



Staff survey 2016: it's not enough to observe, we need to act!

The disappointing results of the 2016 survey of the staff of the Commission, Offices and Executive Agencies: Based on the findings, the Commission must act!

The results of the 2016 opinion poll of Commission staff were published without fanfare on 18 October 2016. It is true that, despite a favourable presentation made by the consultant in the 2016 report, the reality is more complex and less positive.

Although some DGs see their staff as being more "engaged", many services are stagnating or declining. Above all, for most of the questions, you can see the positive support of the staff slipping back slowly but surely towards indifference or resignation. U4U suggests an analysis and lessons to be drawn from this disappointing survey for the Commission.

The opinion poll by and of the Commission's staff (called the "Speak Up Staff Survey 2016 – We listen, We care, We act") was released relatively discreetly by the Commission as the results remain average.

It even looks as though the key indicators, such as "staff engagement", are tending to decline, although participation in the survey across the whole of the Commission rose significantly (from 40% in 2013 to 49% in 2014 and 51% in 2016). This increased participation, meaning that more than 20,000 colleagues responded, is a good sign, and the DG HR must be congratulated for extending the consultation periods and encouraging staff to take part.

Glass half full or glass half empty? This analysis attempts to focus on the main results and read between the lines to bring out the basic trends. It should be noted, however, that the methodology of this survey remains open to question. On the one hand, some questions are vague and/or repetitive and new questions appear with little added value. On the other hand, the groups of questions in composite indicators are sometimes unconvincing. Finally, the 2016 report does not allow easy comparisons with 2013 and 2014, as it does not use consistent indicators from one year to the next, and new data appear or disappear without explanation. As a result, it is clear that the consultant responsible for the report tends to highlight the positive

elements of the consultation and shelve those aspects that are less positive for the Commission, which unfortunately means that the report loses its position of impartiality.

1) Staff engagement levels: situations vary according to the DG/Office/Executive Agency

The staff engagement level is a composite indicator composed of the combined answers to 7 questions. The results show a worrying fall in staff engagement from 70.8% in 2013 to 65.4% in 2014 and 64.3% in 2016: a loss of 7 percentage points in 3 years, although it was particularly severe between 2013 and 2014 and less so over the last two years.

If we look at the 7 indicator questions, we can see that the question with the highest score (84%) is the one concerning the clarity of objectives (Q: "I have a good understanding of what is expected of me at work"), while the question with the lowest score (40%) is the one relating to professional development by the management hierarchy (Q: "my line manager helps me identify my training and career needs"). We can see here something that will appear throughout the survey: an implicit – and sometimes strong – criticism of management, not only at head of unit level, but also at director and director-general level.

Clearly, the top ten among the DGs commands attention. Apart from the classic case of the EPSC, composed of a few select temporary agents hardly likely to be critical of the system (and thus confirming the results of the ex-BEPA in 2013 and 2014), the DGs with the most engaged staff are: 1) SRD-MOVE-ENER (75%), 2) SCIC (74%), 3) FISMA (73%). At the other end of the scale, the worst is 1) the Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency in Luxembourg (CHAFAEA) with 55%, 2) OLAF (56%), followed by 3) NEAR and DEVCO (58%) and 4) PMO, OIL and ENER (59%).

Also noteworthy are the substantial decreases at JUST (from 71% to 62% between 2014 and 2016), MARE (from 73% to 67%), ENV (from 71% to 66%), ECHO (from 68% to 61%), OIB (from 65% to 60%), and NEAR (ex ELARG, from 66% to 58%).

On the other hand, we should note among the positive results the small SRD-MOVE-ENER service (from 65% to 75% between 2014 and 2016), OP (from 62% to 69%), HR (from 65% to 68%), REGIO (from 66% to 69%), REA (from 64% to 67%), EAC (from 60% to 64%) and INEA (from 63% to 68%).

Also evident are the continued poor scores among the Offices and the large DGs such as RTD, CNECT and DEVCO.

Looking at these results, it therefore seems clear that nothing is a foregone conclusion here, and that the right policies can have a positive impact on the engagement of the Commission's staff.

Finally, the report highlights two other interesting pieces of information. Firstly, and unsurprisingly, it notes that engagement falls over the years: newcomers are more enthusiastic than their more senior colleagues. However, it also quite rightly notes that "the Commission

must ask itself about the "split" that occurs after a few years in the job, when engagement falls significantly" (page 15). Secondly, the report notes that, while the engagement of officials is about average (around 65%), that of contract agents is only 61%: an obvious problem in view of the fact that the freeze on the number of permanent posts is long term and the increased use of contract agents also risks being long term.

