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REMOTE WORKING IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

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RESUMEN

TRABAJO REMOTO EN LA ADMINISTRACIÓN PÚBLICA: UN ESTUDIO CUALITATIVO EN EL CONTEXTO ITALIANO

COVID-19's impact on organizational and working context produced consequences on employees, employers and companies across the world. The pandemic has certainly modified the quality of life at work of people and has accelerated the use of work from home, often generating confusion and misunderstanding between employees and employers: smart and remote working became daily words, but the consequences of them was not fully considered. Based on this context, this study's aim was to define, in an exploratory way, potential thematic cores in discussion about smart/remote working. To achieve this aim, a focus group in an Italian Public Administration was analyzed. Participants were invited to describe their personal experiences of smart working during the period of health emergency. Analyses were performed to assess and identify two main principal thematic cores, in which the two meaningful words were "difficult"/ "problems" and "opportunity". This ambiguity is coherent with the literature on the topic, which considers the experience of remote /smart working as two side of a coin. Indeed, smart/remote working provides at the same time benefits in terms of conciliation, economical and time savings and improved performance, but on the other side produces very important issues related to social relationships, technostress and constant availability to work.

Palabras clave

Qualitative - Remote working - Public sector

ABSTRACT

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COVID-19's impact on organizational and working context produced consequences on employees, employers and companies across the world. The pandemic has certainly modified the quality of life at work of people and has accelerated the use of work from home, often generating confusion and misunderstanding between employees and employers: smart and remote working became daily words, but the consequences of them was not fully considered. Based on this context, this study's aim was to define, in an exploratory way, potential thematic cores in discussion about smart/remote working. To achieve this aim, a focus group in an Italian Public Administration was analyzed.

Participants were invited to describe their personal experiences of smart working during the period of health emergency. Analyses were performed to assess and identify two main principal thematic cores, in which the two meaningful words were "difficult"/ "problems" and "opportunity". This ambiguity is coherent with the literature on the topic, which considers the experience of remote /smart working as two side of a coin. Indeed, smart/remote working provides at the same time benefits in terms of conciliation, economical and time savings and improved performance, but on the other side produces very important issues related to social relationships, technostress and constant availability to work.

Keywords

Qualitative - Remote working - Public sector

Introduction

COVID-19's impact has been extreme and heavy and had effects on employees, employers and organizations across the world. At the same time, this scenario produced different strategies to cope with and to deal with new challenges deriving from the current scenario. At the organizational level, the economic context and the new policies adopted to control the social and commercial effects due to pandemic, encouraged researchers and practitioners to take up new research topics which are still becoming essential for all the community well-being because of their theoretical and practical implications. At the individual level, everyone at work changed their way of life and their quality of lifetime has been transformed: while for some of them experienced improved quality of life, for others it has worsened. Recently, an interesting review categorized populations of shutdown-affected employees into three classes of occupation, classified by work practices and payment changes. The groups are defined as the Remotes (people who work from home and, in general, work remotely), the Essential or life-sustaining employees (health professions, safety jobs and supermarket staff) and the Unpaid (laid-off employees who receive unemployment benefits) (Kniffin et al 2020; Kim, Cho & Kang, 2020). In the first lockdown, all the governments adopted several measures to contain the outbreak, including the use of various emergency measures especially in workplaces; no traditional ways to work have been implemented (remote working, telework, work from home) both for private and for public sectors.

The pandemic has certainly modified the quality of life at work of people and has accelerated the use of work from home, often generating confusion and misunderstanding between employees and employers. The work from home meant that people had to manage several difficulties to organize own working time; for instance, the space in own home has been shared with the family, this situation makes it difficult to respect the boundaries between work and family. At the opposite, in some cases, the work from home was linked to the advantage to improve the quality of life, time and economic savings, solved many problems to manage family time and care tasks. There is no doubt that all this diversity of work management is needed to be studied and improved, depending on the organizational context and the type of contract and of job. It is also significant that many employees have learned new strategies to adapt to the work context, for instance, the increase of the virtual teamwork which are gradually replacing traditional meetings forced people to implement new social and structural resources and to craft the existing resources. In some organizational environments (such as in the public sector), before pandemics, it was unimaginable to adopt a virtual teamwork in work practices. During the first step of lockdown, it was a necessity, over time it has become an increasingly common practice. These changes led to several consequences for people at work; some of them experienced the lack of social contacts, the social distancing, and the workplace loneliness (Kniffin et al. 2020) which were negatively related to employee's affective commitment, pro-social behaviour; another effect concerned the virtual communication, which, in the absence of nonverbal prompts, had the risk to generate misunderstandings, relational conflicts and counterproductive behaviors. Given the uncertainty of the duration of the pandemic, another element remarkable over time is the health and well-being at work in function of the recent solutions provided by Local Governments to limit the social contacts and contain the numbers of contagious. About the use of work from home (hereafter: WFH), many organizations preferred to keep it even after the most acute phase of pandemic and many employees got used it, taking advantage in terms of performance and work-family balance (Molino et al. 2020).

