About the Pulse Check

In April 2020, employees from across the UN system were invited to participate in a UN-wide Pulse Check run jointly by the **UN Development Coordination Office (DCO)**, the **UN Innovation Network (UNIN**), the **UN System Staff College (UNSSC)**, **Young UN: Agents for Change (Young UN)** and **#NewWork**, and supported by colleagues from other UN entities. 4613 colleagues from more than 50 UN system entities in 146 countries responded.

The goal of the Pulse Check was two-fold: to gain a better understanding of how colleagues from across the UN system experienced working during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to identify areas for improvement and (interagency) collaboration. The intention was to take the pulse of employees at the system-wide level at one point in time, rather than to provide a comprehensive analysis of all challenges and opportunities or of the situation in a particular UN entity.

The Pulse Check is part of the **#BuildBackBetter initiative** and findings have directly contributed, along with other inputs, to define the focus areas of the UN-wide **#BuildBackBetter Challenge**. The challenge aims to identify, develop and share innovative solutions and emerging good practices to working in the COVID-19 con-text and beyond. The Pulse Check results have also informed the #BuildBackBetter Dialogue Series to engage employees in an open, constructive series of conversa-tions to "deep-dive" into certain topics and provide a platform for further exchange around this topic.

Key Messages

Adjusting to a Digital Set-up

At the time of the Pulse Check (April 2020), the majority of the 4613 respondents **felt well supported, connected** and had the **skills and tools to do their job well.**

- **Two thirds of all respondents** were **working remotely** in their usual duty station, 65% of all respondents had **care responsibilities.**
- **91% felt they had the skills** and **more than three quarters stated that they also had the tools and resources** to do their job well in this digital set up.
- Around **85% felt supported** by their supervisor and their organisation, and connected to their team.
- **90% indicated** that their **organisation communicated regularly** about developments and new work realities.

Workload, Work-life Balance and Ability to Perform

However, many respondents saw their **workload increase** and experienced **challenges in maintaining a healthy work-life balance.**

- **Almost half of respondents (44%)** experienced an **increase in workload and 48% reported an increase in working hours** during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Around half of respondents** felt that their **motivation** and **ability to do their job well** remained the same as usual during COVID-19. These elements decreased for around one quarter and increased for the remaining respondents.
- **39%** expressed that they **did not have a healthy work-life balance.**

Innovation, Collaboration and Openness for Change

For the most part, respondents felt that the situation brought about by COVID-19 **increased both the need and opportunities for innovation and collaboration.**

- **More than three quarters** indicated that the **importance of innovation increased** during the pandemic, and that their **organisation was more open to change than usual.**
- **Two thirds** felt they had **more opportunities to try new approaches and innovate**, while **47%** stated they have **more opportunities to collaborate with other teams.**

Positive Developments

Despite many negative impacts of COVID-19, **the top positive developments** identified by the largest number of respondents related to **flexibility in remote working arrangements and working hours, innovation, and reduced duty travel.**

- **More flexibility in remote working arrangements** was included among the top three positive developments by 73% of respondents, while more flexibility in working hours was included by 37% of respondents.
- **Greater willingness to innovate and implement change** was selected as a positive development by 35% of respondents.
- The **reduced need for duty travel** (and the associated reduction in carbon emissions) was considered among the top three **positive developments for 34% of respondents.**

Emerging Areas for Improvement

Respondents were also asked in which areas their organisation could improve to be better prepared for future crises. Six areas were selected most frequently and helped to inform the #BuildBackBetter Challenge and the Dialogue Series:
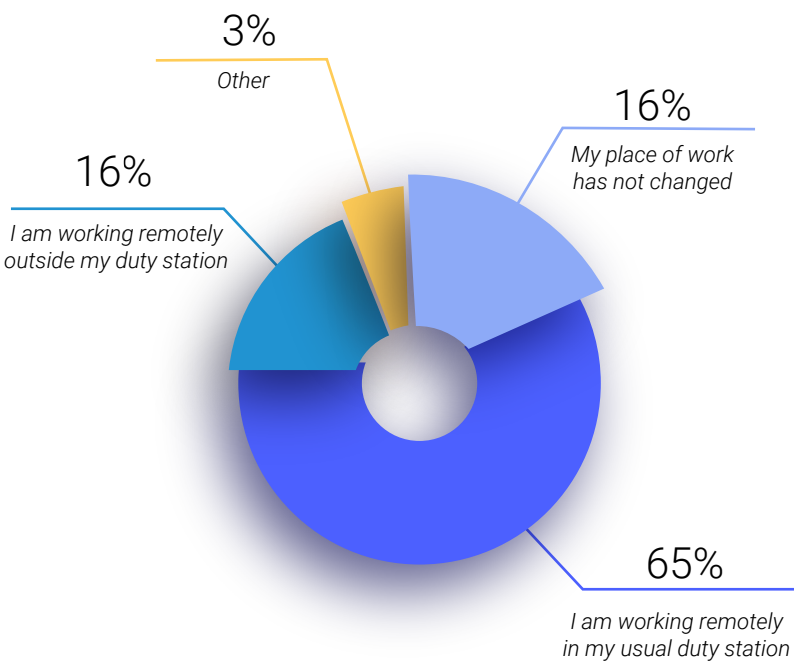
- **Adopting agile processes** to make decisions quickly,
- **Developing and implementing guidelines/protocols** to ensure business continuity
- **Improving knowledge sharing**
- **Improving inter-agency cooperation/coordination** on response and recovery
- **Improving communication flow and access to information**, and increasing the dissemination of accurate information
- **Enabling healthy work-life balance** to support employees wellbeing
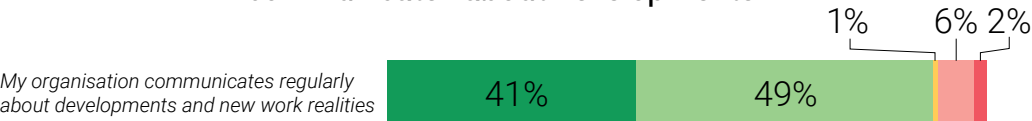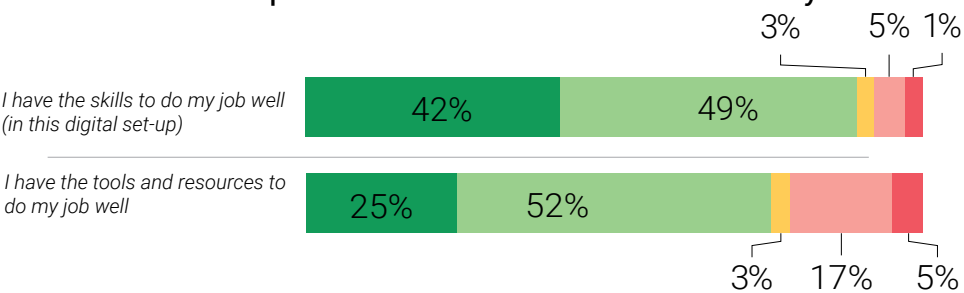
Pulse Check Key Numbers

