

# The European Commission

## Where now? Where next?

### Research Briefing 6: Job satisfaction and workplace engagement. Does institutional context matter?

**Staff in the Commission are very satisfied and engaged with their work, but what impact do wider organisational changes have on their experience of the workplace?**

#### Background

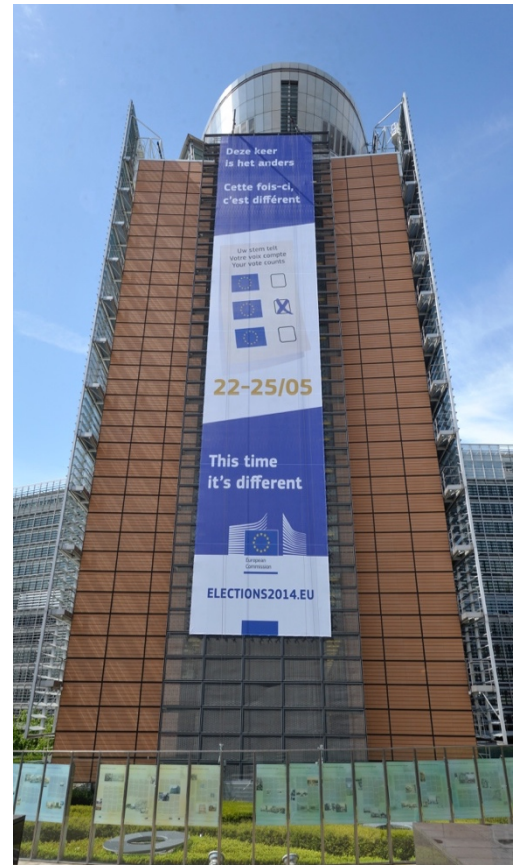
Close attention is now paid by employers, research institutes and academics to job satisfaction and employee engagement in the workplace. Focus in this regard has mainly been directed to the pride felt by employees in the job, their sense of personal accomplishment at work, and their experience of managers.

Two of our studies, '[The European Commission: Facing the Future](#)' in 2014 and '[The European Commission: Where now? Where next?](#)' in 2018, have looked at job satisfaction and experience of the workplace on the part of staff in the Commission. Both reported high levels of engagement among staff which were largely in line with the results of the Commission's staff survey. But we believe there are also more subtle processes at work.

Beyond the questions about the job, personal pride and engagement, however, we also probed staff views on their experience of developments in the wider institutional environment.

In the 2014 study, we included in our online survey a series of detailed questions aimed to solicit opinion on the impact of the changes to the Staff Regulations. (This followed our long-term interest in reform, which we asked about in our first research project, '[The European Commission in Question](#)', in 2008). The 2014 reforms, which were strongly associated with austerity following the financial and economic crisis, had resulted in a material change to employment terms and conditions, which staff were busy digesting, and about which they did not have positive views (links to [Connolly and Kassim 2014](#): ch. 4; [European Court of Auditors 2019](#)).

Our 2018 study also sought to examine staff views on the impact of organisational and procedural.



For further information:

*Project website:*

<https://www.uea.ac.uk/political-social-international-studies/research/the-juncker-commission>

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### Does institutional context matter?

Specifically, it aimed to solicit attitudes on the 'political Commission' and the 'new ways of working' introduced in 2014 under President Juncker. Both can be thought of as reforms, although, of course, since they involved changes in organisational structures and procedures, they did not affect staff in the same way as amendment of the *Statut*.

We discuss how the changes enacted under the Juncker Presidency might be viewed in terms of the historical development of

presidential leadership in the Commission in another research briefing ([Research Briefing 4](#)). How staff saw those changes and how they evaluate the Juncker Commission more broadly are similarly covered elsewhere ([Research Briefing 5](#)). In this briefing, our aim is to reflect on the possible effects of both sets of change – the 2014 reform of the Staff Regulations and the advent of the Juncker Commission – on how staff feel about their work. In other words, although job satisfaction and job values are typically

linked to the clarity with which employees consider that their responsibilities are defined, the predictability of their workload, and how they are managed, we suggest, first, that wider institutional and organisational developments might also play a role, and second, that the effects of the latter might be picked up indirectly. We think that it is worth reflecting on the results from the two studies to see whether and, if so, how such an impact might be detected.

