

Virtual expert meeting

27 September 2021

TOWARDS A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT REPORT

**‘MENTAL HEALTH
IN THE DIGITAL WORLD OF WORK’**

Report



Meeting objectives

- To gather experts' thoughts and views on the issues that should be addressed by a European Parliament Own Initiative report, entitled 'Mental health in the digital world of work'
- To develop a document based on this meeting, that can serve as input/basis for discussions for next meetings and activities surrounding the development of the report (e.g., a wider stakeholder hearing in the European Parliament)

Meeting format

The meeting brought together 6 experts, with discussion based on a set of guiding questions, shared with participants beforehand.

Meeting participants

Apart from Maria Walsh MEP, the meeting brought together 6 experts:

- Teresa d'Oliveira, *King's College London (UK)*
- Solveiga Eidukynaitė-Gerard, *Policy Analyst, European Commission, DG EMPL*
- Veronika Jakl, *Vienna University (AUS)*
- Peter Keri, *Awakenings Foundation (HU) and GAMIAN-Europe*
- Laura Marchetti, *Mental Health Europe*
- Christopher Prinz, *OECD*

The offices of MEPs Tilly Metz, Radka Maxova and Tomas Zdechovsky as well as GAMIAN-Europe and Mental Health Europe staff were also represented.

Draft agenda

14:30 - 14:40	<i>Welcome and introductions, Maria Walsh MEP</i>
14:40 - 14:45	<i>Background and aims of the meeting, Maria Walsh MEP</i>
14:50 - 15:30	<i>Open discussion, based on guiding questions, All</i>
15:30 - 15:45	<i>Tour de table for issues that have not yet been addressed, All</i>
15:45 - 16:00	<i>Conclusions and next steps, Maria Walsh MEPs and MEPs present</i>

Report

Introduction

Maria Walsh MEP welcomed participants and invited them to briefly introduce themselves and their specific interest in the topic of the meeting. After this tour de table, she provided information on the background and aims of the event. She stated that the [European Parliament's Committee on Employment and Social Affairs](#) has recently decided to draft an Own-Initiative report entitled 'Mental health in the digital world of work' and that she has been appointed as Rapporteur.

This is the first time that the Parliament has agreed to specifically devote a report to mental health, which presents a real opportunity to raise awareness and advocate for change. While health - and mental health as a part of that - is not within the competency of the EU, mental health is becoming more and more important. The report can function as a useful steppingstone in the efforts of the MEP Alliance and Coalition towards a comprehensive EU level Strategy on mental health, as already called for by [the Council of Ministers in 2019](#); it can also support the campaign for a European Year for Mental Health.

Maria Walsh stated that while the title - 'Mental health in the digital world of work' - may seem a little specific, it could be used to cover a broad range of topics, related to work and mental health in the widest sense. A cross-sectoral approach will need to be sought for the document to have a lasting impact.

For the report to be as comprehensive and representative of the real issues and priorities, the views of experts will be indispensable. This was the background to organising this meeting, which serves as a first opportunity to have an exchange with leading experts on the report's future content and output.

Maria Walsh MEP underlined that there is no concrete outline or structure of the report at this point; it is currently at the information-gathering stage, and the parameters are not yet fixed. Today's meeting - and probably similar meetings in the future - will help to specify the parameters and content.

Following this expert meeting, Maria Walsh MEP will also be meeting with the Shadow Rapporteurs to continue discussions. The report will probably be voted in the European Parliament in April 2022, which leaves ample time for robust preparation.

Open discussion based on guiding questions

Maria Walsh MEP then introduced the discussion, inviting experts to make short statements based on a set of guiding questions that were sent before the meeting (see box below).