4613 total respondents

50 UN system entities

146 countries

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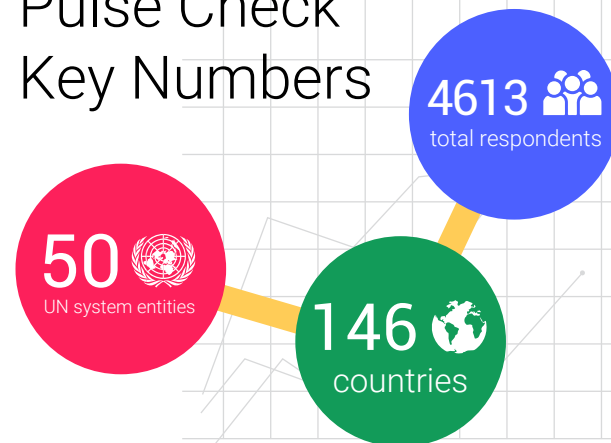
Adjusting to a Digital Set-up

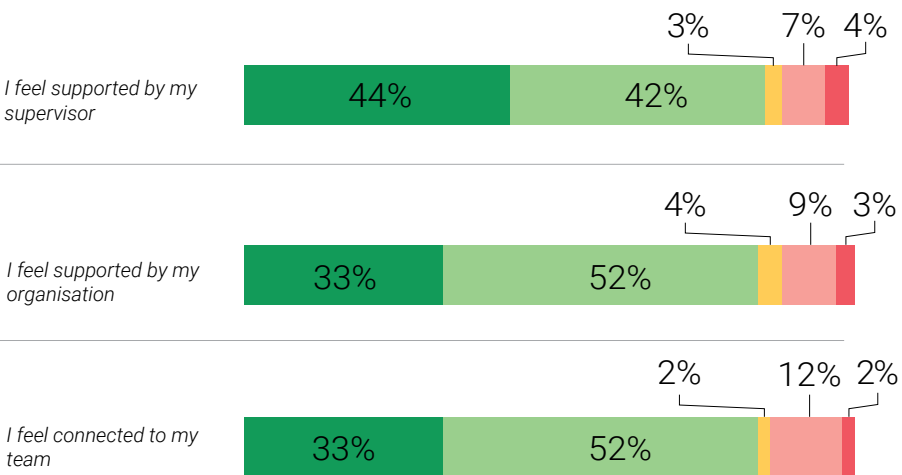At the time of the Pulse Check, two thirds of respondents were working remotely in their usual duty station.

3% Other

16% My place of work has not changed

16% I am working remotely outside my duty station

65% I am working remotely in my usual duty station

91% felt that they had the skills to do their job well in a digital set-up but 1 out of 5 reported a lack of resources to actually do so.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I have the skills to do my job well (in this digital set-up)	42%	49%	3%	5%	1%
I have the tools and resources to do my job well	25%	52%	3%	17%	5%

The vast majority of respondents felt supported by their supervisor and organisation, and connected to their team.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel supported by my supervisor	44%	42%	3%	7%	4%
I feel supported by my organisation	33%	52%	4%	9%	3%
I feel connected to my team	33%	52%	2%	12%	2%

90% of respondents were of the opinion that their organisation regularly communicated about developments.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My organisation communicates regularly about developments and new work realities	41%	49%	1%	6%	2%

Legend:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Not sure
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

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Respondents' Comments: Adjusting to a Digital Set-up

The Pulse Check featured several questions inviting colleagues to leave comments and suggestions around the impact of COVID-19 both on their daily lives and on the work of their organisation. Almost 3,300 comments were submitted. Below is a summary of comments received in the context of 'adjusting to a digital set up'.

Communication

Respondents **appreciated efforts and initiatives by their organisations that sought to keep them informed and connected**, not just for work but also to help cope with isolation. One of the most common concerns was around cascading information down through the hierarchy, especially through middle management or to the field, which created at times uncertainty or confusing messaging. Some respondents argued that **there was not enough communication**, while more argued that there was an **information overload** or that information was confusing.

"There is excellent communication from the corporate comms group to keep staff members abreast of the situation and how it affects them at the workplace."

"My organisation communicates very effectively, but there is a disconnect between the messages of flexibility and tolerance that we read and the practice. I feed lack of consistency between the top management messages and the pressure I get from my supervisors to deliver."

"There's an overload of information, what we need is more effective communication"

Support to employees

Many respondents were satisfied with the response of their organisations and some noted that they were **inspired by the support offered by colleagues, managers, and leaders including the many messages from the Secretary-General himself.**

However, others felt that support was lacking. For instance, one area clearly pointed out was the **unequal treatment of consultants and, in some cases, interns**. While some organisations gave guidance that special service agreement contractors were to be given sick leave for COVID-19, respondents noted that unequal treatment of consultants was more the norm and pointed to the **hypocrisy of not providing healthcare benefits.** Furthermore, **some respondents from field-based duty stations noted that they were "stranded"** or stuck in a country and unable to leave; some also reported that they felt pressured to stay even though they could not add much value there.