#### Beyond job satisfaction?

On job satisfaction, we are struck by how little appears to have changed. The 2018 survey repeated many of the questions posed in 2014 on the experience of the workplace and the results were broadly similar. On the whole, the responses to questions on the workplace, their team and how they are managed suggest strong continuity. Staff are very positive about the Commission.

The same is true for most but not all of the responses to what staff value about

their jobs and the constraints or frustrations that they face. It is possible that we are seeing an indirect effect of the 'political commission' and the 'new ways of working' on how people perceive their work. For example, the job value for 'making a difference to European citizens' and 'building Europe' has increased dramatically. Similarly, with the exception of 'too many approval stages', what staff consider to be impediments to carrying out their job effectively have come down.

Our view is that this change could be quite important. Even if staff, particularly in certain places and in certain levels, are not necessarily familiar with the details of the structural and procedural changes that have been enacted, they may pick up on the broad message and consider that their working life has improved and that they feel even more strongly committed to a pro-EU value because they sense a new direction of travel that they regard as positive.

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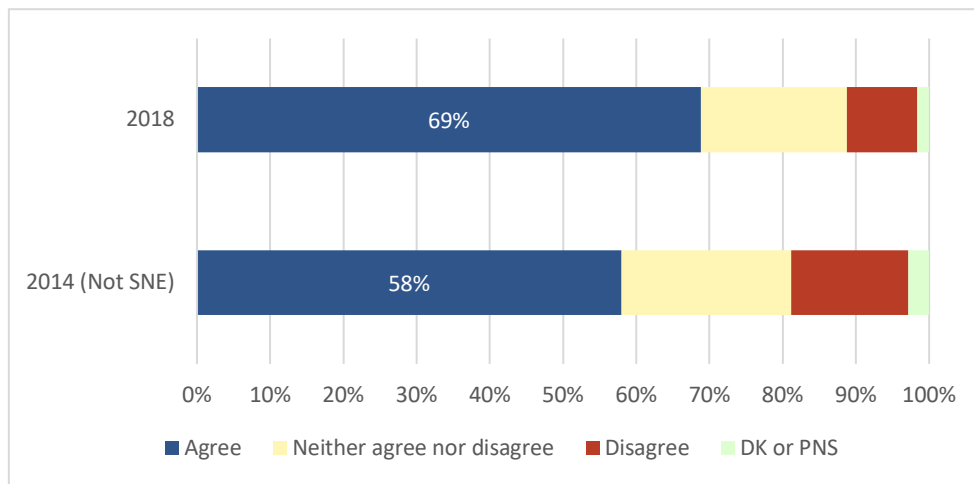
**Other evidence?**

We believe that there are also a number of other signs. First, there is a big increase in the pride that

staff express about their work. The proportion of people who are proud when telling others that they work for the Commission has increased from 58 per cent

in 2014 to 69 per cent in 2018.