2) Drop in satisfaction, uncertainty about the future and low legitimacy of the management chain

The report also ponders the "factors" of engagement and analyses three main groups of composite factors: the management chain (which influences 48% of engagement), individual responsibilities (20%) and working in teams (15%, the rest representing 17% for 4 different factors). It is therefore clear that the management factor accounts for almost half of staff engagement: however, the report observes a certain weakness in this area, noting the inadequate support by management in motivating staff and developing their skills.

With regard to the Commission as a place of work, the report is fairly positive, noting for example that 75% of those consulted "take pride in their work" (compared to 80% three years ago). However, to questions concerning the efficient allocation of resources, support is more lukewarm: only 28% of those consulted believe that "human resources match the amount of work to be done" and 49% do not agree with this statement. The open comments lead one to think that the quality and involvement of the management in the human resources policy are far from optimal.

Interestingly, some of the questions on well-being at work have scores that are more positive in 2016 than they were in 2014 (although less than in 2013). Nevertheless, some profound changes are appearing. While the total percentage of those who are generally in agreement with the statement "there is a pleasant atmosphere at work" remains stable (from 75% in 2013 to 72% in 2016), there is a significant fall in those who agree (from 49% to 37% between 2013 and 2016) and a corresponding increase in those who "slightly agree" (from 26% to 35%). In other words, in three years around 10% of those surveyed are less convinced of the "pleasant" nature of the Commission as a place of work. This trend is very clear in all the questions asked. Accordingly, for the statement "I have a good balance between my working life and my private life", those who agree fell from 40% to 28%, those who "slightly agree" rose from 26 to 29% and those who disagree or barely agree rose from 23% to 27%. The basis of agreement on the Commission as a pleasant place of work is crumbling slowly but surely. This is also clear from the crucial question "I feel that the Commission cares about my well-being", for which favourable responses ("agree" and "slightly agree") fell from 49% to 35% between 2013 and 2016, while the unfavourable responses ("disagree", "barely agree") rose from 30% to 38%.

As regards the assessment of those consulted about their own work, "the satisfaction with job content and tasks" remains at quite low levels. Only 24% of those surveyed "agree" with this statement, while 51% only "slightly agree". Although only 11% of those consulted disagree or barely agree with this statement, the fact remains that satisfaction with work at the Commission remains limited. As with the previous area, the erosion of positive support is substantial: to each question on the quality of personal work, the fall in the number of those who agree is around 10

percentage points between 2013 and 2016, while the number of those who "slightly agree" increases proportionally. This trend of a decrease in engagement is visible for each of the panel's questions. For example, to the statement "I feel that my opinion is valued", only 61% responded favourably in 2016 ("agree" and "slightly agree") against 73% in 2013 but, above all, the number of people who "agree" fell from 44% to 30% while those who "disagree" or "barely agree" rose from 14% to 21%. Even more notable is the mistrust regarding a management set-up that does not encourage professional development, either because there is too much work and no time for training, or because management is not competent or interested in this area.

What about the impression of the Commission's staff regarding their future? The report notes soberly that "this is an area with very low scores – most of the Commission's staff do not feel optimistic about their professional future". The report includes the biggest drop in the scores: "I feel I am able to manage my career choices and decide on my own career development" (- 9 percentage points) (page 58). However, although the officials are again more positive in this area, it is the contract agents, especially GF IV, who remain the most pessimistic. This is a clear message to the Commission: the fact that most contract agents are on fixed-term contracts does not mean there is no need to give them hope of a career and/or professional development. Unfortunately, the present negotiations on contract agents with fixed-term contracts largely ignore this reality.

The thirteen questions on the management hierarchy at head-of-unit level give an image of stability between 2013 and 2016. In broad terms, the heads of unit receive around 50% to 60% positive support from their staff, according to the questions, albeit with around 22% to 37% who "agree", while 28% to 33% "slightly agree". The fact that the legitimacy of the heads of unit seems rather fragile poses a major problem for the Commission. From this perspective, the latest GIDs on heads of unit do not call into question the lead position of the Director General in the appointment of heads of unit, a position that often leads to questionable appointments, as they are made exclusively on the basis of political and/or personal considerations and not at all based on the ability to manage staff: hence the pattern of assistants to directors-general or cabinet members becoming heads of unit despite having no experience of staff management, something that remains a matter of considerable concern among the staff.