"It has been very emotional to see so much support from the Secretary-General, Staff Unions as well as managers and colleagues. Work has been crucial but most importantly our good physical and mental health has been their number one priority in this situation."

"I felt that I have to choose between my health and work: if I chose my health and not report for work, there will be backlash and I was fearful about my job."

"An organisation that supports its employees would have looked after the totality of its staff better."

"Interns are not supported by the organisation right now. We have never been formally addressed in a single top-down communication since this started, meanwhile staff members are getting every care and consideration."

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Role of managers

For many respondents **managers played a decisive role** in the mitigation of negative impacts. While some praised the leadership of many managers and their role in **building team morale and ensuring effective communication**, others highlighted severe deficits in managerial skills and suggested targeted training for managers in areas including managing remote teams and leadership. **Many expressed a need for more support and guidance from their managers.** There was particular dissatisfaction with behaviour that was sometimes seen as undermining the safety and well-being of employees, for instance when it came to resisting calls for telecommuting (respondents felt that choosing to work from home would reflect badly on them), insufficient reprioritisation, and by insisting on the same deliverables and performance metrics.

"My unit does a daily virtual meeting and also a weekly "sanity check" call."

"The organisation has been exemplary, unfortunately, when line managers are not in the same line of thinking, this is where it all falls apart."

Digital tools and resources

Overall, respondents appreciated the **collaborative online tools** being introduced to facilitate remote working. Many respondents noted that they would appreciate **more training** to familiarise themselves with and master new tools deployed rapidly throughout their organisations. Respondents also reported difficulties in working conditions such as **lack of digital tools and reliable internet access.**

"We need more and better IT support, as we rely on technology for our work now more than ever."

"Widen access to online training to all staff, especially local staff, to adapt faster to the changes COVID-19 is bringing and keep morale up."
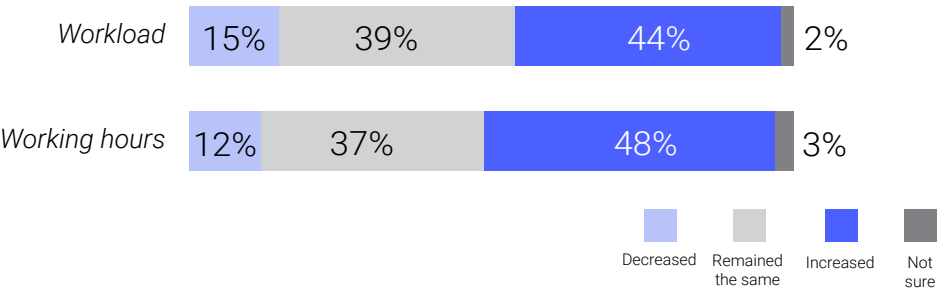
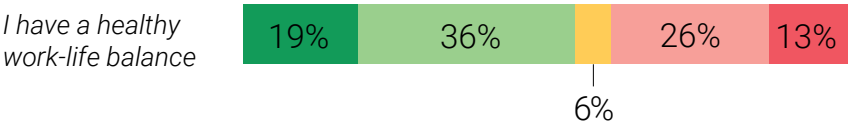# Workload, Work-life Balance and Ability to Perform

The Pulse Check also sought to assess to what extent the workload and working hours of UN colleagues had changed, as well as their ability to do their job well and their work-life-balance.

Almost half of respondents experienced an increase in workload and/or working hours. Workload and working hours increased especially for respondents with managerial responsibilities, who reported an increase of 54% and 55% respectively.

*How have the following aspects of your work changed?*

|	Decreased	Remained the same	Increased	Not sure
Workload	15%	39%	44%	2%
Working hours	12%	37%	48%	3%

While half of respondents felt there was no change with regard to their ability to do their job well and their motivation, a good quarter reported that COVID-19 had a negative effect in this regard.

How have the following aspects of your work changed?

	Decreased	Remained the same	Increased	Not sure
Motivation	29%	51%	17%	3%
Ability to do job well	26%	49%	22%	3%

Only half of respondents stated to have a healthy work-life balance, while 39% felt they did not at the time of the Pulse Check.

I have a healthy work-life balance	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	19%	36%	6%	26%	13%