Teresa D'Oliveira (King's College London) highlighted two important areas related to workplace mental health: the nature of work itself (e.g., the job descriptions, the nature of the activity) on the one hand and working conditions on the other. In terms of jobs, new and highly specific skills are required. While it is normal for today's students to graduate with and master these, the rest of the workforce must continuously follow and catch up. This represents challenges that can be stressful for many people. New digital services reach different and more widespread populations; access to information is easier, answers to questions are faster, costs are lower. In other words, from an organisational point of view, there are many advantages for companies to invest in digitalisation. However, there are challenges as well, mainly for small and medium-sized companies; these do not always have the resources to introduce the required changes and upgrades of systems. The pandemic intensified these challenges. So, even if the skills are in place, there are challenges related to equipment and support networks. It is a good moment to discuss digitalisation as COVID-19 has brought these and many other challenges to the fore. There are many questions related to where the priorities are in these areas and where intervention would be desirable. As the workspace has become mobile, work can be done anywhere and anytime. It also means that a person becomes part of his or her workspace; the workspace is where the person is at a specific moment rather than a dedicated physical space. That raises specific issues in terms of that workspace, also in terms of diversity and inclusion. A balance will need to be found between work, personal and private space.

Veronika Jakl (Vienna University) focused on what has changed during the last decade rather than on the entire process of digitalisation, as digitalisation existed already before this time. Working with computers and laptops rather than with paper is not so new. Faster information flows, quicker ways of connecting and finding information and organising work differently was already ongoing. But during the last decade – and especially, over the last 18 months, driven by the pandemic – communication and cooperation have changed enormously, mainly concerning virtual workspaces and the hybrid world of work in offices and meetings. In comparison to the early 2000s, people have now had to develop new forms of communication skills. Employees, managers and supervisors need different social skills; and the latter needs a new set of leadership skills related to ensuring that all workers are included, involved, and reached, making sure that tasks are completed and ways to best keep informal communication between colleagues going.

Solveiga Eidukynaitė-Gerard (European Commission, DG EMPL), on the question how the digitalisation has changed the workplace, mentioned the irregularity/flexibility of when and where the work is performed (dynamic workplace, work from home, constant connectivity, etc) as well as new tools and equipment/machinery (working with laptops, artificial intelligence systems, etc).

According to the EU-OSHA's discussion paper "New forms of work in the digital era: implications for psychosocial risks and musculoskeletal disorders" (1), the nature of work has also intensified: the pace has stepped up enormously. More than 20% of all jobs will be further automated in the near future, which means that significant numbers of job transitions will need to be made.

Peter Keri (Awakenings Foundation (HU), GAMIAN-Europe), working with colleagues living with mental health problems, underlined the changing nature of human contact in the workplace. Working for an organisation supporting people living with mental distress, working, and meeting digitally has significantly changed the way stress, traumas and psychosocial problems are being shared and addressed. The Internet is not the place where feelings can be expressed like before. Communication has changed; and the 'old' human contact is sorely missed. This is a definite negative aspect of the digital era and solutions need to be found. Communication, online or via email, can easily be misinterpreted and have undesired effects.

Christopher Prinz (OECD) stated that it would be essential for the report to investigate and take account of inequalities. There are many different aspects to inequalities that need to be taken into account. He pointed out that digitalisation is indeed changing the nature of work; however, we need to be careful of what we mean and who we refer to. The way digitalisation has changed during the last 18 months has had varying impacts on different people in different jobs. For instance, when talking about telework, we need to keep in mind that half the population did not have the opportunity or possibility to do so. They did of course experience other pressures like fear of or exposure to the virus, job or income loss, confinement; there were psychological challenges but different from the ones related to digitalisation.

The report should pay sufficient attention to such types of inequalities.

The OECD has done a lot of work looking into the impact of the pandemic on mental health and changes in mental health prevalence. It is surprising to see how the impact differs for the various population groups. For instance, young people have been more affected than other age groups, while they were least affected by the pandemic in health terms. This signifies that there are complex processes at play, with different aspects impacting different people.

Lastly, the report needs to ensure a good balance between the changes in the world of work during the pandemic and the longer-term perspective of developments and how that will impact the future. There needs to be more work done to address challenges as well as the benefits. The report should ensure different recommendations are provided for different target groups.

