

**‘Another work routine is possible’: everyday experiences of
(unexpected) remote work in Italy**

Alessandro Gandini^{a*} and Emma Garavaglia^b

*^aDepartment of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan; ^bDepartment of
Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy*

*Corresponding author: Alessandro Gandini, Department of Social and Political
Sciences, University of Milan, alessandro.gandini@unimi.it

‘Another work routine is possible’: everyday experiences of (unexpected) remote work in Italy

The article discusses the opinions and perceptions of knowledge workers in Italy concerning the shift to remote work during the first countrywide lockdown (March-May 2020) imposed to contain the Covid-19 outbreak. Prior to the pandemic, remote work arrangements in the Italian context were not common. Thanks to a set of 35 interviews to workers who experienced significant disruption to their usual working routine because of the health crisis, we show that a marked element of *discovery* of remote work characterises their accounts, articulated across 3 dimensions: temporal organization of work and life, technology, and social relations. We argue that this experience was instrumental for many of them to learn that ‘another work routine is possible’, because of the opportunity to try out alternative arrangements in the management of tasks and responsibilities. Yet issues of work-life balance, together with managerial cultures anchored in pre-pandemic forms of organization, considerably affect this perception.

Keywords: Covid-19, knowledge work, new forms of work, remote work, smart work

Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has forced millions of workers worldwide, particularly knowledge workers, to suddenly adapt to work remotely, supported by digital technology. This, in turn, has given many of them the chance of experiencing remote working routines and practices for the first time, presenting them with the opportunity to evaluate their efficacy. Despite the significant individual and contextual impact of the health emergency, this constitutes an unplanned and highly valuable large-scale experimentation of remote work arrangements, which deserves specific attention.

Among others, Italy represents a very interesting example to observe in this regard. Prior to the pandemic outbreak, Italian work cultures were deeply anchored in

traditional office work. Remote or 'smart' working arrangements were not common, with figures varying from one sector to another but that remained largely minoritarian overall. Indeed, this way of working had been commonly considered to be a 'corporate welfare' concession, granted to certain workers in response to specific needs or circumstances, and upon justified request (Maino and Razetti, 2020).

This article discusses the opinions and perceptions of knowledge workers in Italy concerning the sudden and unplanned shift to remote work during the first countrywide lockdown imposed by the Covid-19 outbreak (8 March - 4 May 2020). It is estimated that, within this timeframe, remote work practices were adopted by 21,3% of Italian companies with more than 3 employees, with a peak of 60% in the service sector, and in the information and communication sector in particular (ISTAT, 2021). A large portion of knowledge workers in Italy experienced remote work for the very first time upon this occasion. Albeit blended with lockdown constraints, this gave them a glimpse of how remote work may or may not be a positive innovation in relation to their work routines, showing them how it may affect their work-life balance and work organization and leading them to question whether it was desirable that remote work arrangements could, at least in part, be institutionalized beyond the health emergency.

Based on a set of 35 semi-structured interviews conducted between May and September 2020, in this article we present and discuss the lived experiences of remote work by Italy-based knowledge workers who have seen their working routines severely disrupted by the pandemic outbreak. Our inquiry focused on 3 main areas: a) the perceptions and opinions of workers with regards to the sudden adaptation to totally new working conditions, in the context of a global pandemic; b) their everyday experiences of remote work and their assessment of the positive and negative traits of this unexpected experimentation; c) their evaluation of the future prospects of remote

work as a ‘new form of work’ in the Italian context. Empirical evidence has been analysed by means of a qualitative thematic analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), focusing on the identification of core themes in a body of qualitative data, and their extraction by means of inductive, manual coding.

Although, as said, their perceptions are inevitably affected by the anxiety and stress caused by the pandemic outbreak, by personal and familial health concerns, preoccupations of job security and income stability, findings suggest that many Italy-based workers have effectively *discovered* remote work during the lockdown period. The element of discovery represents the core theme in their accounts; this is articulated across 3 main dimensions: temporal organization of work and life, technology, and social relations. We argue that the first 2020 lockdown represented for many Italy-based knowledge workers the opportunity to find out that ‘another work routine is possible’, because of the possibility of experiencing alternative arrangements in the management of tasks and responsibilities. Yet, issues of work-life balance, together with managerial cultures that they deem to be inadequate or unwilling to support this innovation, considerably affect this perception. In particular, fears of ‘laziness’, excessive autonomy and a loss of control upon work routines by employers and supervisors are believed to hinder the prospect that remote work practices may, at least in part, be institutionalized beyond the pandemic emergency, thus resulting in a missed opportunity.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section we review the existing research on remote work, exploring its trajectory across the different phases of ‘virtualization’ of work. Subsequently, we take a closer look at the geographic and cultural context of our research, Italy, focusing on its peculiar features in relation to remote work adoption and work cultures, which we deem essential to adequately assess our results. Following a methodological note, we then present our empirical findings,

providing evidence of the prominent element of discovery of remote work that emerges as a common thread across our participants' accounts. In the conclusive section, we illustrate how our analysis might contribute to the understanding of remote work as a 'new form of work' in the post-pandemic scenario, discussing the limitations of our research and reflecting upon the potential scope of future studies on this topic.

Remote work: a new old work practice

Remote work is not a new phenomenon. The experimentation of practices of work at a distance, with no need to physically access the workplace, can be traced back to as early as the 1970s, in coincidence with the economic downturn caused by the oil crisis – which ignited a debate on the continued necessity of commuting to work and raised concerns about traffic congestion (Bailey and Kurland, 2002). Yet, despite technological advancement, the diffusion of remote work has been substantially slow in subsequent decades, following the broader, irregular trajectory of the 'virtualization' of work (Johns and Gratton, 2013).

The seminal work by Olson (1983) provides with a first definition of remote work, intended as “organizational work that is performed outside of the normal organizational confines of space and time” (Olson, 1983: 182). Considered as such, it was deemed to be most suitable for workers employed in the knowledge economy; the diffusion of ‘office information technology’, Olson argues, would facilitate remote work as it enhanced ‘telecommuting’ practices in lieu of the financial and practical burden of the daily commute to the workplace. Based on a study of 32 organizational employees, Olson suggests that the jobs which would be better performed remotely are those with “minimum physical requirements, individual control over work pace, defined deliverables, a need for concentration, and a relatively low need for communication”

(Olson, 1983: 182). Her study finds that individuals who work from home are typically “highly self-motivated and self-disciplined” and have “skills which provided them with bargaining power”. Among their motivations are “family requirements or because they preferred few social contacts beyond family” (ibid.).