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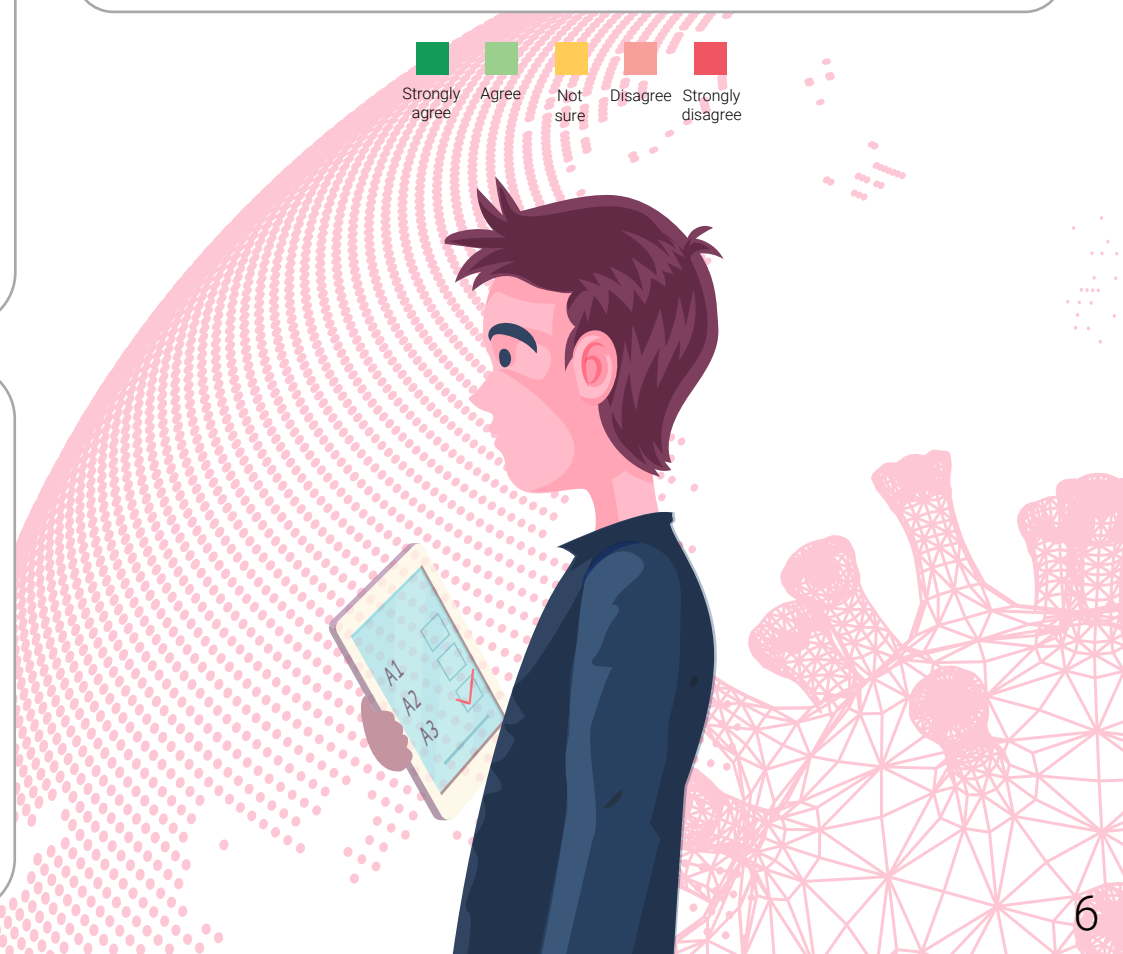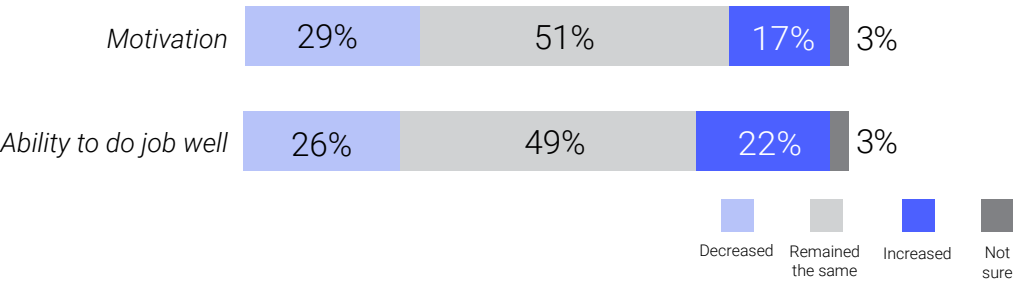
Respondents' Comments: Impact of COVID-19 on Workload, Work-life balance, and Ability to Perform

Internal Structures and Processes
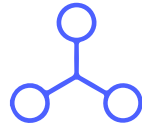
Overall, respondents noted that their **ability to do their job well** depended on **accessible systems, efficient and flexible processes, and the right equipment.** Respondents frequently commented on issues that prevented their organisations from acting more quickly and respondents from doing their job well. These included **hierarchical and centralised decision-making, bureaucratic procedures, departmental silos and a lack of agility in general.** Challenges were noted especially in procurement, data sharing and switching from development to humanitarian work.

"A lot of innovation efforts are taking place, but administrative procedures have not sufficiently adapted, and we lack agility/flexibility to implement new approaches and re-focus our work programme activities."

"Country-level implementation is suffering because of our bureaucracy and heavy internal procedures. We are not agile and prepared for crisis situations."

"It has taken more than 4 weeks to get approval to procure masks and protective equipment for local communities, which they have urgently requested support for."

Equipment

Lack of **access to equipment enabling working from home** (e.g. screens, desk chairs), **challenges accessing IT systems** (especially during early phases of the pandemic), as well as the **lack of stable internet connection** were factors highlighted by respondents affecting their ability to do their job well. In terms of safely conducting their duties, respondents underscored the **need for masks, sanitisers and personal protective equipment** to allow safe working in the field. Respondents flagged issues accessing these resources, which may have prevented them from doing their job to the best of their abilities while protecting their personal health.

"The internet is heavily censored, speeds are among the slowest and penetration is very low. We cannot simply move our operations to the internet."

"I tried to get my HQ approval to buy masks and gloves for equipping me and my team to the new realities. It was refused."

Work-life balance

The challenge to **juggle work and family life** was one of the most frequently mentioned themes and **many respondents expressed concerns** about their work-life balance. Specifically, respondents with care responsibilities expressed problems maintaining a healthy work-life balance and the wish for more support and flexibility (such as modified deliverables and flexibility in time management) to accommodate their situation and needs. At the same time, some respondents noted that the new remote work arrangement allowed them to **work more efficiently** at home than in their office and **spend more time with their families.** Commuting times, family status and care responsibilities were key components affecting the perceived perception of teleworking and its impact on work-life-balance. There was a call for **clear guidelines on working hours, respect for lunch breaks, evening and weekend time. Equal treatment of employees** with or without families, in field or HQ locations and across organisations was a major focus in the comments, requesting for **fairness in workload distribution and flexible work arrangements.**

"On the one hand, leadership reminds us to take good care of ourselves. On the other hand, the demand to deliver has increased. There is a tension between the messaging and the workload."

"The work has increased exponentially."

