



Supporting Smart Workers During a Pandemic. Lessons Learned from a Case Study

Sabrina Bonomi^{1,2(✉)}, Daria Sarti³, and Teresina Torre⁴

¹ eCampus University, Novedrate, Italy

sabrina.bonomi@uniecampus.it

² University of Ostrava, Ostrava, Czech Republic

³ University of Florence, Florence, Italy

daria.sarti@unifi.it

⁴ University of Genova, Genova, Italy

teresina.torre@economia.unige.it

Abstract. The purpose of this study is to analyze the adoption of practices and tools finalized to support smart workers to improve their work conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, we believe that such a peculiar situation has represented an important “opportunity” for companies to reaffirm the centrality of the wellbeing of their people and the need to take care of it, to put at the heart of internal policies wellbeing and inclusion reinforcing - and in some cases redesigning - their already existing systems. In detail, our research aims to examine how some practices even more fostered through electronic channels have been used and how these are expected to change the usual people management with an impact on future organizational behaviours. The analysis was carried out on the case study of a big MNC. During the pandemic, this company has implemented an ongoing survey articulated in three waves (April 2020, July 2020, and October 2020) to understand employees’ feelings toward working in the new situation and their perception of organizational inclusion in conditions of physical distance – being aware that the “new” approach represents a no-return point in the evolution of HRM. These results offer interesting stimuli for practitioners and scholars in the field of HRM and OB towards the new normal.

Keywords: Smart working (SW) · Covid-19 · Pandemic · Organizational support · Wellbeing · Multinational company

1 Introduction

International literature [1–3], as well as Italian one [4–6], have introduced smart working (SW) as a new approach to work organization. It is based on greater flexibility [7, 8] and larger discretion in work activities, in place and time they are carried out, and on increased responsibility towards results that workers are requested to provide. Technologies play the role of enabler for SW; their features in terms of portability and connectivity have opened new possibilities concerning where and when people can work.

Some enterprises have been practicing SW for some years as a feasible response capable of balancing often conflicting needs, such as efficiency and productivity on the company's hand, and flexibility and work-life balance on the individual's hand [9, 10]. Combined solutions were usually proposed, so that workers continued to go to work for most days of the week as usual and, for the other few days, they worked remotely as smart workers [5, 6].

Notwithstanding the attention devoted to this new model of work organization, smart workers still represented a small percentage of the total workers in Italy even if they were slightly increased in the last few years [11]. At the same time, it was underlined that the enterprises, where SW was normally used, appreciated it for its many benefits, confirming literature suggestions [4, 12, 13].

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Italian government fostered SW diffusion (also introducing some exceptions to the law prescriptions - namely the law n. 81/2017, which represents the regulatory framework in Italy on agile work in the field of subordinate work - so to facilitate its implementation), as a good solution able to allow people to work as better as they could, but granting limitations to physical contact, considered as a potential source of virus diffusion. So, SW became the "new" way of working for most workers. Enterprises with consolidated experiences in managing this model were facilitated in organizing it at a large scale, but all at once, they had to develop more intense practices to support workers - and their superiors too - in a context where the whole work and connected relationships were run at distance.

This new scenario offered the possibility of observing the dynamics traditionally associated with SW in a context characterized by the absence or weakness of certain conditions, which are considered as fundamental for the success of such work practices [14]. Among these: the specific preparation for the transition to the "smart" mode, the character of voluntariness, the agreement between employer and employees, finally the complementarity between working time in the company and remotely.

Psychological challenges and risks for remote workers have been largely investigated in the last years by a number of scholars, e.g. [15]. However, very few studies, so far, have been conducted in working contexts when remote working was practiced at such a large scale - as it has been during the pandemic - and in which its discretionary nature was replaced by an almost mandatory feature. So, as suggested by [16] a need in the shift of research focus is requested to understand "how to get the most out of remote working" rather than whether to implement it as it previously was.

In this vein, our present study aims at shedding light on the role played by organizational practices in supporting employees' success at work, as a result of fostering their positive feelings, wellbeing, and perception of inclusion, coherently with the traditional perspectives of analysis of SW experiences, focused first on the benefits in terms of a better balance between work, family, and leisure, and its relationship with individual wellbeing.

