

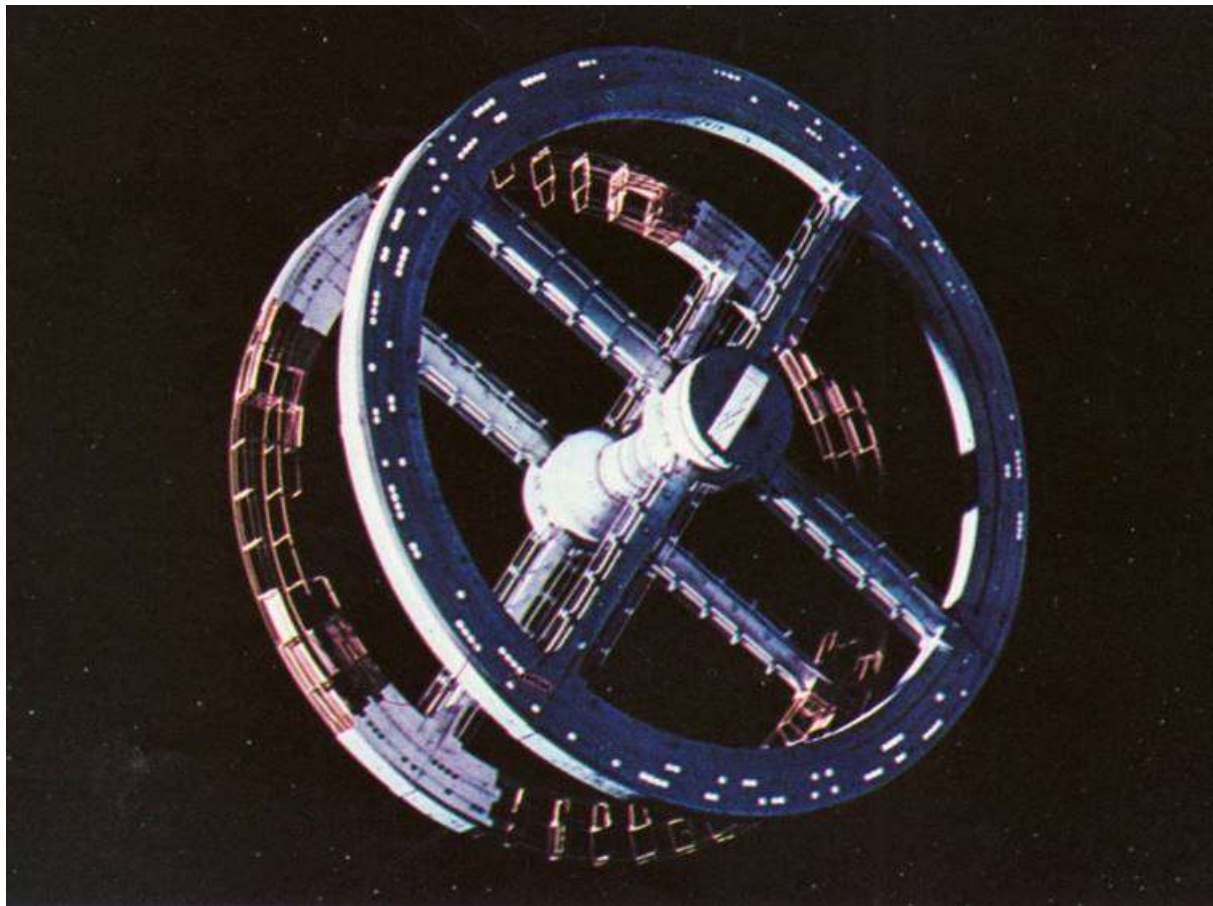
2022: A CONTRACT AGENTS MOBILITY EXERCISE ODYSSEY

OPACITY ADDS DISMAY TO RECORD NUMBER OF COLLEAGUES MOVING TO UNWANTED COUNTRIES

*TAO-Independents Delegations calls for more
transparency, objectivity, accountability and flexibility*

27 June 2022

The compulsory mobility from one Delegation to another represents an opportunity for Contract Agents (CAs) to diversify their work experience in otherwise completely flat careers. Changing Delegation offers new learning opportunities and, sometimes, a welcome fresh new beginning. However, changing country, sometimes continent, and in some cases moving their family along to difficult places, also present serious existential challenges way beyond the professional sphere. **Yet the Commission still treats CAs mobility in Delegations with the opacity and lightness typical of when it shifts staff from one department to another within Brussels.** Staff in the Commission are familiar with interviews shortlists without transparency or with the characteristic lack of courtesy in not even bothering to notify staff about their interview results. Let us not even aspire for the unthinkable such as receiving constructive feedback to learn from one's performance. **It is an institutional culture. One which in Head Quarters is damaging but which in Delegations can be existentially devastating. This must change! ...and not only for Delegations.**



CAs and their families at the mercy of a procedure in the dark

In the absence of shared official figures, Contract Agents involved in the 2022 mobility exercise reported that over 35% did not obtain any position within their five preferences. We would welcome official figures on this and we would be happy to be wrong! But if these were to be confirmed, it would be a record in the short history of CAs' mobility. If we ever obtain official figures, it would be necessary to account for colleagues who have resigned (it includes a TAO Delegations board member), and for colleagues who, as a last resort, went on sabbatical or on extended parental leave at their own expense to try their luck with *ad-hoc* vacancies or with the 2023 mobility exercise.