"I feel I am not as efficient in completing my tasks when working remotely. As a result, I try to compensate for lack of efficiency by working more hours or on the weekends. I constantly feel pulled towards doing more work, even when I should be relaxing. Over a longer span of time, it tends to drain me out."
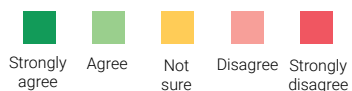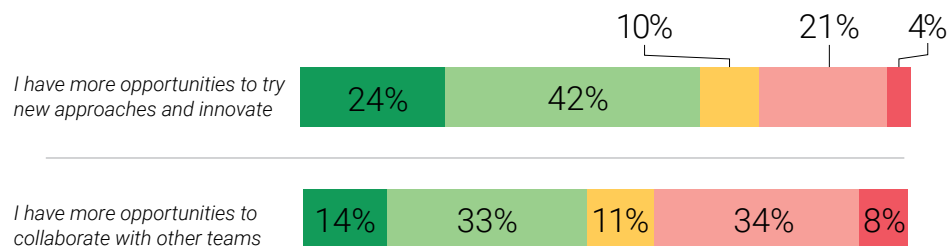
Innovation, Collaboration, and Openness to Change

By shifting operations from offices to homes while demanding maximum support to beneficiaries and governments, the pandemic required fast adaptations, innovative thinking and the willingness to change old ways of working rapidly.

The vast majority of respondents agreed that the importance of innovation increased during the pandemic, while also stating that their organisation was more open to change than usual.

| | 9% | 10% 2% |

The importance of innovation has increased: 37% | 41% | 9% | 10% | 2%

My organisation is more open to change than usual: 31% | 45% | 9% | 12% | 3%
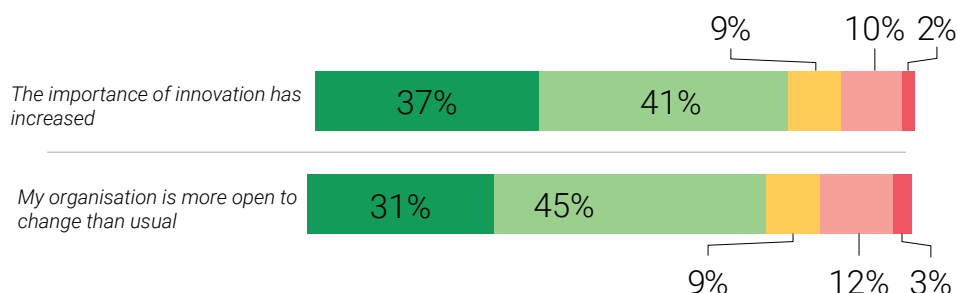
Two thirds felt that they had more opportunities to try new approaches and innovate. The picture was less clear for collaboration, where half of respondents saw more opportunities to collaborate, while the other half did not.

I have more opportunities to try new approaches and innovate: 24% | 42% | 10% | 21% | 4%

I have more opportunities to collaborate with other teams: 14% | 33% | 11% | 34% | 8%

Legend: Strongly agree | Agree | Not sure | Disagree | Strongly disagree

Respondents' Comments: Impact of COVID-19 on Innovation, Collaboration, and Openness to Change

Innovation

Respondents highlighted the **importance of innovation** and were mostly **excited about the changes** they were seeing and the speed with which they were being introduced. However, some respondents felt that their organisations were struggling to fully embrace ways of integrating such changes. Many respondents expressed hope and some apprehensions about whether these **improvements will become the "new normal"** after the pandemic.

"Barriers to change that previously were considered insurmountable dropped away."

"Importance of innovation has been emphasised before, but now it becomes part of `the new normal"

"While the need for innovation has increased, there is still a lot of resistance."

Some colleagues also lamented the lack of bold and transformational innovation while others felt that a pandemic was not the right time to experiment.

"There's a push to innovate, but the implementation of ideas is subject to unnecessary bureaucracies."

"I think my organisation hasn't been very innovative for the COVID-19 response, which is sad and demotivating and strongly impacting my motivation"

"The unrealistic expectation to cook up innovation is sickening during a pandemic period."

Collaboration

Some respondents expressed that the remote work arrangements had actually strengthened **collaboration within their team and across departments.** Specifically the introduction of online tools, online file and knowledge management helped to further collaboration while at the same time increasing transparency and process tracking. Respondents also noted that there had been more cooperation and tighter networks across different locations and even across organisations.

"Teleworking has given us the opportunity to work collaboratively more than previously and be engaged in cross-cutting discussions across the different divisions"

"My organisation focuses much better and cooperation has interestingly increased"
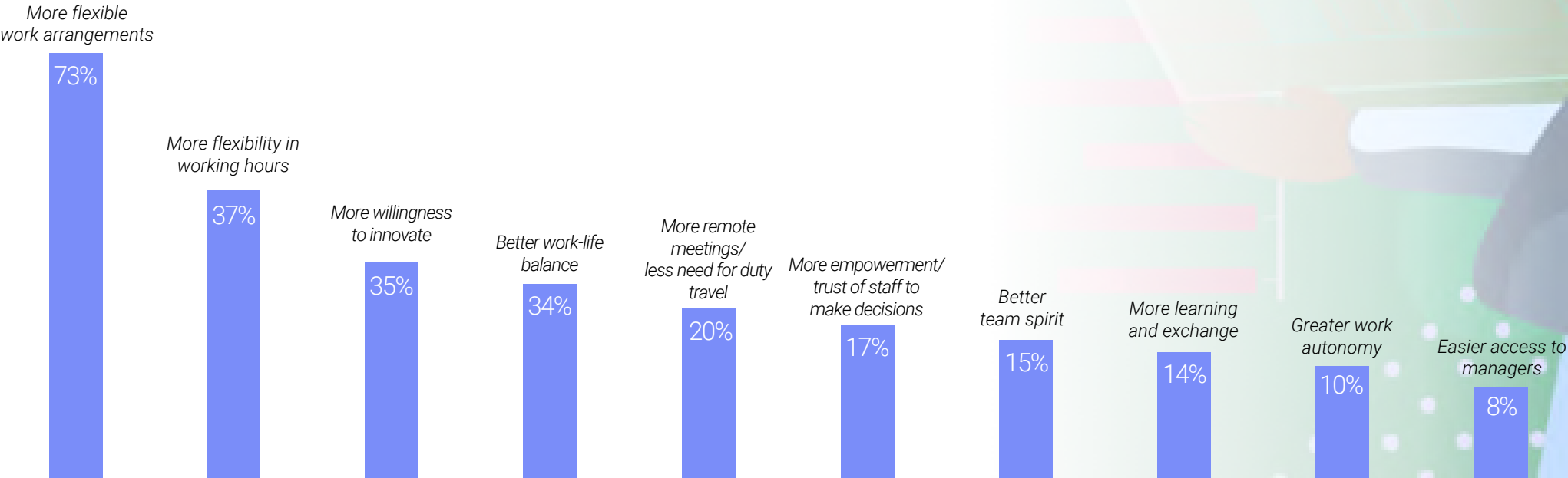
Positive Developments and Good Practices
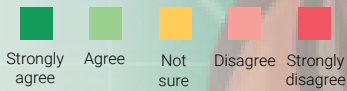
COVID-19 posed major challenges for the UN system's organisations, but respondents noted several positive developments.