In particular, we think that interesting stimuli could be offered by investigating the relationship between the supportive practices created or improved in the new context - for which the usage of electronic channels was the standard dimension - and the taking care of employees' wellbeing and sense of inclusion. Indeed, these two latter represent some of the most critical features for the evolution of work. In detail, we wonder if and

to what extent those practices devoted to employees' support were perceived and were able to foster their attitudes toward the organization and the work, in the SW experience run during the lockdown.

To pursue our goal, the paper is organised in the following manner. The second section introduces the theoretical background and our research questions. The third part presents an explorative case study and its most relevant results. Specifically, a qualitative method for the analysis was chosen because of the pioneering nature of the investigated phenomenon [17] and to better understand which and how supportive practices are applicable for organizations in the specific pandemic context. The data were collected on a sample of about 1800 workers of an MNC in Italy through three online structured questionnaires administered at different times: at the beginning of the pandemic, when the pandemic situation was thought to be over, and in October, with a view to new restrictions. In the last section, some preliminary suggestions about our research question are established and the main limitations it shows; also, considerations useful for future development of the study are proposed.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Telework Towards Smart Working as an Evolving Way of Working

The new important evolutions in information and communication technologies have enabled the change of work [18–20]. Also, this evolution was led by increased work digitalization, both in terms of skills requested by employees [21] and organizational design interventions [22]. As well, the general attitude toward the use of technology at work has been analysed, and its changes over the years emerged [23].

Among authors, there is general recognition of the first milestone. Indeed, Nilles [24] coined the term “telecommuting”. After some decades, Bailey and Kurland [25] propose this definition: “working outside the conventional workplace and communicating with it by way of telecommunications or computer-based technology” (384). Many labels have been used to identify “unconventional” ways of working in the years to come, such as telework, distance work, e-work, mobile work, remote work, and smart working: the most recent label.

In literature, telework is defined as “the substitution of communication technologies for work-related travel and can include paid work from home, a satellite office, a telework centre or any other workstation outside of the main office for at least one day per week” [26]. It regards different forms related to work contents, depending on its nature (more executive or more conceptual). In a focused perspective, it is strictly associated with working from home [27]. This has been the most diffused meaning when technologies were characterized by stationary status, allowing to work only in specific conditions.

Kim and Oh [28] suggest that SW is an “extended version” of telework, and they describe it as telework, that individuals perform upon convenience smartly and innovatively using ICT and mobile devices and “regardless of time and place”. On the other hand, SW is intended as a new approach to work organization, challenging the traditional logic of hierarchical control and the conventional models of work design [2], in which technology seems to be a simple enabler and not a constitutional element.

Several distinguishing dimensions characterize SW; one is related to flexibility which is declined in terms of working spaces, time, and tools; also, it is remarked that the new way asks for more discretion in work activities and more responsibility for results provided [4, 7, 8, 14].

Studies have so far demonstrated that these features foster employees' better performances and organizational competitiveness [29, 30], organizational survival, and development [31]. In the end, they reinforce the perceived importance and the usefulness of this newly adopted model [32].

In managerial practice, SW was introduced marginally, particularly in the Italian context [11]. Among the organizations that adopted this working solution, the way mostly applied foresaw a few days of remote work – on average around three and four per month - so that a limited usage did not require an intense preparation for doing it and specific support to manage it by workers themselves and superiors [5, 6].

2.2 Managing Employees Working Remotely During Lockdown for Wellbeing and Inclusion

Recent studies concerned with the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the relevant role of HR Departments and HR practices in helping employees handle the current changes affecting employees' conditions in their workplace [33]. Some studies identify the relevance of work design practices for managing remote workers; it was especially demonstrated that social support, job autonomy, and workload prevent workers' challenges, loneliness, and procrastination [16]. In the same context, other studies demonstrated the increased effects of digital transformation at work and the need for upgrading employees' digital skills and developing their abilities in the use of new technologies. Further, HR professionals were requested to help employees to arrange the new way of working by enabling them to handle automated tasks and make decisions [34], cooperating in teams, promoting knowledge sharing [35] and, most important, arranging their wellbeing [34] in the new virtual work environment.

The rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a sudden and forced change in the working space-time modalities from one day to another. So, the particular and contextual circumstances forced companies to focus on employees' perceptions about their sense of inclusion and the support they could offer during the lockdown first, and for the period of the pandemic as well, in a condition where a gradual and proper preparation and planning for change had not been possible.

The perception of the sense of inclusion by employees represents a critical topic for organizations. This is true, especially when considering the current work scenario characterized by the pervasiveness of digital transformation and the recent pandemic crisis. In this context, because of increased work digitalization, the physical and psychological distances between employees and the employer improved dramatically; this happened in a context characterized - as well and because of the pandemic - by a general social discomfort.

Several studies on work digitalization, still before the pandemic, raised concern on critical issues related to employees' sense of inclusion such as professional isolation due to telecommuting and the importance of "social" support systems as essential to improving employees' sense of belonging [36, 37].

First studies on inclusion at work define inclusion as “the degree to which individuals feel a part of critical organizational processes such as access to information, connectiveness to co-workers, and ability to participate in and influence the decision-making process” [38].

Some authors suggest the presence of relevant outcomes arising from employees’ inclusion, such as job performance, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship, organizational commitment, and affective outcomes [30]. Also, contextual determinants favoring employees’ perception of inclusion in a specific working context are highlighted. In particular, Shore et al. [40] underline the importance of some “organizational inclusion practices” such as communication and sharing of knowledge among members of the same working group, participation in decisions making, group discussion, and in the end, caring and support from the direct supervisor and his/her critical role in promoting a culture of inclusion [41].

The practices to enhance employees’ inclusion can be considered belonging to the organizational support dimension, which lies in the theoretical domain of the social exchange theory [42, 43]. Some examples of these practices can be coworking space and fab lab, internet café, innovation time off, hackathon, but also “dogfooding” and so on [44].

The perceived organizational support is recognized as being very close to the one of organizational wellbeing. Indeed, in a definition provided by Eisenberger and colleagues [45] perceived corporate support is reported as employees’ “beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their employees’ contributions and care about their wellbeing”. Further, the authors add that: “perceived organizational support is assumed to increase the employee’s [actual] attachment to the organization and his or her expectancy that greater work effort will be regarded” [45].

Evidence is found of relationships between support perception, firm performance, and workers’ wellbeing. For example, authors remark a positive relationship between organizational support with organizational citizenship behaviours, affective commitment [46] job satisfaction, and job performance [47, 48]. Moreover, it is suggested that perceived support from the organization reduces employees’ psychological strain and social isolation [47]. In the same vein, Kowalski & Swanson [49] demonstrate the importance of a relationship based on trust between employees and the employer on the performance and satisfaction of teleworkers.

In our perspective, organizational support does also include the job design dimension since we consider the choice of implementing mechanisms that enable and favour workers’ activity – making work more sustainable even in the “humane” dimension - as evidence of the organizational willingness of supporting employees’ even if its evidence might be hidden, in reality, to the employees’ perception. So, can the choices behind the design of integration mechanisms be considered as supportive of the action of the employee? Our answer is positive.

In conclusion, our research question is how and by which practices can smart workers be supported to increase their organizational wellbeing and inclusion perception within a corporate setting?

3 Empirical Analysis

3.1 Method

A qualitative method for the analysis was used here. In particular, the case study [50] seemed the most suitable methodology to answer our research question. Indeed, it allows us to correctly answer a “how” question in a specific context [51] (in particular: which and how supportive practices are applicable in the particular pandemic context; so that, peculiarity and uniqueness of an organizational setting can be understood [52]). This methodology is also adequate because the scientific research on support practices during a pandemic is necessarily still in a pioneering phase [17], as shown in the previous section.