In subsequent years, the term ‘telework’ has come to be conventionally used in academic research to identify practices of work at a distance. These gained new traction across the turn of the century in coincidence with the ‘second wave’ of virtual work (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016; Johns and Gratton, 2013; Ellison, 1999), and have come to be part of the broader discussion of modern-day digital work practices (Huws, 2001). The comprehensive review of telework research performed in the early 2000s by Bailey and Kurland (2002) highlights that male professionals and female clerical workers are those most likely to engage in modern-day telework, suggesting that commute relief no longer represents a major motivating factor. Organizational advantages in the execution of work, such as the capacity to concentrate and to avoid distractions, are highlighted in their study as more central. Recent research suggests that workers find an increase in work performance while teleworking, due to a reduction in opportunities for distraction, and enjoy the opportunity for greater autonomy (Bloom et al., 2014). However, a number of works also show that, for some workers, working remotely leads to an increase in stress due to the need to demonstrate one's productivity at a distance. An extension of working hours and a decline in the quality of interpersonal relationships, impoverished by greater social and professional isolation, are also reported (Golden et al., 2008; Turetken et al., 2011).

Yet, despite the optimistic predictions of many commentators, during the first decade of the 2000s the adoption of telework remained rather sporadic. This is believed to find reason in managerial cultures that struggle to find this practice to be cost-

effective beyond workforce outsourcing. Managers tend to see little need to change existing organizational practices and, up until recently, cited issues of trust and control as key factors that discourage them from experimenting with telework adoption (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016). In the years immediately preceding the pandemic, telework and remote work reappeared as prominent within the academic discussion of the ‘new forms of work’ of the digital era. Terms such as ‘smart’ (Gastaldi et al., 2014) and ‘agile’ work (Denning, 2018) have become popular to indicate work practices that are centred around the enhanced potential of digital technology to foster alternative spatial and temporal arrangements of work. Compared to telework as traditionally intended, ‘smart’ and ‘agile’ work introduce an asynchronous element to remote work, as they (should) entail an agreement with the employer or supervisor on a set of hours of remote co-presence and availability, while the rest of one’s working time is autonomously organized by workers according to their own priorities (Beauregard et al., 2019). Interestingly, this renewed interest in remote work practices follows another economic downturn (this time, the 2007-08 economic crisis) and occurs in parallel with the broader diffusion of ‘nonstandard’ forms of work, particularly freelance work, which have been described as ‘the new standard of work’ in the digital economy (Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Gandini, 2016). Epitomous figures in this new revival of remote work are perhaps ‘digital nomads’: these are ‘location-independent’ workers who are not required to show up in person to conduct their job, and thus take advantage of the opportunity to work fully remotely to prioritize a leisure-based lifestyle, typically by travelling across non-Western, affordable, Western-friendly and digitally-advanced areas (Thompson, 2018; Reichenberger, 2017).

Then, in 2020, remote work practices experienced a sudden large-scale diffusion across Western economies and beyond, as a main means to counter the impact of the

Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. Brynolfsson et al. (2020) estimate that half of the US workforce worked from home during the first lockdown phase, with 35.2% of workers shifting to remote work because of the health emergency. In Europe, Eurostat (2021) estimates that 12% of the workforce aged 20-64 in the EU habitually worked from home in 2020 – increasing from the 5-6% that was reported prior to the pandemic. Scandinavian countries in particular show high percentages of adoption of remote work, with Finland leading at 37%. Across Southern and Eastern regions of Europe, instead, remote work arrangements continued to be rather sporadic even in the context of the pandemic, particularly in Croatia, Latvia, Cyprus and Bulgaria, where remote work figures remained steady at around 5%.

This sudden and unplanned large-scale experimentation of remote work newly calls into question its benefits and drawbacks in terms of a range of aspects that include the workers' wellbeing, work organization, autonomy and control, and the role of technology in the workplace. Research conducted before the pandemic demonstrated that remote work practices can indeed improve job performance, support a better work-family balance, and reduce stress levels (Contreras et al., 2020; Kossek et al., 2006; Fonner and Roloff, 2010; Coenen and Kok, 2014; Anderson et al., 2015) – “if employees can obtain managerial support, peer support, and technological support” (Irawanto et al. 2021: 2). However, during the lockdown remote work has been associated with a diversification of experiences of time and space, unveiling a more complex (and forced) redefinition of boundaries and routines that questions what are commonly recognized as the positive aspects of working from home. Research shows that some workers felt “stuck in a never-ending, ‘future-less’ moment of distress”, in which it was “difficult to distinguish days, weeks or months. Yet others had to cope with the sudden repurposing of all spheres of their lives (e.g., work, family, and private

life), all happening simultaneously in one place - the home - leading to what has been described as never-ending fatigue” (Kunisch et al., 2021: 1411). Moreover, working from home on a full-time and compulsory basis significantly affected the quality of workers’ social relations: engaging in social exchanges exclusively via the mediation of technology resulted, for many, in a feeling of work communication overload, as well as in social isolation (Lal et al., 2021).

Research also suggests that, as a result of this unplanned experimentation, many workers are now increasingly interested in *hybrid* work models, that entail some days at the office and some working from home. These are seen as a favourable trade-off between the advantages of in-person work and the benefit of not having to mandatorily go into the office every day, and are envisaged to increase work productivity overall (Bloom, 2021). Flexibility in work location has also become a factor that many workers pay considerable attention to in their assessment of work-life balance and job quality (Barrero et al., 2021; Microsoft, 2022). Arguably, however, most of the existing data in relation to this emergent trend come from the Anglo-American context. It seems interesting therefore to question the extent to which, and in which ways, this shift has concerned also other areas – such as Italy, for instance – where remote work practices were less popular prior to the pandemic, and where managerial cultures tend to be quite reluctant to embrace innovation and change.