A majority of 84% of respondents agreed that their organisation responded effectively and 77% felt that their organisation continues to deliver effectively on its mandate.

My organisation responded effectively

| 32% | 52% | 4% | 10% | 3% |

My organisation delivers effectively on its mandate

| 26% | 51% | 11% | 10% | 2% |
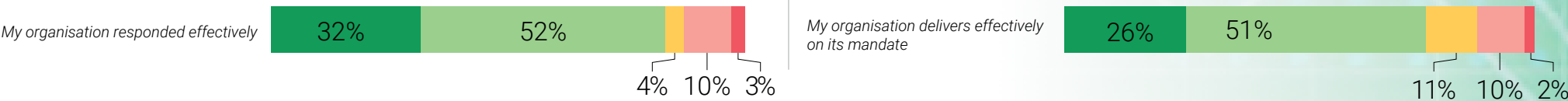
When asked about the top three positive developments in new ways of working that they would like their organisation to keep, almost three quarters of respondents chose more flexibility in remote working arrangements. More flexibility in working hours, greater willingness to innovate and implement change, and a better work-life balance were selected as one of their top three positive developments to keep by around a third of respondents.

More flexible work arrangements — 73%

More flexibility in working hours — 37%

More willingness to innovate — 35%

Better work-life balance — 34%

More remote meetings/ less need for duty travel — 20%

More empowerment/ trust of staff to make decisions — 17%

Better team spirit — 15%

More learning and exchange — 14%

Greater work autonomy — 10%

Easier access to managers — 8%

Respondents' Comments: Positive Developments they Would Like to Keep Going Forward

1,134 respondents shared good practices or innovative solutions they observed in the COVID-19 context and would like to keep going forward. The summary below is sorted by number of mentions, starting with the area that received the highest number of comments.

Adoption of flexible working
(493 comments)

Teleworking, work from home: Telecommuting has shown that organisations can function with people working remotely.

Modernisation through online tools: The rapid introduction of diverse digital platforms and tools such as Microsoft Teams, SharePoint or Zoom allowed organisations to quickly modernise themselves and their practices, and supported business continuity.

Better results and efficiency
(305 comments)

Higher efficiency: Meetings were fewer, shorter, more productive, structured and focused. There were fewer interruptions leading to more working hours and greater productivity. There was a greater focus on results and priorities

Optimized processes through agile approaches: E-signature and approval, reducing the need for paper; more agile, streamlined and quicker decision-making and reduced bureaucracy; better delegation of authority, less micromanagement, and more autonomy

Cost savings and less emissions through reduced travel: COVID-19 reduced the need or possibilities for travel (and thus reduced carbon emissions). This could affect whether or how often onsite meetings (and related travel) are considered necessary in the future.

More inclusive and engaging projects/events: Telecommunication was now also increasingly used to engage with stakeholders; projects and events carried out online have become more inclusive and engaging, which reduced inequality to some extent.

Better teamwork
(294 comments)

Enhanced team spirit: Increased engagement and interactions with colleagues as well as a greater sense of team spirit and trust despite working remotely.

Better collaboration through digital tools: Streamlined digital tools brought better online file and knowledge management, made it easy to keep track of processes as well as improved transparency. They also helped to increase cooperation across the world and establish tighter networks across divisions, locations, and organisations.

Support for staff wellbeing
(174 comments)

Flexible working conditions: Greater flexibility and autonomy in working hours and arrangements; work based on individual circumstances allows for better work-life balance; flexibility in working place and duty station

Caring, support and information shared with staff: Greater awareness and information about physical and mental well-being; more caring and support from HQ/HR on issues such as health and mental health; better IT hardware and support such as laptops, remote connection or training

Learning, innovation and embracing change
(48 comments)

More **willingness to innovate and embrace change**, both at the individual and organisational level

More online **webinars, training and learning opportunities**

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Emerging Areas for Improvement

UN system entities adapted well to the changing circumstances, but opportunities remain to improve the future response to sudden-onset crises.

Respondents' comments on opportunities for improvement

Many respondents (355) shared thoughts on opportunities for improvement in the context of COVID-19.

Work-life balance

The challenge to juggle work and family life was one of the most frequently mentioned themes. The vast majority of comments related to the **tension between increased expectations while having to care for family members at home or remotely.** There was a call for **clear guidelines and equal treatment of staff** with or without families, in field or HQ locations, regardless of contract type and across organisations. **Fairness in workload distribution, flexible work arrangements** and better treatment of consultants were the most common suggestions. Regarding post-COVID-19 times, staff also expressed that they would welcome the opportunity of more flexible working arrangements without stigmatisation.