The case analysed was that of the Italian branch of an MNC operating in the food and beverage sector. This case was considered particularly significant because it was representative of an extraordinary situation, both for the number and type of applied home working activities (from teleworking to smart working), for the attention that the company showed in supporting workers during the pandemic, for monitoring wellbeing and organizational inclusion through the Sustainable Engagement Index (SEI).

This case study was also chosen because of the privileged situation of one of the researchers, who had access to data collection so facilitating the in-depth analysis. These data were collected through three online structured questionnaires. The questionnaires' results were analysed by the HR managers of the MNC to decide what to do for monitoring and improving the new working activities asset caused by the pandemic, just like a survey. For this reason, the words “questionnaire” and “survey” are considered and used, in this case, as synonyms. The first survey – made up of 10 questions, of which six single-answer, three open, and one multiple - was administered on 9 April, at the beginning of the pandemic, when the lockdown in Italy forced most of the workers to work from home. The second was proposed in July 2020, when the pandemic was thought to be over. The third survey was launched in October with a view to new restrictions.

The sample was composed of about 1800 workers, working in commercial functions (the majority, more than 63%), supply chain related functions (i.e., Production, Logistics, QSE, SC Planning, and procurement; about 20%), financial function (approximately 7%), human resources function (2%), legal, and others to a minor extent. For the first survey, the respondents were about 1500, with a response rate of 86%, divided into males (72%) and females (28%); 26% of them were line managers. The second survey was answered by approximately 1.130 people, 60% males and 31% females, and 9% not stated; 24% of them were line managers. In October, about 1450 people participated, which corresponds to 81% of the sample, to the survey; 67% were males and 33% were females; the line managers answered were about 25%.

The HRM team of the company then processed the results. Through a group of work and discussion, the researchers selected the most interesting and relevant contents from the incoming materials and, when necessary, transcribed these contents with a word processor to build a homogeneous archive for the analysis.

3.2 The ‘MNC’ Case Description

The company we studied has about 1900 employees, distributed in several regions across Italy. It operates in the food and beverage sector, in consolidated markets, and

is responsible for product merchandising, customer relations, promotions, Corporate Social Responsibility activities, and public and institutional relations. The actions of the Italian branch are based on three fundamental pillars: vision, purpose, and values. The vision expresses the strong desire to “be the most respected company in the beverage sector and lead growth in all the categories in which it is present”. The purpose declares its commitment to invest and consolidate the link with the community it belongs to, both environment and people. Finally, the values of organizational culture are part of a holistic vision, that includes customers, employees, the communities in which this branch operates; they are integrity, continuous learning, and teamwork and are considered as essential ingredients for success.

The company has a robust policy of attention to its collaborators that puts “people first”; it considers training, professional development, safety, and employees’ wellbeing as fundamental elements for value creation; therefore, it supports creating a work environment based on the enhancement of diversity and inclusion, promoting the development of equal opportunities. Its clear conviction is that success comes from the ability to attract and retain talented people in a stimulating environment, given that people’s wellbeing is considered a primary driving force to harmonize positive results, productivity, and people’s work-life balance. Coherently it obtained a certification from an Institution, which globally certifies companies that stand out for the excellent working conditions reserved for their employees.

Our branch has been experimenting with teleworking since 2011 to promote a greater balance between workers’ private life and professional activity, allowing them to combine flexibility, security, quality of performance, and reconciliation of work with personal and social life. The use of information and communication technologies and more flexible ways of working could also constitute a response to important environmental needs by reducing CO₂ emissions and social needs, with positive effects on family management and community.

Telework represented only a change of the place where work is performed, not affecting the integration of the worker in the company organization and allowing the employer the normal exercise of the powers of direction, management, and control.

The worker was requested to correctly use the equipment granted on loan for free use (laptop, a printer, a Wi-Fi line dedicated to working, and a mobile phone) by the technical instructions provided, as well as, moreover, take care of their safety inside the home intended as a place of work. To facilitate the maintenance of interrelationship with colleagues, the activation of teleworking (especially if indefinitely), required the presence at the workplace for at least four days a month. Of course, training played an important role.

Smart Working

In September 2014, three years before the law n. 81/2017, a “Policy on remote working” of the company has been defined with the related guidelines.