Since last year, many private and public employees had to carry out their work in an agile working regime, defined in the common sense as remote working. This term is improper used to identify an exclusively work performed at distance, in one's own home, following the imposed measures to avoid the risks of contagion even on the places of working. So, it could be identified, to all intents and purposes, as home working, tele working or remote working. The labels used to the different alternative working methods are often deemed as synonyms, but these terms represent conceptually different ways to concept the work alternatively to the traditional system. Remote working (in Italian language: "Lavoro agile" or "Smart working") represents the evolution of other forms of work at distance, such as telework,

made possible by the innovation of information and communication technologies. Teleworking is a real form of contract, instead smart working is an agreement between the worker and the organization within an employment relationship.

The two forms of remote work differ mainly in terms of flexibility and autonomy. In smart working, the places and the working hours are chosen by the worker and the set goals are defined in agreement with the organization, which must also identify the worker's days off and appropriate measures to ensure their disconnection from technological devices. The rules imposed on teleworking are not very flexible. In this case, timetables, locations, and technological tools are pre-established and reflect the same organizational set-up used in the workplace office. In general, the absence of some of the requirements discussed above confirms that smart working in the emergency period is a simple form of remote work rather than an agile work performance (Di Tecco et al., 2019).

Several studies highlighted the effectiveness and the negative effects of remote work during the outbreak. A study conducted by Dubey and Tripathi (2020) analyze the feelings and emotions of people towards the concept of remote work during the period of health emergency. It emerged that over 73% of people had a positive feeling towards work from home. Wang and colleagues (2021) moreover stated that remote work positively impacted on autonomy which is, in turn, positively related to performance and job satisfaction.

It's quite apparent a clear division between private and public workers, as in the case of Public Administrations (PA). In private companies the application of remote work models was already widely diffused before the state of emergency, legally regulated by agile labor bills such as, the law n.81 of 2017. In the case of Pas, they were not confident with these practices in the work context, so they have encountered greater organizational difficulties in the implementation of working methods at distance. Subsequently, these difficulties had a negative impact on the well-being of workers resulting a rapid increase in conditions from work-related stress, workaholism, burnout and difficulties in the work-life balance.

According to a survey conducted by the Observatory Smart Working (Crespi, 2019)¹, the smart workers in the private sector are distinguished by higher levels of job satisfaction with their work and greater mastery of digital skills than other people who worked in a traditional way. These variables inevitably make it possible to maintain high levels of self-efficacy and involvement with one's job role. In general, it has been found that the worker in the private sector benefits from all the positive aspects made possible by remote working methods. He enjoys greater flexibility in terms of schedules, which allows him to make the most of his organizational skills; manage their time optimally for the objectives set and for the implementation of the activities to be carried out and, finally, to improve the balance between work and private life.

But, what about the remote workers in Italian Public Administrations? Since 2015, with the “Madia” Reform Law n.124 of 7 August 2015, the Italian legislative bodies had resolved on the subject of agile work with reference to Public Administrations, on possible regulatory interventions to achieve the objective of introducing this flexible regime operating within three years, for at least 10% of employees, on a voluntary basis and during the phase of completion of the regulatory framework on agile work which then took place in 2017. Before the health emergency, the implementation plans for smart working in public administrations were a phenomenon that was still not very widespread and practically nil. Only later, with the onset of the pandemic, was there a rapid recourse to teleworking even within the PA. However, this sudden change has conditioned situations and conditions linked to the well-being of workers in many and contrasting ways among the personnel within the Public Administration.

Aims of the study

Starting from the framework, this research study aims to define potential thematic cores correlated to the introduction of remote working methods within the Italian Public Administration, occurred during the period of health emergency of Covid-19.

To achieve this aim, the qualitative tool of the focus group discussion was used. The participants were invited to describe, within a group discussion, their personal experiences of smart working during the period of health emergency. Focus group discussion is a qualitative method used to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. This approach permitted to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals (remote workers in public sector) (Nyumba et al. 2018).

The main topic of the focus group discussion was to explore the strengths and weaknesses of remote work, emphasizing and concentrating the opinion of the participants on the potential job and personal resources they have developed, according to the Job Demands Resources Model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), to improve their performance and to govern stress and negative outcomes.

Methods

Participants of the focus group were subjects selected “by reasoned choice”, as they meet the objectives of the survey. They have similar characteristics and operate in similar contexts. In particular, the sample was made up of 12 Italian employees, distributed equally between men and women, employed in the public sector, more specifically in a Public Administration. Research was conducted through focus group discussion (FGD), as above-mentioned. The focus group is a qualitative data collection technique used in social research which is based on the information that emerges from a group discussion on a topic or a subject that the researcher wants to investigate in depth. This tool is focused on some specific aspects with the aim of investigating in-depth opinions, attitudes and motivations of the

actors involved in each social phenomenon. Traditionally the privileged context for its development is the classroom. In this research context, given the “Provisions implementing Decree-Law 25 March 2020, n.19, on urgent measures to address the epidemiological emergency by COVID-19, and Decree-Law 16 May 2020, n.33, on additional urgent measures to address the epidemiological emergency by COVID-19”, the focus group took place in telematic mode, by the Google Meet platform. Two moderators took part in the group discussion introducing the topic under discussion. All the participants and researchers included were involved in the group discussion for a total time of about 60/90 minutes. In addition, during the FGD, an audio recording was made with the aim of carrying out the qualitative analysis of the contents and speech emerged during the discussion (with the required permits).