Role of managers

For many respondents, **managers play a decisive role** in the mitigation of negative impacts. While some praised their leadership, team morale and communication, many staff highlighted severe **deficits in managerial skills and suggested targeted training** for them. More precisely, respondents requested more understanding of the **need for flexibility and balance**, and wished for a **discussion on/adjustment of their work goals and better prioritisation.** In the open-ended responses, staff stated that they would generally appreciate **more timely communication** and would like to be **stronger engaged in work coordination and prioritisation.**

Organisational development

Comments highlighted the need for **more agile teams and training, simplified processes, increased staff engagement, more transparent communication and the need for learning through the exchange of good practice.**

Training

Staff appreciated the **collaborative online tools** and asked for organisations to continuously **offer training and upgrades**. Some staff expressed the need for better support to have **reliable access to the internet.** There was a lot of **appreciation for the mental health training and support** offered and requests to continue it.

Safety and hygiene

Respondents suggested organisations **provide masks and sanitisers**, particularly in field-based duty stations and if they were expected to commute. Field-based respondents were concerned about **sufficient access to medical care for them and their family members**, especially for national staff. Some pointed out the need to **role model safety measures** to prevent COVID-19 and other potential future shocks.

Respondents were also asked in which areas their organisation could improve to be better prepared for future crises. Six areas were selected most frequently and helped to inform the #BuildBackBetter Challenge and the Dialogue Series:

Adopting agile processes to make decisions quickly

Developing and implementing guidelines/protocols to ensure business continuity

Improving knowledge sharing

Improving inter-agency cooperation/coordination on response and recovery

Improving communication flow and access to information, and increasing the dissemination of accurate information

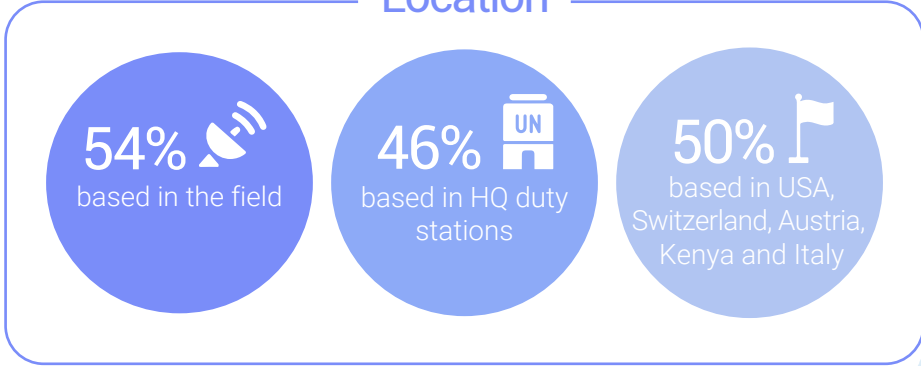**Enabling healthy work-life balance** to support employees wellbeing

Demographics of Pulse Check Respondents

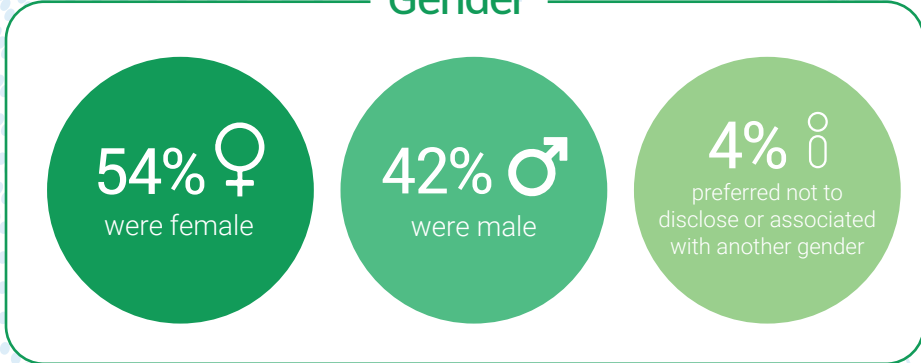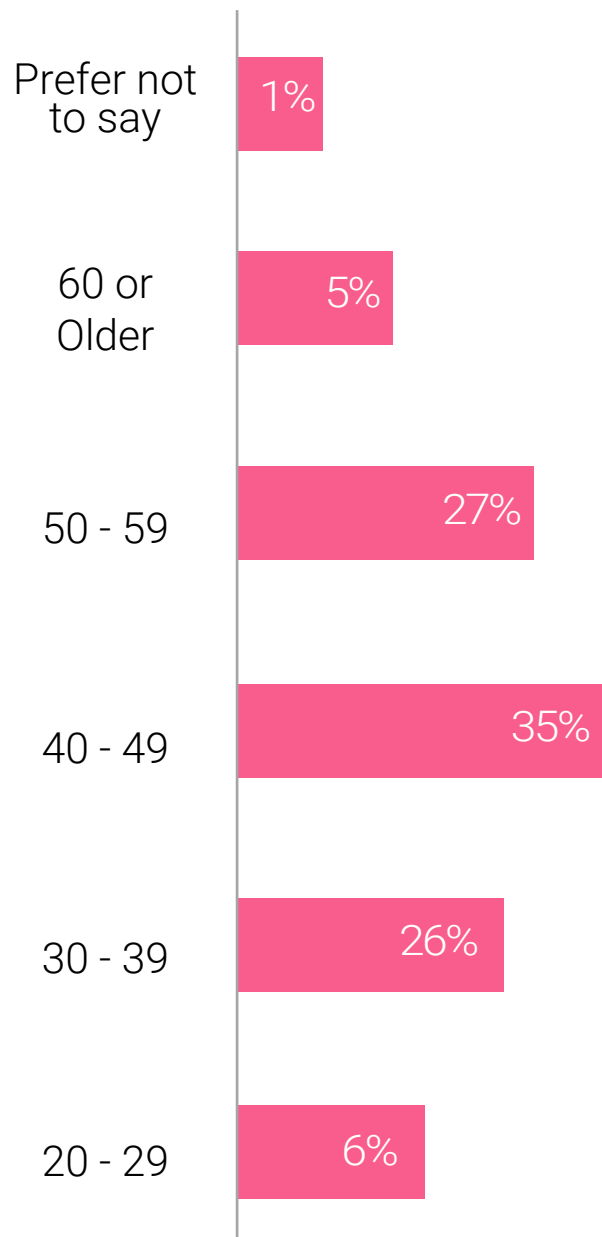**4613** respondents | **146** countries

