

People management responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the public service

Public servants have been at the forefront of the COVID-19 response, developing emergency measures to keep populations healthy, safe and supported. To do so, the public service had to adapt, developing new ways of working in a constantly changing and often remote environment, integrating new tools and technology, and requiring unprecedented agility and resilience. Despite restrictions and lockdowns, public administrations managed to develop and use new tools and practices to ensure the continuity of public-service delivery to citizens, while keeping their own employees safe.

In this sense, remote working went from being seldom used to becoming the main, and often sole, way of working in many countries and administrations. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, 19 out of 25 (76%) OECD countries saw over half of their civil servants working remotely (Figure 6.7), and most expected increased remote working in the years to come. Most countries could count on existing tools and policies to enable remote working: 31 out of 34 OECD countries (91%) used existing communication channels to keep staff informed, 22 already had the IT infrastructure to enable remote work in place, and 20 did not have to change their remote working regulations/policies. However, and considering the depth of the change, additional tools were required to make the leap from occasional remote working to full remote working: 23 out of 34 OECD countries (68%) had to develop video conferencing and other communication tools which are now common and widespread (Table 6.8).

However, working remotely is not possible for all public servants, and the definition of essential workers has become increasingly relevant: 15 out of 34 OECD countries had already defined such positions, while 14 countries had to define, or redefine, them at the beginning of the crisis. Moreover, 31 OECD countries used special staffing regulations and policies, which often made it possible to move staff internally to face surges in demand. While 23 of these countries already had the necessary regulations and policies in place, 8 had to develop new policies and regulations to enable this change. This illustrates how the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled public services to identify effective policies in these areas, and develop new ones to create a highly flexible and agile workforce.

While highly challenging and stressful on public servants, the COVID-19 crisis may also be an opportunity to embed longer-term agility into public employment systems. For

example, most of the implemented measures are expected to stay after the crisis, especially those tools related to remote working arrangements. A significant number of countries had to update policies around remote working, recruitment and leave, and put in place new tools to monitor the impact of the crisis on their workforce, including employee surveys. Many countries also needed to meet increased demands in various functions, including health, employment services and security services. They were able to do so by developing tools for internal reallocation of staff and streamlined recruitment processes (Figure 1.7, Chapter 1). This crisis proved the resilience of public workforces across OECD countries, not only to integrate remote working, but to also introduce more flexibility to adapt to complex and fast-changing circumstances.

Methodology and definitions

Data were collected in the summer of 2020 through a special COVID-19 module of the 2020 Public Service Leadership and Capability survey. Most respondents were senior officials in central government HRM departments, and data refer to HRM practices in central government. The survey was completed by all OECD countries except Chile and Iceland, one OECD accession country (Costa Rica), and Brazil and Romania.

Further reading

OECD (2019), *Recommendation of the Council on Public Service Leadership and Capability*, OECD, <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/%20en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0445>.

OECD (forthcoming), *The Future of Work in the Public Service*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Figure notes

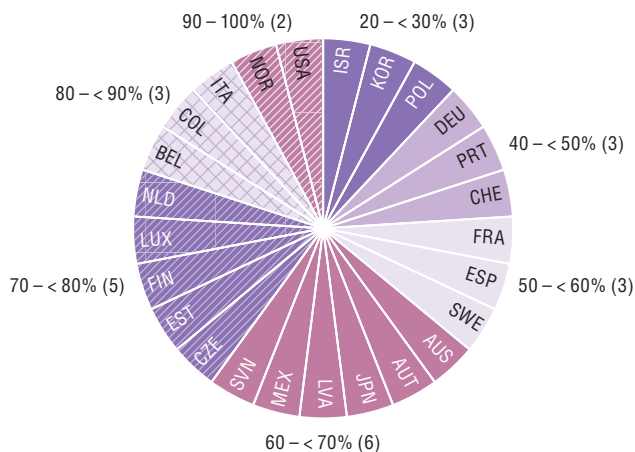
Data for Chile, Iceland and the United Kingdom are not available.

6.7. Data refer to the highest percentage of employees working remotely between March and July 2020. Data for Canada, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, New Zealand, the Slovak Republic and Turkey are not available.

6.8. Data for Japan refer only to policies implemented at the central level, not including policies taken by individual ministries.

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6.7. Share of the central government workforce who worked remotely during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, 2020



Source: OECD (2020), Special COVID-19 module of the Public Service Leadership and Capability Survey.

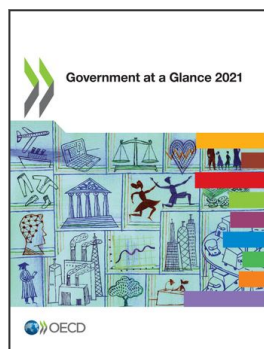
StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934258059>

6.8. Personnel management responses during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020

	Definition of essential positions	IT infrastructure enabling remote work (e.g. laptops/VPN)	Remote working regulations/policies	Video conferencing and other communication tools to enabling remote working	Leave policies for employees who were unable to work remotely	Recruitment/staffing regulations/policies (including internal mobility)	Communication channels to keep staff informed (e.g. website)	Co-ordination bodies (e.g. committees to co-ordinate the personnel management response)	Tools to track data on employee response (e.g. employee surveys, number of VPN connections, admin data)
Australia	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Austria	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆
Belgium	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆
Canada	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆
Colombia	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Czech Republic	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Denmark	□	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Estonia	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Finland	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
France	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Germany	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆	□
Greece	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆
Hungary	□	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆
Ireland	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Israel	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Italy	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆
Japan	□	◆	□	□	◆◆	□	□	□	□
Korea	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Latvia	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Lithuania	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆◆	◆◆	□	□
Luxembourg	◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆	□	◆	◆	◆	◆◆
Mexico	□	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Netherlands	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□
New Zealand	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆
Norway	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	□
Poland	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Portugal	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆
Slovak Republic	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆◆	◆◆	□
Slovenia	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□
Spain	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□
Sweden	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆	◆	◆	□
Switzerland	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	□	◆◆	◆◆	□
Turkey	□	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	□
United States	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
OECD Total									
Already in place before the COVID-19 crisis ■	15	22	20	10	10	23	31	19	11
Newly developed or highly transformed ◆	14	12	13	23	13	8	2	9	12
This measure is expected to stay in place after the crisis ◆	22	32	29	31	16	24	30	21	17
Not applicable □	5	0	1	1	11	3	1	6	11
Brazil	◆	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□
Costa Rica	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Romania	◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	□	◆◆	□	◆◆

Source: OECD (2020), Special COVID-19 module of the Public Service Leadership and Capability Survey.

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