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Covid-19: the numbers of smart working in 2020

In Italy alone, agile workers will increase tenfold: over 5 million when fully operational.

According to the Smart Working Observatory of the School of Management of the Politecnico di Milano, during the lockdown 6.58 million Italians experimented with **remote working**.

Agile working involved about a third of Italian employees and more than **ten times more than the 570,000 Italian smart workers in 2019**. Specifically, 97% of **large companies,** 94% of **public administrations** and 58% of **SMEs**, . The majority (2.11 million) work in large enterprises (mainly in the finance and ICT sectors and less in retail and manufacturing), 1.13 million in SMEs, 1.5 million in micro-enterprises with fewer than ten employees and 1.85 million in public administrations (PAs that already had projects underway were able to involve more people -70%- than administrations that had to start from scratch -55%-).

In September 2020, amidst difficulties and uncertainties in the opening of workplaces, smart workers had fallen to 5.06 million, divided into 1.67 million in large enterprises, 890,000 in SMEs, 1.18 million in micro-enterprises and 1.32 million in the public sector: on average, workers in large private companies worked remotely for half of their working time (around 2.7 days a week), compared with 1.2 days a week for employees in the public sector.

Today, remote working has become part of everyday life for Italians. At the end of the emergency, it is estimated that "**agile workers, who will work at least partly remotely, will total 5.35 million**, of which 1.72 million in large enterprises, 920 thousand in SMEs, 1.23 million in micro enterprises and 1.48 million in PA. Projects to adopt the mode even after the emergency are on the rise: 70% of large companies will increase the number of days they work remotely, on average from one to 2.7 days a week, and one in two will change the physical space. In the PA, smart working projects will be introduced (48%), the number of people involved in the projects will increase (72%) and people will work remotely on average 1.4 days a week (47%), compared to the current average day".

Mariano Corso, Scientific Director of the Smart Working Observatory, explains how the Covid19 emergency has accelerated the process of transformation of the work organisation model, "demonstrating that Smart Working can concern a potentially very wide range of workers, provided that processes are digitalised and staff are equipped with appropriate tools and skills". For example, **in 33% of large companies, call centre operators worked remotely for the first time**, in 21% counter staff worked from home, converting part of their activities and communicating digitally with customers, and in 17%, remote work was also applied to specialised workers by digitalising access to machinery.

"Now it is necessary to rethink the work in order not to waste the experience of these months and to move to the real Smart Working, which must provide more flexibility and autonomy in the choice of place and time of work, fundamental elements to push a greater responsibility on the results. We need to put people at the centre with their needs, talents and singularities, structuring training, involvement and welfare plans that help people to express their full potential'.

Of course, the emergent application of Smart Working has also laid bare the technological unpreparedness of many organisations. "**More than two out of three large companies have had to increase the equipment of laptops and other hardware tools (69%) and tools to be able to remotely access business applications (65%)**; three out of four PAs have encouraged employees to use personal devices; 50% of SMEs have not been able to work remotely".

As seen in a previous article on the health implications of smart working, at the organisational level, however, "it was difficult to maintain a work-life balance for 58% of large companies and 28% of workers, and for 33% of organisations managers were not prepared to manage remote working. In spite of the difficulties, this atypical Smart Working contributed to improve employees' digital skills (for 71% of large companies and 53% of PAs), to rethink business processes (59% and 42%) and to break down barriers and prejudices about agile working (65% of large companies), marking an irreversible change in work organisation".

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