The context of the study

Italy represents an interesting and peculiar context to observe in relation to remote work. In focusing on it, we follow the call for an increased attention to contextualization in organizational research (Welch et al., 2022). As argued by Rousseau and Fried (2001), contextualization permits to consider the specificities of a

work setting vis-a-vis the rapidly diversifying nature of work, which “can substantially alter the underlying causal dynamics of worker-organizational relations (ibid., pp. 1). Thus, we concur with Welch et al. (2022: 8) in maintaining that “Context is essential to interpretive scholarship: it renders social action meaningful”.

Inspired by this approach, we take Italy as a context of significant interest for the study of the evolution and cultures of remote work. As said, before the pandemic remote work arrangements in Italy were not common. Legislation on smart and agile work was first introduced in Italian law in May 2017 with the goal of defining the boundaries of application of this emergent mode of working, albeit still quite sporadically adopted (Lavoro.gov.it, 2022). This provision understood remote work arrangements as a kind of ‘corporate welfare’ concession – meaning, a benefit granted to certain workers in response to specific needs or circumstances, and upon justified request (Maino and Razetti, 2020). Following the imposition of lockdown measures, which included a nationwide mandate to work remotely for all non-essential workers, a sudden shift to remote work practices took place. The Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2020) reports that 37.2% of companies with up to 50 employees adopted remote work during the first 2020 lockdown, often for the very first time, with percentages increasing alongside company size (73.1% among medium-sized companies and as much as 90% among large companies). A later report (ISTAT, 2021) accounts for 21,3% of companies with more than 3 employees that adopted remote work arrangements throughout the whole of 2020 (including the second half of the year), with a peak of 60% in the service sector and in the information and communication industry (ISTAT, 2021). In the public administration sector, only 1.7% of employees experienced remote work prior to the pandemic. In May 2020, the number of public sector workers in Italy who were working remotely was reported at 64%,

decreasing to 46% in September 2020.

These figures indicate that an actual, sudden ‘shift’ towards remote work has taken place in Italy in coincidence with Covid-19 outbreak, which has somewhat unique traits and that represents a significant element of novelty in a context where, as said, the percentages of adoption of remote work had historically been rather low (Chiaro et al., 2015). While 58% of companies had some kind of ‘smart’ work programme in place in 2019, it is estimated that this involved a mere 570.000 workers (Osservatorio Smart Working, 2019). Of further interest is also the persistent terminological confusion between the terms ‘remote’ and ‘smart’ work in the Italian public debate, with the two substantially overlapping with one another to generically indicate synchronous distance work. This is also reflected in emergency legislation promulgated alongside early pandemic restrictions, whereby the term ‘smart working’ was used essentially as a catch-all expression for any kind of remote and/or home work (Gandini, 2020). Furthermore, a significant north-south divide can also be observed concerning the adoption of remote work in this period, which reflects broader patterns of north-south inequality in the Italian labour market as well as in terms of technological advancement (Eurostat, 2021).

A cultural understanding of remote work practices as exceptional and conditional to specific circumstances – irrespective of the increased potential of working at a distance enabled by digital technology in recent years – is therefore intrinsic to the Italian context. This also mirrors the features of the Italian productive system, characterised by a very large presence of small and medium enterprises (European Commission, 2019). Research acknowledges that the managerial approach – and consequently the human resource management systems – that is prevalent in Italian SMEs heavily relies on physical presence, direct control and supervision (Barabaschi et

al., 2022). Hierarchical structures based on traditional leadership are most diffused and in-person office work has always been considered the undisputed norm – also due to a clear preference for face-to-face, verbal communication at work. Furthermore, fears of laziness and loss of control upon workers characterize the mainstream perception of remote work, not only by employers, but also by the general public (Gandini, 2020). Even a progressive political figure such as Milan’s mayor Giuseppe Sala publicly declared in June 2020 that remote work arrangements would need to end soon because “it is time to return to work”, implying that remote work should not be considered as ‘real’ work (HuffPost.it, 2020).

Moreover, in order to fully seize the opportunities offered by remote work, Italian companies ought to have embraced the opportunities offered by digital technologies in the first place. According to ISTAT (2018) and MISE (2018), Italian companies are overall less digitalized than their European counterparts, and technology investments are largely concentrated in medium and medium-large companies (Cirillo et al., 2021). In fact, although the benefits of digitalisation for SMEs have been widely demonstrated, small and medium enterprises often lack the resources, capabilities, and attitudes (Wolcott et al. 2008), as well as the expertise and time (Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015) to fully take advantage of digitalisation (Eller et al., 2020). In this regard, the institutional context – i.e. the digital infrastructure, as well as the level of digitalisation of the company’s competitors, suppliers and customers (Hinings et al., 2018) – also plays a key role in hindering this process of innovation.

As a result, it may be argued that remote work came as an ‘exogenous shock’ (McAdam and Scott, 2005) for the Italian productive system, its labour market and work cultures. As noted by Corbo et al. (2016: 324), exogenous shocks may play a significant role “in exposing rules that had been taken for granted, calling into question

the perceived benefits of those rules”. Exogenous shocks, they continue, act as “convulsive moments” that “may shuffle resources and thereby alter the relationships within the field” (ibid.). Emergent research shows that lockdowns have deeply affected work norms, showing employers and employees that it is actually possible to work flexibly and with greater autonomy, to practice new forms of leadership, and to connect in different ways (e.g. Richter, 2020). Nonetheless, it cannot be taken for granted that these are the only byproducts of such an exogenous shock. As said, these are strongly dependent from the context in which they are embedded (Welch et al., 2022). Due to its peculiar specificities, it seems therefore necessary to expand our contextual understanding of the impact and implications of the diffusion of remote work in Italy throughout the pandemic, as these can prove to be fruitful for the assessment of remote work prospects more widely.

Data and methods

Our empirical research consisted in semi-structured qualitative interviews (McCracken, 1988) conducted with a set of 35 knowledge workers who, for the most part, live and work in the regions of northern Italy (Lombardy, Veneto and Piedmont), with a large prevalence of Lombardy and the Milan area. Our primary focus has been on those workers who did not regularly work from their home prior to the pandemic outbreak, and whose work routines were thus more severely disrupted by the imposition of work-related health restrictions in the country.