Staff opinions on senior management vary little, but once again remain lukewarm. Half of those surveyed believe that senior management give clear guidelines, while a quarter remain convinced of the opposite, and another quarter are indifferent. One-third of staff disagrees with the statements "senior management shows that listening to staff is important" and "senior management practices communication in both directions". In most of the questions, more or less 40% of the staff support senior management, with a movement between 2013 and 2016 away from those who "agree" towards those who only "slightly agree".

Finally, the response to the last question shows that 26% of the staff surveyed were "very satisfied to work at the Commission", while 43% were "satisfied to work at the Commission", i.e. a total of 69%. Certainly a positive image, but certainly not the very positive image that an exemplary administration that inspires its staff would like to convey.

In other words, there is a degree of trivialisation of the Commission, but above all a workforce that increasingly questions itself about the missions and practices of the institution. In this regard, the real erosion of the category of those who "agree" in favour of those who "slightly agree" marks a basic tendency that shows the growing doubt of the staff on the Commission's ability to lead, inspire and manage its staff. We are a long way here from the cliché of the European Commission as an elite administration populated with staff devoted to the European cause.

3) What lessons can be drawn from this survey?

The relative silence surrounding the release of the results of this survey leads one to think that there will be no central initiative to remedy the problems identified. The reaction is rather to ask each DG to find local solutions to the problems of motivation. This raises a policy problem, as it is clear, as suggested below, that this survey merits a policy-based follow-up at the level of the DG HR. However, it is also a problem of action, because, as we know all too well, at local level the Directors General are also in the habit of handing the matter over to the Directors, who in turn pass the buck to the heads of unit to remotivate the troops. We have seen that this has often failed in the past. The clumsy attempts at getting staff at the units to participate in solutions when the problem is wrongly stated and/or has other causes, while the legitimacy of the management hierarchy can never be questioned, consolidate the unease. Thus we have seen Directors organising "away days" in a disaster, forcing the units to hold joint breakfasts or asking some staff to suggest working improvements in reports that are quickly buried. These are usually no more than empty gestures that fool nobody, hence the major inertia that has been observed.

There is even a risk that the non-disastrous results of 2016 compared to 2014 reinforce the impression of the management within the Commission that, in spite of everything, the staff is "resilient": so why change a staff policy that is, if not supported, at least tolerated and not openly criticised? This would be a great pity when some DGs have demonstrated that staff engagement and motivation could increase between two surveys. Nothing is a foregone conclusion; there are numerous examples of success that we can learn from.

U4U believes that the following steps must be taken to improve the report resulting from the staff survey and its use to create a better staff policy for the Commission:

- 1) The preparation of the report on the survey results should be widened to include staff representatives within the framework of a social dialogue that makes it possible to establish a joint diagnosis.
- 2) The report should include a section on the different categories of staff (AST/SC, AST, AD, AC, AT, END) in order to diagnose the problems specific to certain careers more effectively.
- 3) The report should contain an annex with a DG-by-DG analysis to supplement the overall diagnosis with suitable local diagnoses (a poorly conducted reorganisation, for example, can have a very negative influence on opinion polls). Contrary to current practice, the detailed results

of the survey must be made available to staff in their respective DGs to ensure they are fully informed.

4) The substantial staff cuts have undoubtedly impacted significantly on the disappointing results of the staff survey. This staff reduction policy should therefore be ended as quickly as possible and the missions of the DGs, offices and executive agencies should be reviewed by applying negative priorities to be defined by joint consultation, incorporating staff suggestions as much as possible.

5) The relatively low level of staff support for management leads one to think that the systematic use of 360° evaluation tools for heads of unit, Directors and Directors General would make it possible in numerous cases to anticipate problems, and even to prevent or mitigate the negative effects of harmful situations. These tools must be used intelligently in the collective interest of the services.

6) Better staff engagement should be a routine objective of the Directorates General in their Annual Management Plan and should feature in detailed plans to be implemented by the new "Business Correspondents" in each DG.

7) The "talent management" policy must be reviewed and adapted to meet staff expectations more fully. The mobility policy within the Commission should also be reviewed, identifying transferable jobs and skills, especially for certain categories (ASTs and 55 + for example), making it voluntary, and providing better staff management training for present and future heads of unit.

Everything seems to indicate that the ball is in the court of the Directors General, who are responsible going forward, in a race between the DGs, for improving staff well-being and increasing positive feedback. For this to work, and to avoid sterile competition and artificial and poorly coordinated policies, it would also be useful if they had the support of the DG HR in their analyses and actions and if they were given a clear run at a social dialogue in favour of collective and transparent long-term solutions for each DG/Office/Executive Agency and across the Commission.

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