**Figure 1. Responses 'I am proud when I tell others I work for the Commission'. 2014 and 2018 compared.**

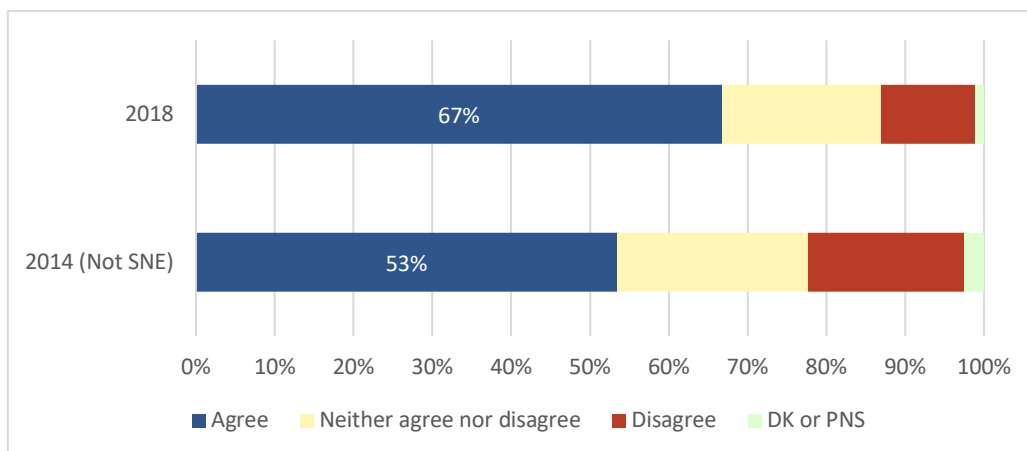


There is a similarly large increase – from 53 per cent in 2014 to 67 per cent in

2018 -- in replies to the question as to whether the

Commission is a good employer.

**Figure 2. Responses 'The Commission is a good employer' 2014 and 2018 compared**



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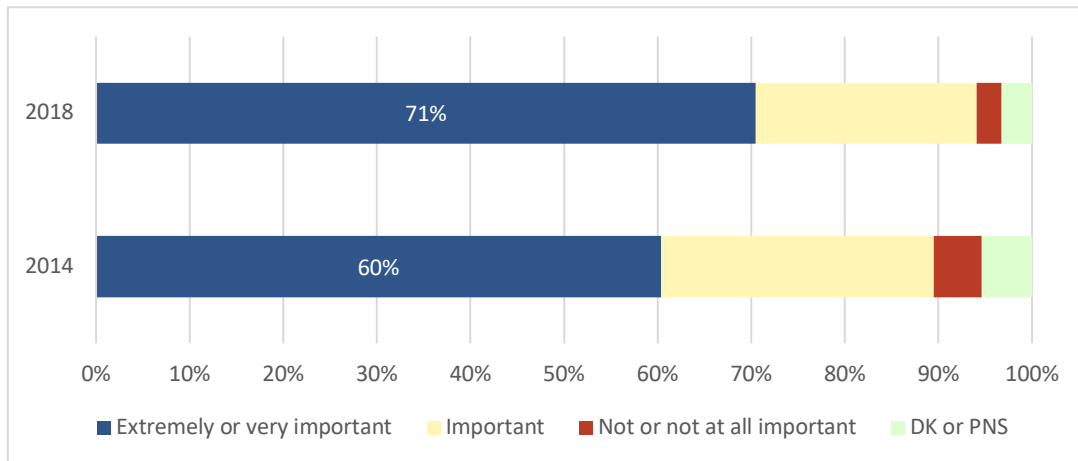
### Does institutional context matter?

On reflecting on these results, the thought is that values in 2014 were lower on account of the changes to the Staff Regulations, while the 2018 responses reflect the positive messages associated with the 'political Commission' – a personal mandate for the

incoming President deriving from the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, turning the page on austerity, and the promise that the Juncker Commission would stand up for the EU, be responsive, and reconnect with citizens.