In defining what we intend for ‘knowledge work’, we adopt a rather extensive approach. Focusing on work ‘content’, we include within this category all those occupations that put an emphasis on information processing, problem solving and the production of knowledge (Barley, 1996; Reed, 1996; Tam et al., 2002; Fleming et al., 2004). Thus, we

take here as ‘knowledge workers’ essentially anyone whose job is ‘characterized by an emphasis on theoretical knowledge, creativity and use of analytical and social skills’ (Frenkel et al., 1995: 773). As a result, our participants include a variety of jobs from a wide range of sectors, from highly standardized and routinised administrative occupations (e.g. commercial employee) to more creative ones (e.g. actress). By focusing on knowledge workers as so defined we thus exclude from our sample those manual, frontline and essential workers that had to continue working from their habitual workplace even during the hardest phase of the lockdown.

Within this broad categorization we further distinguish between two distinct groups. On the one hand we have a set (20) of employees with standard dependent contracts – mainly, workers employed in administrative jobs in the manufacturing, logistics or service sectors, in health, education and research. On the other hand, and building on Gandini (2016), we also included a set (15) of self-employed, independent workers, who are freelancers, consultants working in various capacities in the business sector, and small business owners in sectors such as communication, marketing, and food. It must be noted that 2 of these independent workers are in fact in what has been defined as ‘bogus’ self-employment (Thornqvist, 2014), which means they actually work full time for one single contractor and essentially fulfil the duties and schedules of a dependent worker without being contractualised as one. The decision to also include a set of independent workers among our research participants is motivated by the attempt to gather a different viewpoint on the diffusion of remote work arrangements, from subjects that might have had some prior experience of working away from a designed workplace. Yet, all the independent workers included in our sample also fit the basic requirement of being knowledge workers who had their work routines severely disrupted by the pandemic outbreak, as they habitually worked outside the home and in

workplaces - such as coworking spaces, or their own small company's offices - that had to shut down on occasion of the Covid-19 outbreak.

Interviews were held in the period between May and September 2020, immediately after the easing of strict lockdown restrictions in the country and while remote work prescriptions mandated by the central government were still in place. Participants were recruited by means of an open call for participation circulated via social media. Those who responded to the call were contacted via email, to illustrate them in full the objectives of the research and the modality of the interview. Due to the need to limit social contacts to reduce health risks, all interviews were conducted remotely via video calls with the help of software such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet or Skype. We are well aware of the challenges that qualitative online research brings with it (James and Busher, 2009). Nevertheless, beyond the constraints imposed by the lockdown, we deemed online interviewing to be particularly appropriate for our study, because of the topic investigated. In fact, this modality of interviewing allowed us not only to collect the participants' accounts of their experience of remote work, but also to somewhat be with them in the same setting (the video call) in which, at that time, they were carrying out most of their work tasks.

Interviews had an average duration of 1 hour and audio was recorded with the consent of the interviewee. The themes discussed in the interview were: a) everyday experiences of remote work; b) remote work organization models; c) domestic work arrangements and work-life balance; d) the management of work relationships; e) the use of technology; f) opinions and visions on the future of remote work, and of work in general, in light of the pandemic outbreak. In total, the sample is composed of 20 women and 15 men. The average age of participants is 41.9 years old. Details about age, gender, occupation, and employment status of respondents can be found in Table 1 (see

Appendix). Although the sample of our research is small, it nonetheless meets the recommendations on qualitative sampling for phenomenological studies (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Morse, 1994).

Interviews have been fully transcribed and anonymised; subsequently, a qualitative thematic analysis of the data was conducted. As illustrated by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), thematic analysis is an inductive analytical technique that focuses on the identification of core themes in a body of qualitative data, and their extraction by means of manual coding. This latter practice consists in the labelling of interview excerpts according to the themes discussed (as presented earlier) and in the iterative identification of the most prevalent viewpoints, to provide evidence of consensus among participants on a given topic. The emergent themes coded were: a) temporal organization (and temporal asymmetry) of work and life, autonomy and control; b) shock, adaptation to and opinion about remote work (positive, negative, neutral); c) social relations and remote work (what changes, what remains the same, how/why); d) spatial arrangements concerning working from home; e) capacity to concentrate on work tasks, changes in workload; f) boundaries between private and work lives; g) role of technology; h) future prospects of remote work. After familiarizing with the collected data and coding the main emerging themes, these were iteratively reviewed by the authors and discussed in several meetings. The construction of relevant categories considered the notes that the researchers wrote during the data collection phase (Charmaz, 2000).

Findings

Overview: first reaction, shock

The evidence gathered from our interviews confirms that, for the majority of workers

who participated in our research, the first 2020 lockdown represents the moment in which they experienced remote work for the very first time – or, in the case of independent workers, for a prolonged period of time, in the absence of alternatives. For many of them, this amounted to an ‘initiation rite’ into remote work; this came suddenly and unexpectedly, barely allowing them to organize their domestic spaces and schedules. A feeling of disorientation is common to their accounts, albeit inevitably influenced by the more general sense of displacement caused by the pandemic outbreak. Yet, interestingly this is sometimes accompanied by a sense of relief, as if many somewhat welcomed that the health emergency suddenly brought to a halt their otherwise fast-paced work routines. Epitomous of this feeling is the excerpt below, in which a 45-year-old human resource consultant working as an independent professional describes his experience:

If I go back to the end of February, usual crazy day, appointments, I come home at 9 o'clock in the evening, then we are completely locked up in the house ... the first feeling I have experienced and seen by many colleagues was, after the shock, a sort of return to childhood... There was a moment when people appreciated that this chain of close, continuous encounters, of always being exposed, had been removed from them... and therefore they started to reflect on how pleasant it was to be at home, to be at a distance, to find space for other things to make work-life balance for real... (Business consultant, 45 years old, male, self-employed)

The exogenous shock of the health emergency caused a turmoil in the worklife of many of our participants. This required them to engage in a significant process of cognitive and practical adaptation to working from the domestic environment, which inevitably intertwined with the practical and emotional weight of lockdown restrictions. Dependent workers in particular, who were not accustomed to working from home, recount highly localized and improvised strategies of coping with the changed environment, primarily relying upon existing resources (e.g. access to a home computer,

extensive use of group chats, a laptop provided by their employer, etc). Yet, individual practices of adaptation were strictly connected to the specific job roles and sectors in which participants were employed. A significant increase in workloads in the early days of quarantine is reported by several of these workers; this finds reason in the necessity by companies to proceed quickly with the reconversion of their activities to comply with the rules imposed by the lockdown, such as turning in-person classes into online training services, or redesigning consulting services to be delivered remotely. See for instance this kindergarten teacher's experience of online teaching:

I don't have a working time anymore. My work runs from Monday to Sunday depending on when my family life allows me to work. So I have scheduled commitments on Friday evenings, when in theory I should have dinner with my family, but colleagues are available on Friday evenings, or I record videos on Sundays and on Mondays I do my homework with my grown-up son. I always work. (Kindergarten teacher, 41 years old, female, employee)

Workers who report an excess of work in the early phase of lockdown are typically those who could set their own schedules, rules, and limits. On the contrary, participants who saw their workload decrease in this phase generally hold jobs whereby individual tasks can only be partially carried out at a distance or are employed in sectors that have suffered a sharp decline in activities as a consequence of the health emergency. Interestingly, the number of working hours seems to have remained the same for those who work jobs with standard office hours and little flexibility. Instead, as said, these have increased significantly – at least according to participants' perceptions - for those who already benefited from some flexibility in the organization of their workload (both among employees and self-employed). This aspect seems to be strictly related to the difficulties experienced in setting clear-cut boundaries between work and other activities. This 31-year-old commercial employee recounts his

experience as follows:

During the lockdown, especially at the beginning, we could not do anything but work... we worked a lot, even beyond the normal eight hours and especially at the beginning... the situation shocked us because we develop courses and training sessions and so we tried to move everything online and so we had to work late, also because we could not leave the house ... so what do you do if you don't work?
(Commercial employee, 31 years old, female, employee)

Also independent workers, who were already familiar with working in a flexible way and, for the most part, had some prior experience of working remotely, had to engage in a significant process of adaptation, as they were required to mandatorily work from the home setting. See for instance how this 30-year-old market researcher, who works for a foreign company and has experience of flexible work arrangements, describes her experience of lockdown remote work:

In a normal situation I would mostly work from a coworking space. I don't really like working from home." (I: So how did you manage this shift to remote home work?) "Not very well, no, especially at the beginning, I have to say... I don't even remember when it started... in March, at the beginning I still managed to go to the office with my partner, because he runs a company, so for a couple of weeks we managed to go there. Then from mid-March I always stayed at home, until this week (June 2020, ndr), when I went to the coworking space a couple of times. I find it very stressful, I can't have a break between work and my life being at home. And then it's more uncomfortable, the chair is more uncomfortable, it's hotter... the cat... my productivity collapsed. Especially at the beginning, I couldn't concentrate on anything, maybe even for a psychological factor... now it's a little better, maybe even a little resiliency, we adapt to everything... And I don't see anyone: this thing of not seeing anyone even to drink a coffee affects me a lot, we get to the end of the day even with my partner and we are zombies... much more tired. (Market researcher, 30 years old, female, self-employed)

Overall, for both categories of workers their perceptions and opinions are characterized by an emphasis on the 'discovery' of a new way of working. In particular,

many found the shift to remote work to be a novel experience, that allowed them to experiment alternative work arrangements that they never thought possible or considered. This element of discovery ties together most of our participants' accounts; their stories are tales of having a taste at a different work routine.

'Another work routine is possible': temporal organization of work and life, technology, and social relations

Notwithstanding the adaptive process required to cope with the impactful constraints posed by quarantine life, those who have continued to work with some regularity during the lockdown phase describe this experience by emphasizing the *discoveries* they made about their new working habits – yet accompanied by some important concerns. This is particularly the case for dependent workers, many of whom experienced remote work for the very first time, but it can be extended, albeit with some important caveats (more on this later), also to independent workers.

A first element of discovery concerns the temporal organization of work and life. Elaborating upon Roberts (2008), it may be argued that lockdown remote work allowed many to discover that alternative temporal arrangements in the management of tasks and responsibilities vis-à-vis one's non-work life were actually possible. See for instance how this 32-year-old financial controller describes his perception of having a glimpse of a different work life thanks to lockdown remote work:

Having a job that in part allows you to have a little more free time, maybe not so much free time, but being more free to manage your own time is one of the things that now I consider very important. [...] We had the chance to see that there is another world different from the one in which we have always lived up to now and maybe we try to, if there are positive aspects, to exploit them. (Financial controller, 32 years old, male, employee)

An aspect that many workers report in their narrations is the possibility to schedule paid and domestic work throughout the day according to their preferences. Even those who had to maintain work schedules that were very similar to traditional office hours are pleased to report about the possibility of freely using short intervals of time, during the day, to undertake tasks that were usually relegated to the evening or to weekends. An example that has frequently emerged concerns the possibility of starting the washing machine in the morning and hanging out one's clothes to dry during the afternoon, without having to do it once the working day is finished – or, again, the possibility of running some errands to the shops near one's home during the lunch break, thus avoiding peak hour. These opportunities brought many workers to reflect on daily routines that can, and for some should, be different from those they were used to. See how this researcher/consultant describes her first experience of everyday remote work life:

The fact that I can start the washing machine while I wait for the coffee to be ready means that I simply do not have to wait for it to finish, to hang the laundry when I get home by train, that arrives at eight and is often late [...] I noticed a radical increase in efficiency in terms of combining work with housework. (Researcher and consultant, 32 years old, female, employee)

A second element that substantiates the discovery of remote work by our participants concerns the enhanced role of technology in work organization and execution. Many participants note that remote work allowed them – and, notably, often also the companies they work for – to discover a new set of tools whose use was previously unthinkable in their daily routines, and that they found beneficial for their work. This is, again, particularly felt by dependent workers in our sample. See for instance how this web marketing manager in her 40s discusses the discovery of distance communication technology in her company:

These things have all been new... in the business division we use Microsoft Teams, but someone who has a Mac still has problems using Teams ... I know it's silly, but someone a little older in age may find this a little more difficult ... However, these are tools that we have discovered and I must say that I really appreciate that the company has understood their importance, even the sales division is starting to use Teams to talk to customers, split the screen, present products, present solutions ... something that before did not even pass through their minds. (Web marketing manager, 42 years old, female, employee)

Yet, the discovery of the innovative and advantageous sides of remote work also comes together with some important caveats. Workers with small children, for instance, report significant difficulties in managing their work-life balance at a time when schools were closed, and irrespective of any increased work flexibility. As they found themselves managing, at the same time and in the same place, work and care responsibilities, many experienced a total dissolution of the boundaries between the two. Not unsurprisingly, this is felt stronger by female workers. See how this female administration manager recounts her personal experience:

If my children had been older, and therefore more autonomous, I would have experienced only the positive aspects of remote work...but they are small, and with the school closure it was suicidal. Both me and my husband worked from home and the children got bored very easily...and we often ended up putting them in front of the television. (Administration manager, 41 years old, female, employee)

Issues of work-life balance in the context of lockdown remote work strongly intertwine with the quality of one's domestic spaces. Many participants recount about their difficulties in finding a place inside the home that was comfortable and quiet enough to be able to work properly. The issue of home workspaces also relates to the need for isolation and the necessity to focus in order to manage the numerous video and phone calls that working remotely requires. See for instance how this 28-year-old digital designer describes his difficulty in sharing small domestic spaces when both occupants

need to work remotely:

In Milan I worked from home because I was forced to, and therefore I stayed in a two-room apartment with my girlfriend who worked from home as well. There were difficult days. From a relational point of view it was perfect, but we had problems with the organization of the space, sometimes with the Internet connection... there were problems just making two video calls at the same time (Digital designer, 28 years old, male, employee)

Conversely, participants who lived alone during lockdown say they appreciated the possibility of working away from the typical distractions of the office – a request from a colleague, coffee machine chats, etc. – especially for carrying out tasks that require some concentration. This ICT specialist, who has some previous experience of working from home, maintains that:

I have always been more productive when working from home because I have no distractions, because if a colleague comes to my desk and asks me "do you remember that email I sent you?" and you waste time looking for it, even if you had already answered that email... there is a lot of time you waste listening to others... When working from home, this person who used to come to your table, writes you a message that you can look at and reply when you have time. (ICT specialist, 52 years old, female, employee)

A third element of discovery concerns how remote work arrangements can change the perception of one's relationship with coworkers. Besides distraction and the possibility to concentrate more, the absence of in-person exchanges with colleagues has for some workers decreased their motivation to work. Overall, the lack of relationships with one's colleagues and the impossibility of spending part of one's time away from home are described by almost all participants as a significant disadvantage of their remote work experience. Certainly, this perception is amplified by the more general condition of isolation that everyone was forced to experience because of the lockdown.

This career advisor, for instance, who sometimes works from a coworking space, reports that:

The fact that you always work alone and you never meet your colleagues is quite alienating, you need to have face to face contacts, I do need to have a chat with my colleagues while we grab a coffee...online it is not the same. I also miss those random encounters...for example, in the coworking space, if you get the chance to listen at what people at the desk in front of you are discussing and you think that it is cool, you can go there and ask something. (Career advisor, 32 years old, female, employee)

As said, these discoveries mainly apply to the dependent workers in our sample, many of whom experienced remote work practices for the very first time in the extremely difficult conditions imposed by lockdown restrictions. Yet, similar elements of discovery are displayed also by the self-employed workers in our sample, albeit from a slightly different viewpoint.

What about the self-employed? A feeling of privation

Contrary to dependent workers, many of the self-employed workers included in our sample did experience some form of remote work prior to the pandemic outbreak. Nonetheless, their discoveries are akin to those of dependent workers, especially in relation to the temporal organization of one's work and life, and social relations. This is because the health crisis forced them to try out a new kind of experience: that of working from home for a prolonged period, without the possibility of engaging in the flexible worklives they used to enjoy prior to the lockdown. For all the obvious elements of difference there can be between them, an element in common across the two groups is a similar tension that juxtaposes the taken-for-grantedness of one's work routines, on the one hand, and the realization that alternative work routines are indeed

possible and, sometimes, may even be desirable. Yet, the accounts of self-employed workers are marked by what may be described as a general feeling of *privation*, that originates from the loss of said flexibility and the impossibility to engage in face-to-face social relations – which represents a key dimension in their work (D’Ovidio and Gandini, 2019).

Concerning the temporal organization of work and life, many report an ‘always-on’ attitude, which makes it difficult to set limits in terms of the time dedicated to work vis-a-vis other activities. See for instance how this digital communication specialist recounts his experience:

Staying at home, working from home means that your work is always with you, it means that even while you are having lunch, your brain is focused on work and you think “okay, maybe I can go to the other room and finish what I need to finish” and it is always like this [...] I decided to wake up in the morning and get dressed like when I used to go to the office. I set up a room dedicated to work, because I have a room available...I decided it was my home office and so I worked from that room...but it lasted very little...I ended up eating in front of the computer very soon. (Digital communication specialist, 38 years old, male, self-employed)

Likewise, many of the self-employed participants reflected on how much the lack of face-to-face social relations with colleagues – or more generally with working contacts – considerably alters their way of working and communicating professionally. This small business owner describes this aspect as follows:

Face-to-face interactions are essential...I mean, now we are using digital communication tools...a lot...and it is cool because they allow us to continue working, but they don’t allow to meet in person and grasp all the nuances of a conversation.... This way of working is a life revolution because...for example if you are with your business partner and you are discussing about a project, when you say something in a certain way you can immediately see the reaction...grasp

the nuances in what your business partner says and understand if he does not agree with you. [...] When you need to discuss about strategies, when you need to share and discuss your opinion with other people, when you have doubts...nuances are fundamental. (Small business owner, 50 years old, male, self-employed)

Taken together, both groups similarly describe their remote work lockdown experiences as the discovery of a way of working which they did not think they would ever experience. This is strongly affected by the contextual impact of the pandemic; nonetheless, despite significant concerns in relation to the day-to-day execution of remote work, many explicitly tell of a sense of ‘before and after’ this experience. This is, in turn, also very contextual (Welch et al., 2022), and may be explained by the peculiar work cultures of the Italian setting in relation to remote work. Almost all interviewees in fact regularly ponder on whether, in the post-pandemic era, remote work arrangements will be institutionalized or, else, things will come back to ‘business as usual’, as if this experimentation of remote work never took place. We expand on this point in the next section.

