

68th Session: Agenda item 134
Secretary-General's Report on Flexible Workplace
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Mr. Chairman, Distinguished delegates,

I am pleased to introduce to you the Secretary-General's report on the Implementation of Flexible Workplace at the United Nations Headquarters. This report is submitted for your review pursuant to General Assembly resolution 67/254. The General Assembly noted the initiative of the Secretariat to commission a report on the application of flexible workplace strategies and working arrangement and looked forward to receiving the report at the main part of its 68th session.

Flexible Workplace is the term that describes arrangements of physical space, technology, human resources and other programs that support a flexible and mobile way of working. It takes various forms. Most common among them are: telecommuting which allows work through alternate worksites, sharing a common desk or workstation; hotelling which involves working in multiple buildings depending on availability; and hot-desking which increases the number of staff supported by a given building by using non-dedicated work stations.

The report draws upon international trends and lessons. Flexible workplace is not simply a matter of space management but a holistic arrangement of physical space, information and communication technology, human resources and other support programs. It must be emphasized that the successful implementation of flexible working requires reconfiguration of workspace, enhanced information technology support and revised human resource policies. As best practices demonstrate, it cannot be achieved quickly but requires a prudent, phased approach to implementation and a gradual adaptation to evolving work practices and needs. This should include a program of robust internal

communication, involving consultations and training programmes, making use of internal work arrangement review, focus groups and the deployment of test environments.

The implementation of flexible working, if successful, can achieve increases in productivity and efficiency, and greater collaboration and interaction in the workplace, enhancement of team work and reduction of real estate requirements and costs. However, if we approach it mechanically, without a prudently phased introduction and without adapting it to the specific circumstances of staff performing different functions, flexible working arrangements might damage staff morale, productivity and efficiency and could carry a reputation risk for the Organization. The prudent approach is particularly important in an organization like the United Nations, where diverse job functions and cultural backgrounds come together.

A brief and limited study on space utilization at headquarters was conducted by sampling six floors in the Secretariat and DC1 building in the last week of this July. The utilization observations were conducted to determine how each staff makes use of the individually allocated workspace throughout the work day. It was observed to what extent staff move in and out, either working at their desk, attending formal and ad-hoc meetings, or interacting with colleagues outside his or her workspace. The records were kept on an hourly basis over four days and found that on average, individually assigned workspaces were used at an overall rate of 50%, ranging from a high at 70% down to 30% at certain times of the day. I understand that these percentages are typical of organizations that have not adopted flexible working policies. The preliminary study concluded that the sampled floors would be able to accommodate a greater population density.

We are not certain if such a utilization rate is representative throughout the Secretariat. For instance, while staff providing substantive support to intergovernmental or expert committees tend to be out of the office during most of the regular office hours, other functions may be performed more consistently at a specific workspace. If a more comprehensive study at UN headquarters were to confirm that space utilization on an hourly basis is approximately 50% across all work spaces, then space could be utilized

more efficiently by implementing flexible working, for example through desk-sharing and other arrangements. Industry practices suggest that the resulting space savings from such measures could be up to 25%.

However, two significant factors need to be considered that are likely to impact the overall potential for space savings at UN Headquarters.

i) As regards the physical environment, flexible workplace needs to be implemented holistically through configuring a range of spaces better suited to flexible working. This would include designing a variety of meeting and common areas and spaces for collaborative working, and others for private focused working. It would take time and resources to implement such changes, particularly in existing premises, be they UN-owned or leased.

ii) The actual space savings that may be achieved depend on the specific organizational context of the UN Secretariat. Further detailed assessments are required on the extent to which flexible working and particularly teleworking can be applied based on the operational needs, required IT investment, staff populations and organizational entities of the different divisions and sections of the UN.

In light of the information at hand, the Secretariat is revising its planning target to 20% space savings with respect to the existing workspace planning figure of 220 square feet per person in the context of considering long term accommodation needs at NYHQ. I would like to underline that this is a planning target and that the speed and extent of its implementation require careful consideration of the work practices performed by different groups of staff and the specificities of the respective buildings including existing ones. Above all, close staff consultation is essential for successful implementation.

The report identifies two main tracks for further action. The Secretariat will:

i) initiate a programme of internal communication and consultations with staff and management to achieve buy-in for the initiative and,

ii) develop a business case for the implementation of flexible working at the United Nations.

As indicated in the report, the Secretary-General recognizes the importance of a comprehensive study needed to develop the business case for a holistic implementation of flexible working. To be comprehensive, the study should give sufficient time to observe space utilization at different periods of the year, engage with all departments and offices to fully capture their requirements, incorporate these into the flexible workplace solutions. We have to conduct some test and pilot environments for flexible working. Consequently the Secretary-General anticipates that this study, to be meaningful, will approximately take six to nine months to complete.

The Secretary-General invites the General Assembly to take note of the report and, in light of the need for a comprehensive study, to request the Secretary General to submit a further report to the main session of the 69th General Assembly containing a detailed business case for the implementation of flexible working at the United Nations.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

Allow me to close with a few words on the timelines for further work to be undertaken by the Secretariat. Solid and thorough analysis is required for the business case on Flexible Workplace. Multiple dimensions need to be addressed, including the Human Resources policy framework, ICT requirements, and the set up of our facilities. We want to learn from Industry Best Practices and need to gather a reliable data set that reflects our current realities and explores future opportunities. None of this can be done in a rigid one size fits all approach: We need to engage Departments and offices to ascertain their specific operational needs and work styles, also taking into account fluctuating workloads at different times of the year.

In order to submit a business case report to the first resumed session to the General assembly through the ACABQ, we need to finalize the draft by the end of this year, which gives us too little time to conduct a comprehensive business case review. You will appreciate that with this scope of work before us, the Secretariat will not be in a position to produce a comprehensive business case in time for the first resumed session of the 68th General Assembly.

Equally, I hope you would appreciate it that it would be too early to expect a detailed assessment of the potential impact of Umoja and a Future Service Delivery Model in the context of the Flexible Workplace to be available to the next session. As Umoja deployment continues through next few years and a future service delivery model will emerge, we will keep the opportunities under review and will report them to the General Assembly for consideration whenever they are available.

I am personally committed to deliver in a timely manner but we need commensurate time to produce a sound assessment and implementation proposal.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, I thank you for your attention.