This way of working implies the possibility of carrying out one’s job from a location other than the workplace or one’s office of reference, in an impromptu and non-continuous manner, everybody can voluntarily adopt it so to manage at the same time better work performance and a satisfactory work-life balance. As a first experiment, smart

working could be performed for a maximum of three days a month where, however, there were elements of “Job Eligibility”.

Another essential factor to carry out remote work extemporaneously was to have, in the chosen place to work, a Wi-Fi network that was able to guarantee confidentiality and processing of data to ensure the same precautions expected by the carrying out work at the company offices. After a year of monitoring, the possibility of agile work was also extended to the “credit” and “treasury” departments, defining at the same time the need to start new monitoring to carefully assess the possible effects of this expansion over a longer period.

In June 2017, in consideration of the positive evidence that emerged during the monitoring period, the maximum number of days usable in SW during the r month went from three to five. At the beginning of 2020, an agreement was signed to increase to seven days per month. Further, in May 2021, another important step was implemented by adding another five days, the effect of which will take place at the end of the pandemic state of emergency.

A central aspect in developing the smart way of working was the reference to the workplace safety regulations in the signed agreement. To ensure the health and safety of its employees, an annual report is shared with the workers’ safety representatives (RLS) in which both the general and specific risks are associated with the method of execution of the employment relationship. This particular attention was specifically intended to ensure that the worker cooperates in the implementation of the prevention measures prepared by the employer to face the risks associated with the execution of the service outside the company premises and take all possible steps to avoid accidents at work or occupational diseases.

Regarding the company assets for carrying out the activity, the equipment was granted on loan for use. The prohibition to use the above-mentioned work tools for purposes unrelated to the work activity was clarified, also providing that any damage caused by negligence by the assignee during the remote service would be borne by the same and had to be repaired at his care and expense.

Starting from March 2020, the company management and the workers’ representatives have defined by mutual agreement and to the satisfaction of both the parts, to increase further the days that can be spent remotely, passing from five to seven days a month for each person, normalizing the improved solution adopted during the pandemic.

3.3 Analysis and Results

Our branch monitored the workers’ feelings over the pandemic three times, as reported before.

The data analysis showed that in October 2020, 40% of people felt good in their work and family situation, but less than in July, when 65% of workers were serene and satisfied, and in April, when 42% felt well. The 92% of workers felt well informed on how the COVID-19 situation has been managed in their company, without significant changes (−3% versus July, +4% versus April). 76% of the respondents felt supported by their manager in their current situation, a little less than in July when the pandemic seemed to have been resolved. 82% of workers felt connected to their team and colleagues during the

day, and 98% of people answered they were aware of health and safety policies/protocols that their company put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic (see Fig. 1).

HOW OUR PEOPLE FELT OVER PANDEMIC

	Positive Response Oct 2020	Positive Response July 2020	Positive Response Apr 2020
Overall <u>how do you feel</u> these days in your work and family situation?	40%	65%	42%
Do you feel well <u>informed</u> on how COVID-19 situation is managed in our company?	92%	95%	88%
Do you feel <u>supported by your manager</u> in your current situation?	76%	80%	75%
Do you feel <u>connected to your team</u> and colleagues during the day?	82%	84%	81%
I am aware of <u>health and safety</u> policies/protocols my company put in place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.	98%	97%	n/a

Fig. 1. Data analysis of survey (Source: MNC elaboration)

Based on these data, the HRM team thought and planned, and designed some specific actions to maintain the sense of belonging of workers and their inclusion.

All the actions were implemented following the surveys and were a response to the main areas to improve the critical situations that emerged during the pandemic. They have been deferred over time and created because of the needs of the moment.

Regarding information and connection, they suggested a General Managers' monthly update, a weekly update from Human Resource Director, Questions and Answers sessions managed by HR with all functions, Sales weekly calls, and no-contact meetings in Plants. A good practice to encourage remote workers to interact in an office was virtual coffees.

Our company offered free psychological sessions and Covid-19 insurance to improve organizational wellbeing, both for workers and their families, free anti-flu vaccines, and a free sport@home app.