TAO the Independents finds it surprising that, in the first round of CA allocations other delegations, at least seven posts in non-hardship countries—with *indemnisation de condition vie* (ICV) between 15%-20%—were not attributed to any staff. We understand that the matching of staff to jobs with expertise requirements is not easy. But it remains surprising that so many positions were left vacant among such a large pool of experienced CAs originally recruited on their expertise in development cooperation. Accepting it is possible that no CAs had the required skills, staff who see their life choices

disregarded expect a minimum of basic transparency e.g. “we are sorry to inform you that position X in country Y requires a water engineer as watsan constitutes most of its portfolio”... though, if most job descriptions were close to the actual needs of Delegations, this would be known in advance. **TAO therefore calls for the reasons for rejection to be reported to candidates based on objective selection criteria and genuine job descriptions.** We understand that the list of assignments of CAs to postings was not published after the first round. So, will we ever know?

The second round in matching candidates to postings: a very ‘disjointed’ exercise

Another surprising aspect of this exercise are testimonies of INTPA colleagues who received a proposal on 02/02/2022, while NEAR colleagues got them on 20/02/2022. Was the exercise not supposed to be a joint process? If it was, CAs should all have received the proposals for the second round at the same time. Since CAs have 10 working days to respond, it means that the INTPA and NEAR mobility exercises went in separate ways. Was this a way for NEAR to get rid of INTPA colleagues who work in more difficult countries? Did any INTPA colleague obtain any position among the NEAR posts or vice versa in the second round? We would welcome this information.

The alternating posting hardship rule: just decoration?

The guidelines for mobility include a rule whereby CAs are expected to alternate between harder and less hard countries. While CAs can voluntarily do more hardship countries, they cannot be forced to. This is crucial for the well-being of CAs and their families. This principle adds further challenges to the puzzle, but that does not justify that a CA having worked four years in a country with 40% ICV (highest ICV due to very difficult living condition), and having performed very well in interviews for an ICV 20% country, be offered a position only in a 30% ICV country.

The fact that a significant number of CAs working in hardship countries (with ICVs of 30% or over) have been proposed 40% or 35% ICV countries again or to remain in their current hardship positions clearly shows **that the Commission has not included sufficient flexibility in the mobility system** as to honour its own commitments. There is a clear need for more buffer options such as transitional postings in Brussels or even alternative options such as involving studies, sabbatical or acting as floaters.

We also heard of a colleague who was proposed to return to a position from where she had been authorised to leave due to health problems.

In conclusion, the principle of alternating positions according to living conditions has become a mere decorative element of the guidelines.

What next for 2023 and beyond?

The list of grievances conveyed by staff to **TAO** the Independents is long. **TAO** hereby demands more transparency about what happened in 2022 and for more accountability in the 2023 mobility exercise as well as the presence of trade unions throughout the entire process. We expect DG HR to take due consideration of our colleagues' concerns and we call for more openness and information on what is being done to improve it.

In **TAO's** opinion, there are a number of structural issues to be addressed to ensure procedures such as mobility (and others) work better in the Commission:

- ✓ **More transparency:** on the process from the shortlisting of candidates for interviews to the reasons for rejecting or selecting candidates; also regarding *ad-hoc* vacancies which should be more visible and delays should be longer to allow for colleagues to stand a chance.
- ✓ **More objectivity:** particularly on the job-descriptions which are all too often vague, generic and unrelated to actual expectations by the Delegation. Staff should not depend on informal networks to find out the actual profile a Delegation is seeking for a position. This should be official in the job description; more objectivity is required on the performance criteria used in interviews; and on the scoring attributed to staff who make incredible efforts to prepare for interviews learning about several completely new countries in a matter of days on top of their demanding jobs.
- ✓ **More accountability:** about the decisions made in the different steps of the procedure such as by allowing staff to get more feedback on their performance and on the reasons for not selecting them. It can be as simple as "another candidate performed better on X, Y and Z".
- ✓ **More flexibility:** increasingly CAs are forced to use their very single one-year sabbatical (known as CCP or *congé de convenance personnel*) or

parental leave, to compensate for mobility dissatisfactory allocations. An increasing number consider retiring early or resigning for the same reason. This calls for the urgent need to add intermediate options to the mobility exercise such as additional CCP for CAs in the interest of the service, more options to transition via HQ, perhaps the option of working as a floater, the possibility to telework for extended periods while waiting for Ad-Hoc opportunities, less disadvantageous part-time arrangements, or even partially sponsored leave for relevant training.

All of the above are just some basic measures, which may not necessarily cost more to the service for CAs to feel that their careers can be reasonably predictable in the long-term. More importantly, they would help CAs feel that when they do not get what they aimed at, at least the Commission did it in a fair way.

The recently adopted “New HR strategy” does acknowledge the importance of mobility as a main driver for the attractiveness of the EU Civil service, to be indeed able to attract and retain the talents our institution needs. We are of the opinion that much is still to be done...

Nurture a culture of merit and transparency and in-house talent will flourish

TAO-Delegations board

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