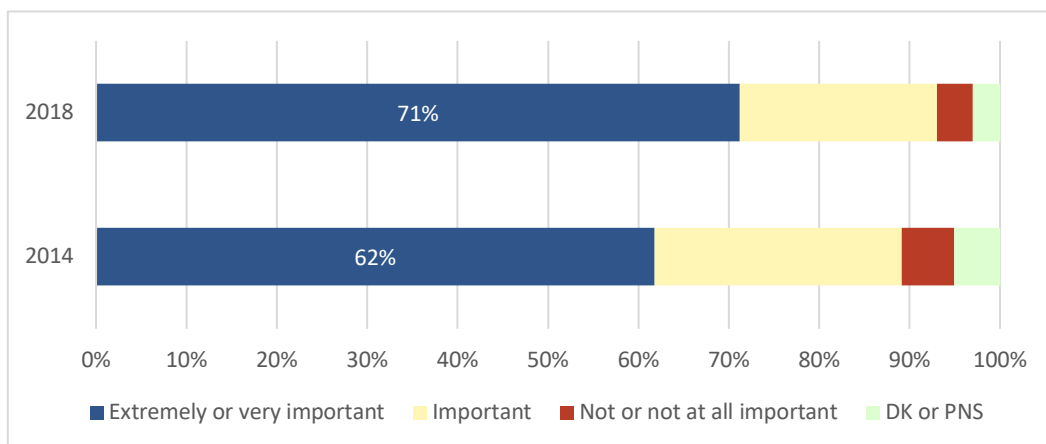
The same factors could be behind the increase from 60 to 71 per cent in the number of respondents who 'value my work because of the difference it makes to the lives of European citizens'

**Figure 3. Responses to 'Job value: making a difference to the life of European citizens'**



There was a similar increase in the response to the question 'I value my work because of it is building Europe': from 62 to 71 per cent.

**Figure 4. Responses to 'Job value: Building Europe'. 2014 and 2018 compared**



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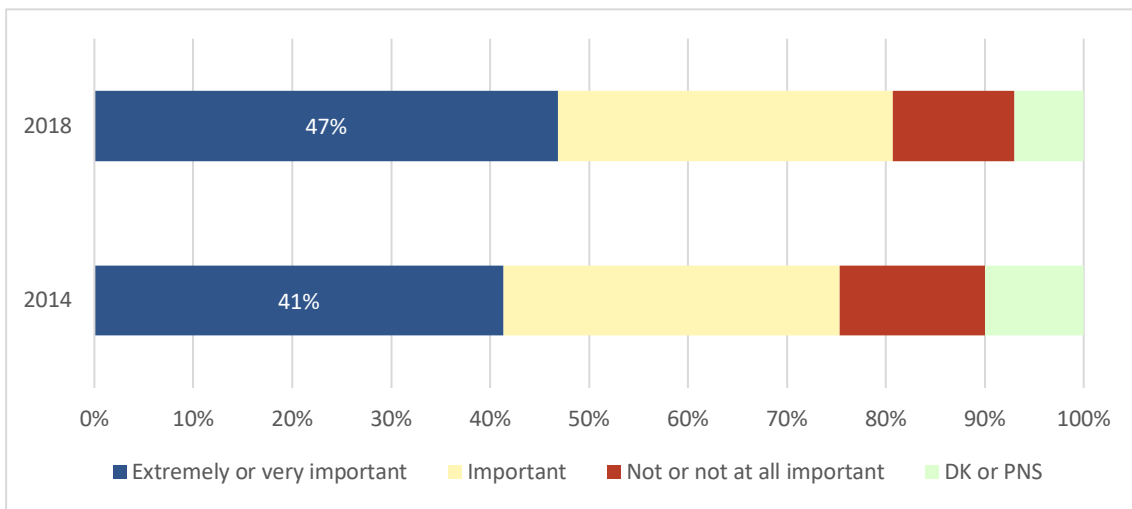
### Does institutional context matter?

A much smaller increase – from 41 to 47 per cent -- was recorded in response to the question, ‘I value my

work because of the influence on policy’, perhaps reflecting the emphasis placed by the