Maria Walsh MEP emphasised that prevention will be the core feature of the report. She explained after because from talking to Member states, it was clear that preventative care rather than reactive care is essential.

1. <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/digitalisation-work-psychosocial-risk-factors-and-work-related-musculoskeletal-disorders/view>

Laura Marchetti (MHE) also highlighted the need to take inequality into account, referring to the potential mismatch between those that have and those that do not have access to jobs. This goes hand in hand with the structural challenges and inequalities already present in the world of work.

In many instances, digitalisation is seen as a cost-effective measure; however, it might create the misconception that employers do not need to supply workers with the equipment and environment required to work safely and comfortably. The quality of the work environment is an important determinant for (mental) health and well-being. Employers have the obligation to support this.

The common narrative with respect to digitalisation – also during the Covid pandemic – is that communication is faster and more efficient. After a year and a half of being isolated from colleagues and relying on online communication only it is fair to say that while face-to-face contact and communication may be slower, it is better in other ways. Emails and online communication can easily be misinterpreted and create extra levels of stress. The lack of face-to-face interaction comes at a price; workers may feel isolated, which in turn can influence individual well-being. This can impact the general wellbeing of the team and affect team spirit – and at the end of the day, these are important aspects of productivity and the ‘wellbeing’ of the organisation as a whole.

Maria Walsh MEP then asked experts for their opinions on the issues which should be included in the report.

Teresa d’Oliveira emphasised technostress, which can happen at many levels, including in relation to the disappearing boundaries between work and private/family life. How can these boundaries be protected? The feeling of needing to be constantly available and responsive can have a serious impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Another important issue relates to the need for research on how to create a sense of belonging. How can mental health problems be more effectively signposted in a digital world of work? With face-to-face contact, changes in behaviour can be noticed and addressed; with digital forms of contact and exchange, we risk missing that opportunity and being able to provide support at an earlier phase.

Yet another point relates to the risk of digital communication to disable social contact and ‘small talk’. Normal day-to-day, face-to-face interaction, based on non-work issues does no longer exist when working remotely; yet this is an important element of the social fabric in employment.

What be done to minimise the risk of loneliness and isolation? How can social skills be maintained and fostered digitally? How can skills be adjusted to make sure that workers have this sense of belonging? How can we develop digital social skills?

Veronika Jakl stated that it would be helpful if the report could contain practical information on how to educate supervisors, employers and those with responsibilities to be more aware of and to better address mental health issues. They are the multipliers in the field; they oversee the daily psychosocial risks. They need to know what mental health is and who is affected. They need to be aware of the psychosocial risks of the entire world of work – not just on the digital side – and how they can improve their mental health and the mental health of their team. They should obtain guidance on what to focus on and how to do so, alongside their daily routines. This is essential as many organisations do not tend to allocate time and space for such training.

Laura Marchetti highlighted that it is a mistake to assume that individual actions (e.g. putting the responsibility on the workers to be more mindful in their job) is the only possibility to ensure good mental health at work. Providing workers, managers and employees with tools, actions and legal standards to prevent mental health problems is very important. The report should make clear that mental health in the workplace is part and parcel of an overall approach to health and safety at work. It is a serious issue that requires structural change at the highest level of organisations and companies standards have to be put in place to safeguard workplace mental health. It is not up to individual managers and individual workers to prevent mental health problems in the workplace. This is an obligation of the government and employers and goes beyond digitalisation.

Teresa D'Oliveira agreed on the need to pay attention to individual vs organisational accountability when talking about safeguarding mental health. Often, organisations state that they have strategies in place, to indicate that work is being done, however, in reality, nothing has changed. Standards are indeed required; moreover, proposed strategies need to be assessed for their impact. We could also think of multiple markers (absenteeism, work/life balance...) which should be part of a system to rate the 'health' of an organisation - this goes beyond mental health. So rather than describing the standards only, the impact of measures taken should be assessed robustly and transparently.