Remote work beyond the lockdown: future scenarios

Participants in our research generally agree that the pandemic crisis has accelerated the processes of digitization and remotization of work that were already in place, and that some of the innovations tested in this phase are inevitably destined to, at some point, become commonplace. Many underline how the radical and sudden changes brought about by the shift to remote work would not have been implemented for yet a long time without the pandemic outbreak. At the same time, however, a large majority of our respondents remains very skeptical about the medium-to-long term prospects of remote work in Italy, particularly for what concerns the willingness of companies and managers to learn from this experience and build upon its positive aspects. A diffused sense of

distrust that companies, as well as the public administration, are effectively willing to institutionalize remote work practices beyond the emergency phase pervades their accounts. See for instance how this 35-year-old product manager describes her expectations:

I think that maybe something could change, even if, to be honest, I see that the majority of my colleagues are still very anchored to old habits, I mean... they are not open minded...maybe it is a question of age...I don't know... [...] In my opinion, on the one hand there has been an increase in the awareness about the opportunities that come with remote work, also in terms of optimization of processes...but on the other hand I don't know, I am not sure. (Product manager, 35 years old, female, employee)

Yet, many of our interviewees express the hope that, beyond the pandemic crisis, they could experiment with *actually smart* work arrangements. Many would see with favour the standardization of a 'hybrid' model, whereby they could work some days in the office and some remotely. In so doing, they underline the significant advantages that such hybridization of work practices would bring, in terms of reducing the time spent commuting as well as the number of business trips held, with the related economic and environmental savings. Many suggest that it is time to overcome the conception of smart working as a 'corporate welfare' tool, which is prevalent in Italy, and express the hope that hybrid models of work will be more generally adopted irrespective of specific circumstances, as a means to improve productivity and support workers' wellbeing. This business consultant's interview excerpt summarizes this view:

I think there will be an increase in the mix between work-at-home and office work, but we should have an honest conversation with companies about what this implies so that it doesn't hurt the employee in terms of freedom. I think that if done well this is the best way to work also in terms of satisfaction, mental health, freedom and also recognition as a responsible adult who is able to carry out their tasks. (Business consultant, 30 years old, male, employee)

The diffusion of the expression ‘smart work’ as a catch-all term for remote work is also a cause of frustration for many workers, as they fear that the potential advantages of *actually smart* work arrangements may be lost if this practice is simply equated to synchronous distance work. While there is a certain curiosity among many of our participants for the possibility to test remote work arrangements outside the constraints of lockdown life, many underline that ‘a change of mentality’ is needed in order to see remote work flourish in the Italian context. Several participants in our study believe that the experience of remote work during the period March-May 2020, aside from contingent circumstances, has partly contributed to reassuring employers with respect to fears that workers, in the absence of in-person control, would stop being productive. Nonetheless, many emphasize the persistence of ‘old school’ managerial cultures based on hierarchy and close control that are hard to overcome, and which are perceived to be inadequate to pursue the idea of goal-oriented and task-driven work that is at the basis of what they think is ‘good’ remote work. Therefore, they fear this experimentation of remote work will remain exceptional and conditioned by the emergency, and that nothing will be learned from it. The perception that many employers are oriented to return to traditional ways of working as soon as possible, thus wasting the advantages brought by this experience, is prevalent in our sample, as clearly expressed by one of our participants:

I wish that all these new opportunities will be seriously considered. I wish that companies reflected on the costs of working from the office... but honestly I fear that if the emergency will end by the end of this year we will go back to the previous situation and we will see this experience only as the answer to an emergency situation...because it depends very much on the managerial culture prevalent in the company. (Digital marketing manager, 36 years old, female, employee)

Conclusion

The article has presented and critically discussed the opinions and perceptions of Italy-based knowledge workers who engaged in unexpected and unplanned remote work practices during the first 2020 lockdown, imposed on occasion of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. Overall, their assessment of remote work is a positive one, because of its potential to improve not only the wellbeing of workers, but also work productivity. Yet, a contrast emerges between the desire to continue experimenting with remote work, expressed by many workers, and the perception that managerial cultures in Italy are ill-equipped, and essentially unwilling, to support this change. We have shown how workers' narrations are marked by a conspicuous element of discovery, articulated across 3 main dimensions: temporal organization of work and life, technology, and social relations. This advances the existing research on the advantages and disadvantages of remote work as a 'new form of work' of the digital era by corroborating the notion that workers appreciate the possibility of experiencing new ways of organizing working times according to one's personal needs afforded by working remotely. Yet, our findings also underline that a general feeling of 'always-on' often accompanies this perception, together with a difficulty in finding adequate boundaries between working and leisure time. Concerning technology, while many participants deem it an improvement for their work organization and execution, yet they also believe that face-to-face social relationships cannot be entirely replaced by online contacts. This presents a significant challenge for many of them, both personally and professionally.

To an extent, considering the longstanding body of research on telework these findings may be seen as nothing particularly new, since they broadly confirm previous accounts about motivations and key factors in engaging in this form of work (Ellison, 1999). Our

research reiterates that remote work, under certain conditions, facilitates concentration and is positively associated with the execution of work tasks with no distractions.

Compared to research highlighting that the reduction of commuting was not a significant motivating factor in relation to remote work (cfr. Bailey and Kurland, 2002), we found that many of our participants would happily reduce their everyday travel to the workplace and thus enjoy ‘hybrid’ arrangements, made of some days at the office and some days working from home. Yet, many would find it hard to be completely detached by the physical workplace and would miss the relational dimension of in-person work if this is cut altogether.

Nonetheless, it is the element of *discovery* of remote work that we find of great significance here, as we believe it catches an early sign of what has later developed into a broader debate around work meaningfulness (Schwartz, 1982) in the aftermath of the pandemic. Our study locates remote work firmly within this emergent trend and calls for a necessity to develop an all-encompassing take on work meaningfulness in the post-pandemic era. Within and beyond knowledge work, many journalistic articles across late 2021 and 2022 have recounted stories of workers who have decided to quit their job during the pandemic, or have taken long-awaited decisions to rethink their relationship with work (e.g. Walhqvist, 2022). Expressions such as ‘the great resignation’ (Thompson, 2021) or ‘quiet quitting’ (Tapper, 2022) have gained popularity to describe different sides of this seemingly-emergent trend. Early research suggests that, in the US, since April 2021 “the share of nonfarm workers who quit their jobs has been at some of the highest levels” and that over a fifth of the total U.S. workforce left their jobs in the same period, particularly in the leisure and hospitality sector (Zagorsky, 2022: np; see also Cook 2021). A Microsoft WTI global survey also shows that 21% of workers who quit their jobs in 2021 reported doing so because of the lack of flexible working hours

or locations. At the same time, half of those who were already working remotely declare they are thinking of switching to hybrid work, or viceversa (Microsoft, 2022). Future research will inevitably have to take these trends to a serious empirical test, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to certify their actual relevance and fully assess their long term significance.