Juncker Commission on key policy areas and getting things done

**Figure 5. Responses to ‘Job value: Influencing policy. 2014 and 2018 compared.**

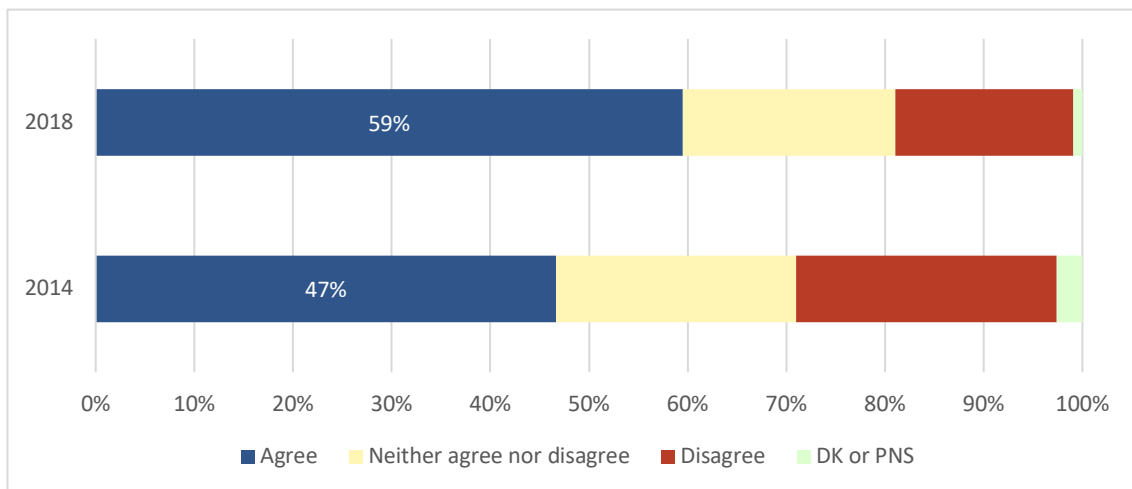


The proportion of staff who consider that they have

clarity in their work objectives rose from 47 per

cent in 2014 to 59 per cent in 2018.

**Figure 6. Responses ‘I have clear work objectives and measures of success’. 2014 and 2018 compared.**



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Finally, the percentage of respondents who felt that they were encumbered by unnecessary tasks or projects fell from 52 in 2014 to 29 in 2018, and the proportion who felt their work suffers due to

constantly changing priorities from 37 per cent in 2014 to 30 per cent in 2018.

In the context of minimal change in the responses to questions concerning the workplace, we suggest that

the upward and downward movements reported above reflect a wider feelgood factor associated with the Juncker Commission and its positive message as compared with the more sombre mood of 2014.

#### Conclusion

Although more work is required, we believe that comparison of the responses to questions on job satisfaction, on the one hand, and job values, on the other, between 2014 and 2018 show that more is

going on than staff simply reporting on their experience of the workplace or engagement as conventionally understood. While responses on job satisfaction remain relatively constant, those on job

values show often very significant movement. Our reading is that these results are signalling broader messages about wider environmental changes in the institution, which affect how they feel about their jobs and the Commission as a workplace.

*Sara Connolly and Hussein Kassim*  
29 November 2019



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#### About the project

'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?' is a multinational academic research project, undertaken by a multidisciplinary team. It investigates the internal structure and operation of the Commission, with a particular focus on of the 'political Commission' and the 'new ways of working'. It looks also at the background, beliefs and experience of the people who work for the Commission. The project is informed by data drawn from three sources: responses to an online survey from around 6500 respondents from across and at all levels of the Commission; a programme of more than 200 interviews, including with Commissioners, cabinet members and senior managers; and five focus groups with staff in non-managerial positions. For further information, see our [project website](#)

The project is the third to be undertaken by a team led by Professor Hussein Kassim, following '[The European Commission in Question](#)' in 2008-09 and '[The European Commission: Facing the Future](#)' in 2014. The surveys in 2014 and 2018 were circulated to all staff and the 2008 survey was sent to administrators in policy DGs and members of cabinet. Where we make comparisons across surveys, we attempt to present like-for-like results for all staff in 2014/2018 and for administrators and members of cabinet in 2008/2014/2018.

Funding for the project comes from the European University Institute, the German University of Administrative Sciences Speyer, and the University of East Anglia. Although the European Commission allowed us to undertake the project and offered practical help, they provided no financial support or funding.

To contact us or to subscribe to further research briefings, please email [us](mailto:us).

'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?' Research Briefings are edited and produced by Sara Connolly and Hussein Kassim.

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