A smart working etiquette was another response to the request for a better work-life balance that emerged in the first survey; finally, anti-fragility coaching was implemented for the out-of-home teams right after lockdown.

Moreover, support and engagement were improved through several actions: monitor & chairs at home, five virtual Family Days with Netflix free subscriptions, Virtual Learning sessions, a new discounts platform, a flat rate for smart workers, and also some vouchers & gifts to spend with their families.

Most of the actions were designed and implemented for the occasion, but the HRM team also re-communicated, enhanced, or digitalized some initiatives already in place (the Christmas party, for example, completely transformed it into a digital event). A series of agreements for employees were available but, in the pandemic, the company signed another agreement to access many more opportunities, in the same way, and provide economic support for workers in layoffs.

Measuring the Sustainable Engagement Index (SEI) 2020 and comparing it with that of the previous year (2019) and of the year before (2018), our company was able to

verify the success of the adopted actions. The SEI 2020 was 87%, and it had remained unchanged since 2019, in which it was increased by 5% from 2018. SEI was measured through six sub-indicators which showed the following trends: *ability to sustain the level of energy* at work decreased slightly (−5%) during the last year, but it was stable compared with the previous year’s results; *possession of equipment/tools/resources to do the job effectively* has grown since 2018 (+6% versus 2019, +4% versus 2018); *willingness to help each other by people of their team*, increased by 4% since 2019 and 1% since 2018; *trust in the company’s strategic priorities* has decreased by 3% during the pandemic, but it grew by 9% compared to 2018; *company sense of belonging* equal to 2019, and grown over 2018; *recommend <the company> as an excellent place to work*, approximatively the same of 2019 (−2%) and more than 2018 (+9%).

Despite the stability of the SEI index, between 2020 and 2019, some of the sub-indicators might have been directly and negatively affected by the pandemic (e.g., the ability to sustain the level of energy I need throughout the workday); so overall the positive tightness of the SEI demonstrates a positive effect of policies implemented.

4 Conclusions, Limitations, and Further Research

As it has been underlined, “HR without technology is hard to imagine nowadays” [53]. This has become particularly true after the full immersion we lived during the pandemic. As our case has shown.

We had wondered if and how the practices devoted to employees’ support in SW, especially during the lockdown, were really and effectively perceived by workers and were able to foster their attitudes toward organization and work. The herein described results show that supportive practices implemented – some already existing, but increased and finalized, and others identified newly by the company - represented a successful manner for our company to cope with the potentially detrimental effects arising from the new working condition, even if they had already experimented both teleworking and smart working, in ordinary times.

Especially three complementary areas of intervention can be considered as key drivers for the company’s success. First is represented by actions devoted to implementing coordination and communication among workers that favours work integration and communication among employees by rethinking, formalizing, and granting interaction mechanisms and suitable channels. The second area referred to the care of employees by pointing to the current emergency and promoting initiatives devoted to their health and safety, which represented a critical issue and a priority. In the end, the third area was specifically devoted to promoting employees’ engagement. Based on the system already existing in the company, the MNC operated mainly by redesigning events and interventions in a more usable mode – that is mainly through electronic channels - given the new working condition.

It is important to underline that these three lines of intervention were implemented systemically so that coherency among the single initiatives and their provision at the same time was granted. This again might be a further element that acts for the success of all the developed actions.

The main limitation of our work is the infancy of our study; the description is quite detailed, thanks to the high number of answers, and shows the trend on which the HR

managers were able to base their actions, but we didn't yet correlate all the variables. Also, the analysed timeframe, despite the three times survey, is less than a year.

Future research could be directed to deepen managers' opinions and judgments concerning the necessary tools and their best use according to their experience and attitude. Moreover, it would be very interesting to understand which are the most significant workers' and managers' competencies able to contribute to their organizational well-being and inclusion. Also, more analyses might be developed to deepen how the use of digitalisation at work will change with the gradual relaxation of restrictive measures and how supportive systems will evolve in the various phases of the return to the new normal.

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