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The world of smart working: individual health

For months now, smart working has become part of the lives of many workers in the world. How was it perceived? And what consequences for workers' health has it brought with it?

According to Mariano Corso, Professor at the Politecnico di Milano and Scientific Director of the Smart Working and Cloud Transformation Observatories, the application of Smart Working in emergencies has reduced the economic and health damage of the pandemic and marked an irreversible turning point in the organization of work.

The Milan Polytechnic Observatory reports that in 2019 Smart Working involved **570,000 workers**, 20% more than in 2018. It was applied mainly by large companies (58%), while the adoption rate remained low in SMEs (12%) and Public Administrations (16%). Those who worked in smart working in 2019 did so on average one day a week, just to do individual work.

In 2020, the Covid-19 emergency made **Smart Working** the preferred, if not mandatory, way of working because remote working proved to be the only possible solution to reconcile social distancing and isolation with the need to ensure business continuity.

The number of "remote" workers suddenly rose to a figure close to **8 million**. Companies that had previously experimented with Smart Working models found themselves advantaged and prepared, but the change was radical for everyone.

In fact, what many of them have experienced is not the real Smart Working, but a form of **remote working** in which "lack the prerequisites of voluntariness and flexibility that are at the basis of the exchange between autonomy in the choice of working methods and accountability on the results on which every Smart Working agreement should be based. People have not been able to exercise any choice because they were in fact bound to work from home, often without those conditions of autonomy and empowerment whose construction requires time and organizational maturity".

Whether you call it smart working, agile work or teleworking, remote working was a new experience "imposed" by the **COVID-19 emergency** and the need for social distancing for months, even to many workers who had never experienced it before. And it is very likely that the experience will continue for a time not well defined.

For the employees of the American hi-tech giant **Google**, smart working will be a widespread reality until the end of 2020: from July only a few offices will reopen, but the fill factor will be kept below 10%. This percentage will rise to 30% in September. Strict security measures will be implemented to protect workers and all those who will continue smart working. The company has provided a $1,000 bonus to purchase equipment to work from home.

Mark Zuckerberg says that by 2030 half of Facebook employees could be working remotely. Social networking employees will work from home until the end of the year and new employees will be selected to work remotely in July.

But how has smart working been received by employees and companies and what repercussions has it had and will it have over the next year?

Perceptions about smart working

While LinkedIn research tells us that remote working is much more stressful for most people than traditional work - out of a sample of 2,000 workers, 21% say they find it hard to pull the plug and work at least an extra hour a day or 20 extra hours a month, 36% pretend to be busy to prove to their bosses that they deserve their job, and 16% are afraid of being fired and anxious whether their company will survive - a survey commissioned by Citrix from CensusWide on a sample of 3700 IT company executives located in 7 countries around the world tells us that 7.5 out of 10 workers appreciate the benefits of working remotely and want to continue working from home (the **full report** in pdf).

69% of the IT managers surveyed said that working from home was not complicated and with the technologies deployed, the work was no different from what was usually done in offices. To continue working remotely for longer periods of time, you need new structures and platforms in the Cloud (not an easy and predictable transition).

But the concerns that **arise** from working remotely within **IT departments** touch on further points:

- the **security of data** and work done off-site: 70% said they were very worried about the impossibility of checking that there were no breaches of security protocols, also because many employees (and this scares 54% of IT managers) have installed software on their devices that was not authorized by the company's IT department.
- the very tight time frame for the **transfer of activities to the cloud and remotely**: 77% of respondents found high levels of stress, but it also produced a significant advantage, because the IT sector within companies has become of primary importance and confirmed its strategic role (which will remain so even after the crisis, according to 77% of respondents).
- the difficulty of keeping companies' **VPNs** (Virtual Private Network) always efficient: according to 23% of IT managers.

On the other hand, in the face of all the concerns of IT managers, the **advantages of working remotely** have quickly become apparent:

- business continuity.
- the satisfaction of employees who were able to reconcile work and family security at a time of serious health concerns.
- the savings derived from not using the company's physical infrastructure (offices, etc.).

What effects does smart working have on our health?

According to Marcello Albergoni, country manager of LinkedIn Italy, "Covid-19 has had an impact on the way we work, we are all adapting to the new normality and learning to be **flexible**. This period has brought with it a number of very different challenges, and for those lucky enough to be able to work from home, we are seeing an impact on our mental health and well-being".
The (psychological, in this case) health of workers is a crucial issue for productivity, and this can also be seen in LinkedIn's chats "the health of workers is at the centre of the wave of conversations that see a 55% increase year on year". An extra space to feel less alone and share the smart working experience to improve it" concludes Albergoni.

Although we have seen that the negative sides of working from home have manifested themselves through stress and increased working hours, there are also positive aspects. 50% of workers say that during the period of smartworking in lockdown they had the opportunity to spend more time with their children and families. 11% of workers also agree that this quarantine period had a positive impact on their **personal relationships**, the opportunity to eat healthier (27%) and exercise more (14%).

So, 70% of workers who have "tried" smart working now do not want to go back anymore, but they need to avoid the risk of burnout.

To continue in this "housewife" direction, in fact, it is important to use the time available also to take care of emotional and psychological well-being, as much as our physical health. 18% of workers reported that their mental health was negatively affected by working from home. 27% of workers have difficulty sleeping, 22% experience some form of anxiety, while another 26% feel that they are not focused during the day. If situations like these are not managed they can easily lead to workers' burnout, psychologists comment.

As Laura Parolin, vice-president of the Order of Psychologists, explains: "The work from home and the impossibility of going out forced us to a sudden redefinition of the balance between work, family and free time. The organization of work before the pandemic allowed us to escape and distance ourselves from other living environments, a possibility that was missing in this situation, forcing us to constantly confront isolation or relationships with our cohabitants, often with the difficulty of defining a satisfactory work-life balance. It is understandable to feel lost and dazed by the novelty, but it is equally crucial to take advantage of the newfound contact with oneself to learn to listen to oneself and rethink emotions, anxieties, fears".

"When people experience great uncertainty," continues Parolin, "it is normal for it to turn into anxiety or fear, especially when they fear losing their jobs, as the LinkedIn data reveals. It is precisely these types of situations that highlight the close link

between our psychological well-being, productivity and ability to work as a team. Companies will have to provide specific company welfare actions (counters, vouchers, conventions) for the psychological support to employees in order to ensure that their well-being is protected, and workers will not have to fear to refer to the professionals involved".

To learn more and train your workers to better manage their work remotely, discover the one-hour online course "Workers in Smart Working Update". The course is valid as a quota of the five-year update for workers.

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