

Face-to-face, hybrid, online? The format of SNB, EWC and SE-WC meetings post-COVID-19

Joint Recommendations of the European Trade Union Federations to EWC/SE Coordinators and worker representatives in SNBs, EWCs and SEs

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As the COVID-19 pandemic prevented face-to-face meetings, SNBs (Special Negotiation Bodies), EWCs (European Works Councils) and SE-WCs (Works Councils in companies with a *Societas Europaea* status) have operated under extraordinary circumstances over the past two years. Online and hybrid (partly online, partly physical) videoconferencing served as a temporary solution to pursue social dialogue with management and secure continuous information and consultation on key issues for European workers.

Now that social distancing and travel restrictions are being lifted, the European trade union federations maintain that face-to-face meetings are the norm to build up effective SNB, EWC and SE-WC work and robust communication among delegates. In some countries, like Germany, decisions and votes by the EWC are only valid if they are made at a physical meeting. Although useful in exceptional circumstances, and as an opportunity to convene more meetings than planned in your EWC/SE agreement, digital tools, like videoconferencing and hybrid meetings, must not replace the basic SNB, EWC or SE-WC's right to face-to-face meetings.

In no instance should the management unilaterally decide on the format of a meeting!

The European trade union federations therefore recommend:

#1 To resume SNB, EWC and SE-WC meetings face-to-face

Face-to-face meetings remain the normal way for SNBs, EWCs and SE-WCs to operate. Preparatory and debriefing meetings with the employee representatives of the EWC/SE-WC should also be held in person, with the assistance of professional interpreters who should be present in the meeting room, too.

The European trade union federations believe it is not advisable to resort to hybrid or online meetings for plenary EWC or SNB meetings, especially at the starting phase of a negotiation when members do not know each other particularly well.

#2 To limit the use of online or hybrid meetings to smaller groups and extra meetings

Online or hybrid meetings could be envisaged for the meetings of the EWC/SE-WC working groups (if any), or for the EWC or SE-WC select committee, provided these online/hybrid select committee meetings help more frequent meetings to take place, in addition to those already planned in your EWC/SE agreement.

The decision to convene a meeting either online or hybrid must be subject to the EWC/SE-WC members' agreement, and decided on a case-by-case basis.

Should you decide to resort to online/hybrid meetings on a permanent basis for the EWC/SE-WC working group meetings, and any additional meetings of the select committee, you may want to consider adapting your EWC/SE agreement accordingly. Should that be the case, please liaise with the trade union expert/coordinator who is assisting your EWC/SE-WC, and with your European trade union federation.

To ensure good quality online or hybrid-meetings, the European trade union federations recommend the following principles:

1. **Agree formally with the management** about the rules and specific conditions for the use of online or hybrid meetings. The first goal is to ensure that all delegates benefit equally from the same high-quality working conditions, and that no one will be disadvantaged (e.g. either by not having access to proper IT equipment or by not being present in the room at a hybrid meeting).
2. **Request the best quality videoconferencing/hybrid system**, i.e. one which provides for:
 - Participation by video, with the possibility of seeing every participant on the screen
 - Simultaneous interpretation in all required languages, provided by professional interpreters
 - Possibility for all participants to request the floor
 - A chat room, where delegates can interact during the meeting with all due confidentiality
 - Participation of external experts and trade union coordinators who assist the EWC/SE-WC
 - A high level of cybersecurity and privacy protection, while ensuring that firewalls and other network security devices do not prevent delegates from convening meetings between themselves (without the management), or prevent the involvement of external experts and trade union coordinators.
3. **Secure access to and training in** the use of the videoconferencing system for all delegates. EWC and SE-WC members must have access to the necessary equipment (computer/tablet, high-speed internet connection, headset, webcam) and to a dedicated office or (home) room to allow for their meaningful participation in the meeting. A training session on, as well as a test of, the chosen videoconferencing system must be carried out before the first online/hybrid meeting takes place.

Of course, it is for the SNB, EWC or SE-WC delegates to decide, together with their trade union federation, what is best, depending on their own specific situation, provided social dialogue is maintained under high-quality conditions. The trade union expert/coordinator nominated to assist your SNB, EWC or SE-WC, as well as the European trade union federations, remain at your complete disposal should you have any questions.



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