Location

54% based in the field

46% based in HQ duty stations

50% based in USA, Switzerland, Austria, Kenya and Italy

Respondents' Background

66% were 40 or older

48% had managerial responsibilities

65% had care responsibilities

Contract Type

75% fixed term/permanent/continuing appointments

15% temporary or consultant/service contract

6% national staff, UN volunteers, and Interns

Gender

54% were female

42% were male

4% preferred not to disclose or associated with another gender

Age

- Prefer not to say: 1%
- 60 or Older: 5%
- 50 - 59: 27%
- 40 - 49: 35%
- 30 - 39: 26%
- 20 - 29: 6%

Duty Stations

Organisation

- FAO: 2%
- UNOPS: 2%
- UNDP: 3%
- UN Environment: 4%
- UN Secretariat: 46%
- Other UN System (entities with less than 100 responses each): 42%

Breakdown of UN Secretariat:
- ODC: 5%
- DSS: 5%
- OCHA: 5%
- DGACM: 7%
- OHCHR: 7%
- DOS: 10%
- DPPA / DPO: 14%
- Other: 16%
- Other in the Secretariat: 31%
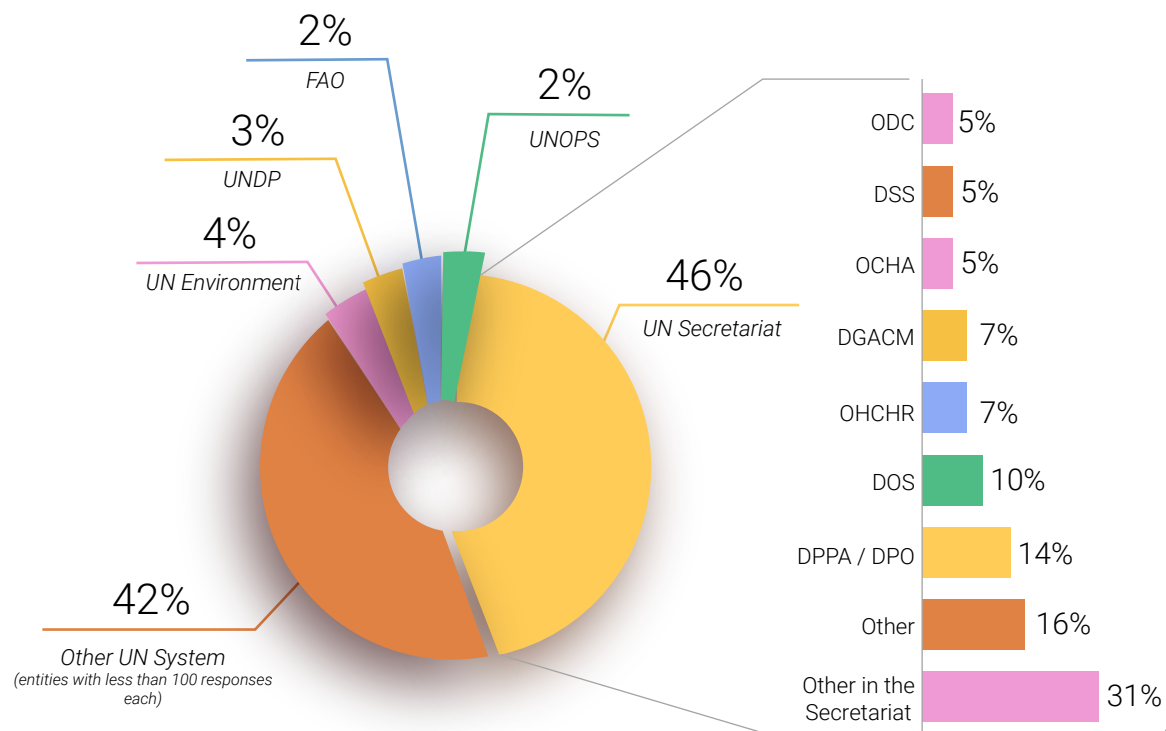
A note on methodology

The Pulse Check was designed to provide a point-in-time snapshot of employee sentiments from across the UN system. To ensure that respondents from a wide range of entities were able to participate in the Pulse Check, questions were deliberately kept broad and did not require any particular background, entity-specific knowledge or technical expertise. By design, respondents were asked to answer all questions in the Pulse Check (except open-ended ones).

One of the main objectives of the Pulse Check was to identify priority areas for the **#BuildBackBetter Challenge** and Dialogue Series. To achieve this, respondents were asked in one part of the questionnaire to choose from a number of options by prioritising them. The Pulse Check received some criticism for this design choice, especially because some respondents felt that the choice was deliberately biased towards certain outcomes and to push for certain policy changes. Instead, this design was chosen solely to enable a prioritisation of issues.

The Pulse Check was not intended to make recommendations towards new policies. Instead it seeks to create a basis for constructive discussions and creative and collaborative thinking on how the UN could improve its way of working and its ability to respond to future crises.

The questionnaire used for this Pulse Check can be found **here**.

Exploring new approaches

As the results of this Pulse Check illustrate, many respondents see a need to break new ground by using new tools and approaches, so that organisations can act more flexibly and effectively. Following this ideal, the **#BuildBackBetter initiative**, which ran the Pulse Check, is an inclusive, agile and participatory approach, driven by an alliance of interested individuals, networks and departments from across the UN system.

Another innovative example was the way in which parts of this analysis were carried out. Given the large number of open-ended comments collected by this survey (3,299 in total), significant team-power was needed to perform the analysis. Therefore, the prototype of an online platform was used to identify volunteers across the UN system who then contributed to this analysis. The platform (**conecta4covid**) was set up to enable UN system employees to support the COVID-19 response and recovery by volunteering their skills and time to support teams in need. The underlying concept will continue to be pursued beyond COVID-19.

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