In parallel, we also reiterate the contextual relevance of our findings in consideration of the peculiar status of Italy as a reluctant adopter of remote work arrangements. Our research shows that workers see the Italian delay in remote work diffusion as the result of a top-down attitude and a certain degree of inflexibility and scepticism for distance work that remains prevalent in most companies. It is worth reminding that a high number of small firms populate the Italian economy and that, in many cases, these are family-owned (cfr. European Commission, 2019). Only an exogenous shock – the pandemic outbreak – ultimately forced the mass experimentation of remote work across the board. It must also be noted that the 2017 Italian legislation on remote, smart and agile work was permanently amended only in December 2022, following a series of emergency decrees, ultimately extending the application of remote work arrangements beyond the perimeter of welfare concession, thus reflecting their actual diffusion on the ground (Lavoro.gov.it, 2022). Building on Corbo et al. (2016), who in turn draw from McAdam and Scott (2005), it may be argued that the pandemic shock had the ability to expose the outdatedness of remote work cultures in the Italian context, as in-person work was taken for granted by many employers as well as by workers themselves. At the same time, it also ignited a reshuffle of the resources and the existing power relationships in this context, showing workers, as our title contends, that ‘another work routine is possible’, and significantly altering their perception of this way of working. As said, there is a general feeling of ‘before and after’ concerning the experimentation

of remote work practices in Italy during the pandemic; its medium-to-long term impact in relation to the local cultures of work will be fully visible only in the years to come.

Inevitably, our research also maintains some significant limitations. It should be underlined once again that the empirical evidence here presented refers to interviews conducted between May and September 2020, immediately following the pandemic outbreak and the imposition of unprecedented, strict lockdown measures. Later in the year and continuing across 2021, in Italy and beyond, new restrictions were subsequently imposed that further affected the personal and professional lives of workers, to the point that what was first considered a temporary change in work routines became a years-long emergency and phase of turmoil. It is undoubted therefore that the perceptions and opinions of workers and the emphasis on discovery we found in our interviews should be understood in light of this broader scenario. It must also be considered that, as a result of the persisting distress caused by the health emergency, these opinions and perceptions of remote work may, and likely will, have changed. It would therefore be highly insightful to re-interview these same participants when the pandemic will be over, in order to investigate this evolution.

A second limitation concerns the sample of workers involved in our research. We are mindful that the definition of ‘knowledge workers’ applied in our study is a relatively broad one. This, as said, reflects the overarching goal of accounting for a variety of practices and occupations that have been most significantly impacted by the lockdown measures. Yet, we also maintain that this broad definition of ‘knowledge worker’ has ultimately been able to access a wider set of nuances than an otherwise narrow sample would have allowed. Looking at workers with different occupational statuses (dependent and independent workers, the latter including ‘bogus’ freelancers as well as small business owners) and across heterogeneous sectors (education, health,

communication and marketing, research, only to name a few) permitted to gather a variety of insights that may be of use for scholars in work and organization across the board, irrespective of specific areas of interest.

A third limitation concerns the generalization of our findings. While we make a case for contextualization (Welch et al., 2022; Rousseau and Fried, 2001) and thus take advantage of the specificities that concern a specific setting to elicit insightful evidence, yet arguably the Italian case can hardly be generalised, being somewhat an outlier among western economies when it comes to technology adoption in work. Nonetheless, we maintain its specificity can also be illustrative of broader emergent trends, such as the already-mentioned newfound relevance of the meaningfulness of work, that we believe are deemed to be a fruitful research avenue in work and organization in the years to come.

Furthermore, it may be of high interest to extend the research beyond Italy and onto other geographical context that are becoming increasingly relevant as remote work destinations, such as rural and coastal areas in Mediterranean Europe, and question the implications this entails in terms of counter-urbanisation trends (Colomb and Gallent, 2022). This would also allow taking into greater consideration a broader range of remote work phenomena that are not at the centre of the current work, such as nomad working, and thus shed further light on the cross-national scale of remote work practices and their consolidation beyond the pandemic contingency. Relatedly, we maintain it is of great importance to keep track of any legislative changes in relation to hybrid work practices at the EU level and beyond individual nation-states; to date, there still is no hard-law provision on remote work arrangements in the EU, and the only regulatory framework that directly addresses this issue still dates back to 2002's telework policy (Eurofound, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2021).

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Appendix

Table 1: Interviewees' sample

Age	Gender	Job	Employment status
53	Male	ICT specialist	Employee
32	Female	Career advisor	Self-employed
52	Female	ICT specialist	Employee
28	Male	Digital designer	Employee
31	Female	Commercial employee	Employee
41	Female	Administration manager	Employee
33	Female	Entrepreneur (food sector)	Self-employed
33	Female	Researcher and Project manager	Employee
56	Male	ICT consultant	Self-employed
59	Female	Civil servant	Employee
60	Male	Entrepreneur (transport sector)	Self-employed
32	Male	Financial controller	Employee
38	Male	Digital communication specialist/Entrepreneur	Self-employed
35	Male	Civil servant	Employee

41	Female	Kindergarten teacher	Employee
24	Male	Clerk	Employee
30	Male	Digital marketing specialist	Employee
45	Female	Psychotherapist	Self-employed
35	Female	Product manager	Employee
55	Female	Training consultant	Self-employed
34	Female	Journalist and event coordinator	Employee
34	Male	Business consultant	Self-employed
31	Female	Designer	Self-employed
42	Female	Actress/Performance teacher	Self-employed
50	Male	Small business owner	Self-employed
41	Male	Educator	Employee
30	Female	Market researcher	Self-employed
32	Female	Researcher and consultant	Employee
64	Female	Psychotherapist	Self-employed
53	Male	Human resource consultant	Self-employed
42	Female	Web marketing manager	Employee
36	Female	Marketing manager	Employee

53	Female	Marketing manager	Employee
55	Male	Health sector manager	Employee
45	Male	Business consultant	Self-employed