Data analysis

The data collected were analyzed through the MEH (Meaning Extraction Helper) software, a qualitative and linguistic tool through which frequencies of the most used words were extracted. Subsequently, the data obtained were visualized and synthesized in graphic representations, obtained by the software Excel, Jamovi and R Studio.

Results

For research purposes, a simple frequency analysis was carried out based on the transcription of the entire group discussion, aimed at investigating and understanding the principal thematic cores of the focus group discussion. These words refer to constructs, elements, important aspects which elicit reflections, points of view and an interesting debate about their personal experience of smart working, tele working or remote working. Before proceeding with the frequency analysis by MEH, the so-called “stop words” were deleted from the linguistic data analysis (words that, because of their high frequency in a language, are usually considered insignificant for a qualitative analysis of the text - expressions such as prepositions, articles, conjunctions or even, some common verbs). For these reasons, frequency analysis was carried out on a total of 409 words starting from the entire focus group discussion transcript.

In particular, the analysis carried out showed that the word spoken more frequently during the group discussion, was “sense” with a percentage of almost 6.8%. Hereafter we found word as “agile”(4.9%), “difficulty” (4.2%) and “colleagues” (3.9%). All the remaining words had almost the same percentage and were, for example, “subject”, “management”, “belonging”, “digital”, “success”, “simple”, “necessity”, “reflection”, “anxiety”, “knowing”, “meetings”, “on-line”, “organization”, “consciousness”, “society”, “responsibility”, “deferred”, “social” and “goals”. A complete review of the words used can be depicted in Table 1.

Table 1 - Most meaningful words adopted in the focus group

Words		
sense	learning	online
agile	capacity	organisation
difficulties	resolution	awareness
colleagues	improving	society
experience	discuss	meaning
problems	follow	responsibility
data	relational	deferred
problem	restart	social
staff	resources	come
services	connect	objectives
subject	constant	concentration
management	complicated	security
membership	tools	person
criticality	interfacing	solutions
important	difference	documents
possibility	caring	urgency
terms	interactions	procedures
relationship	comparisons	reports
colleague	rules	management
digital	serenity	positive
success	feedback	issues
simple	overcome	happens
need	reconciliation	stay
manage	simultaneously	virtual
reflection	ruin	experiment
anxiety	reflect	experiment
knowledge	relationship	social
meetings	emergency	sustainability

Discussion

Analyses highlighted that the word at the center of the discussion on remote working was “*sense*”: this suggests an attitude of the smart worker oriented to find meaning to the remote work experience that they had to face during the period of health emergency. This orientation seems to agree with the open debate in Italy in this year of pandemic towards the meaning of this new way of working. Its essential characteristics, the possibility of making it «smarter» without losing effectiveness and productiv-

ity, making easier to reconcile work with the personal and family needs of the individual worker suggest that smart working cannot be longer conceived as a new way of working but prefigures a strategic change in the workplace involving processes, workers, and organizations. Performed analyses allowed to identify two main principal thematic cores, in which the two meaningful words were “*difficult*”/ “*problems*” and “*opportunity*”. This ambiguity is coherent with the literature on the topic, which consider the experience of remote /smart working as two side of a coin. Indeed, smart/remote working provide at the same time benefits in terms of conciliation, economical and time savings and improved performance, but on the other side produce very important issues related to social relationships, technostress and constant availability to work (Molino et al., 2020; Ingusci et al., 2020; Signore et al., 2020, Zito et al., 2020; Manuti et al., 2020). In fact, beside the expression “*sense*”, other meaningful words turn out to be “*agile*”; “*difficulty*”; “*problems*”; “*experience*”; “*management*”; “*necessity*”. These are all words that once again confirmed the necessity of a re-definition not only of the meaning of one’s job role but, above all, of the best practices useful to effectively implement agile working methods. The potential changes, which can be introduced by smart working, are rooted at the level of managerial culture, macrosystem, in the construction and re-conceptualization of remote friendly places.

Limitations of the study and future research

The study has, of course, some limitations which must be necessarily discussed. A methodology of qualitative research carried issues linked to the individuality and the subjectivity with the collected data which undermine the inferential process and, thus, the generalization of the outcomes to the population. Nevertheless, in this case, qualitative analysis technique was adopted with the aim to explore personal experiences on the topics of discussion of this work. Based on this result, some insights can emerge and could be used to investigate in depth the phenomenon of interest. Future research could consider the possibility of further studies on the topic of the benefits and criticality of remote working, for the exclusive use of qualitative research methods, starting from an in-depth analysis of personal experience, the attitudes, and views of smart workers themselves.

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