations system be better leveraged to enhance organizational agility?

How can the United Nations system use digital tools such as artificial intelligence to drive efficiency gains?

The Committee was invited to reflect on the following:

(a)   Innovative pilots using digital tools and artificial intelligence to enhance selection processes, taking into account the experiences of early adopter agencies;

(b)   The appetite to engage in joint activities for enhanced assessment and selection approaches, including at the inter-agency level;

(c)   Priority processes in which the piloting of artificial intelligence-based and digital tools may be warranted.

Use of digital technologies to enhance efficiency and user experience

How can the United Nations system build an enabling work environment that supports the employee experience?

The Committee was invited to reflect on the following:

(a)   Good practices and practical steps to further promote flexible working arrangements, including the necessary technological underpinning for virtual teamwork and the requisite culture and leadership support;

(b)   Adequate approaches to implement more systematic skills enhancement and career advice, even within limited budgetary envelopes.

How can the United Nations system enhance leadership performance, engagement and organizational culture?

The Committee was invited to reflect on the following:

(a)   Its desire to work towards a broader base of common survey items for enhanced inter-agency benchmarking and experience exchange;

(b)   Suitable approaches and pilots to move from or complement regular all-staff surveys to pulse surveys, gathering immediate actionable feedback;

(c)   Investment in better people management skills, the setting of common standards for people management and the prioritization of people management as equally important to technical skills and field experience;

(d)   The importance of future leadership competencies being valued and prioritized in selection, recruitment, performance assessment and development.

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