Peter Keri stated that it would be useful to have evidence-based information listing the positive and negative aspects of the digital workspace for all stakeholders. Digitalisation tends to be viewed as a positive development but that is not necessarily the case. While there are of course positive sides, we now also know about the negative sides of using digital spaces for our work and personal contacts. Evidence should be collected from all stakeholders to build a complete picture and to help address the negative aspects.

Solveiga Eidukynaitė-Gerard provided an overview of what the European Commission's DG Employment is doing in the field of mental health, which the report could refer to:

- [Framework Directive of Health & Safety at Work](#) (2) states that employers are obliged to carry out a risk assessment and consider all potential risks in the workplace and take appropriate measures, including risks affecting mental health;
- For example, in 2014, a number of supporting measures have been taken in this area. One of them is the [Interpretative document](#) related to the implementation of the Framework Directive and how that covers mental health at work to facilitate implementation by employers;
- The 2014 evaluation on policy and practice to promote mental health in Europe (3) (concluding that non-binding solutions were most often preferred to more regulation);
- The work of the European Agency for [Safety and Health at Work \(EU-OSHA\)](#), including useful guidance documents and tools tackling psychosocial risks; EU- OSHA has recently developed an [online risk assessment tool for COVID](#), which also contains an assessment of psychosocial risks at work;

- More information can be found under the following link:
<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=716&langId=en> (see 'Psychosocial risks').
- Recent adoption of a [Commission's Communication on the strategic Framework for Health and Safety at Work](#) (4) for the next 7 years, which refers, among others, to the following activities relevant for mental health at work:
 1. Ongoing update of the Directives on Workplace and Work with Display Screen Equipment (as these dated from the 90-ties): psychosocial skills and mental health at work is one of the considerations
 2. Follow up to the 2021 [European Parliament Resolution 'The right to disconnect'](#);
 3. In cooperation with Member States and social partners, prepare a non-legislative EU level initiative related to mental health at work, assessing all emerging issues related to workplace mental health and putting forward guidance for action (planned for end 2022);
 4. An OSHA campaign on a safe and healthy digital future covering psychosocial and ergonomic risks in particular. (planned for 2023-2025).

Solveiga Eidukynaitė-Gerard offered to share this information with experts present.

A final point, raised by Laura Marchetti and Peter Keri related to the need to actively involve stakeholders and experts by experience in the development of any recommended action on mental health; the concept of co-creation should be the guiding principle for any future EU policy or other type action.

Conclusions

Maria Walsh MEP thanked all experts for their time and invaluable input. She reiterated that her intention to produce a report which is comprehensive, in line with the priorities of stakeholders, representative of the real issues that need to be addressed and ambitious in its calls, while respecting the EU's remit in the field of health.

Further meetings with stakeholders are being planned and the group of experts participating in this meeting will be kept informed and involved.

Maria Walsh stated that a comprehensive meeting report will be circulated for approval; experts will be provided with the opportunity to add issues that they may not have had the occasion for in this meeting.

2. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A31989L0391>

3. <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=13871&langId=en>

4. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0323&qid=1626089672913>

Guiding questions for the discussion

- How do you think digitalisation in the world of work has changed in the last decade? Do you think enough resources have been put in place to allow for this transition?
- What in your opinion are the 2 most important challenges when it comes to workplace mental health? (NB these can go beyond digitalisation)
- Can you indicate your reasons for selecting these two?
- What action should be taken/should be changed in order to adequately address these challenges?
- Which stakeholders should be involved to facilitate this?
- Could 'workplace mental health' as a theme be a useful policy 'hook' for other areas where mental health should be addressed?
- Are you aware of (policy) initiatives (at EU, national, regional, local or specific company level) that aim to address these challenges, well as the impact of these initiatives?
- How should the topic of workplace mental health, and the challenges brought about by digitalisation, be addressed by the EU level (e.g., a dedicated European Year for Mental Health, Strategy for Mental Health as called for by the Council in 2019....)?



CONTRIBUTORS

MEETING COORDINATION AND
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