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Rethinking the Unthinkable: A Delphi Study on Remote Work during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Background: The outbreak of COVID-19 pushed organizations towards the adoption of new ways of organizing the workplace, to contrast the diffusion of the virus as well as to ensure the production of goods and services. Many workers and employers were suddenly forced to switch to forms of remote work, quite often without any real preparation to successfully deal with these changes. This exploratory study aimed to investigate the point of view of Italian HR managers on the introduction of these new ways of working in Italian SMEs, to underline both the advantages and risks of remote work and to provide a shared list of best and worst practices related to remote work adoption. A Panel of 19 Italian experts of HR management was recruited in April 2022 to perform a Delphi study. They were asked to take part in an anonymous and asynchronous discussion started with stimulus questions, on their remote working experience during the pandemic. A mixed-methods approach was adopted for data collection and analysis. Results: Five principal themes emerged, related to both the positive and negative implications of the adoption of hybrid and remote work, namely: work-life balance, environmental sustainability, impact of working life on individual wellbeing and health, and technological improvement. The content analysis was realized with the use of the T-Lab software, stressing the risks of inaccurate planning and management of these new ways of work. Conclusions: This is the first application of a Delphi study in the Italian context on the impact of COVID-19 on work-life transformative processes. The results highlight the importance of clear communication, transparency, trust, and technology in successfully implementing remote and hybrid forms of work. By implementing these best practices, organizations can create a work environment that supports remote and hybrid work, fosters collaboration, and maintains productivity. The findings of this study can serve as a useful guide for organizations that are transitioning to remote or hybrid work models.

Keywords: remote working; COVID-19; Delphi study; organizational wellbeing; best practices

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, new ways of organizing workplaces have emerged to control the spread of the virus and to ensure the production and the delivery of goods and services. In some organizations this only required an enhancement of forms of remote work that were already widely used, while others had to face a radical, fast, and unexpected change. Many workers were indeed required to switch, quite suddenly and without any preparation, to remote or hybrid work for the first time. According to early estimates from Eurofound (2021), approximately 50% of Europeans worked from home (at least partially) during the pandemic, while before the emergency this figure was only at 12%.

The most recent literature in the field of organizational psychology highlights the need to deepen the knowledge of positive and negative consequences on individual and organizational wellbeing due to the introduction of new ways of working, as well as the challenges faced by management to deal with this rapid transition (Harker Martin and

MacDonnell 2012; De Vincenzi et al. 2022; Allen et al. 2015; Donati et al. 2021).For these reasons, the present study explored, in the Italian context, the impact of introduction of these new ways of working from an HR management' perspective, to underline the implications in terms of organizational wellbeing as well as to identify good and bad practices when implementing remote and hybrid work.

In the following section, a literature review about flexible work arrangements' implications will be presented, able to underline both positive and negative consequences in terms of wellbeing and performance.

2. Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many organizations to rapidly adopt remote work in order to continue their operations while minimizing the risks of infection. This sudden shift presented serious challenges to establish new work routines but, at the same time, also brought some positive effects. This has generated an increasing interest in remote work as a viable work choice in the post-pandemic world (Kane et al. 2021; Smite et al. 2023; Galanti et al. 2023; Bloom et al. 2015).

2.1. Positive Implications of Remote Work

Work-life balance represents probably the most widely quoted benefit of the introduction of remote work during the pandemic. The reduction of commuting time and the opportunity to work from home has proven to reduce workers' stress and fatigue, allowing them to spend more time with their families.

A study by Harker Martin and MacDonnell (2012) underlines that remote workers report lower levels of work-family conflict than their on-site colleagues, as well as higher levels of job satisfaction and commitment. In a similar way, Allen et al. (2015) found that remote work provides greater flexibility that, in turn, may improve employees' work-life balance. The association of remote working with better work-life balance and high job satisfaction was confirmed by other studies as well. Increased productivity is another positive consequence of remote work. A number of studies have shown that remote workers are often more productive than their in-office colleagues due to fewer distractions, less time spent in commuting, and increased autonomy (Bloom 2020; George et al. 2022). A study by Bloom et al. (2015) found that remote work during the pandemic increased productivity and reduced costs for companies. Remote work has also proven to generate cost-saving benefits for both employers and employees. By eliminating the need for office space, companies can save on rent, utilities, and other related expenses. On the other hand, employees can save on transportation costs, meals, and other expenses related to working in an office (Beno 2021).

Remote work has also been proven to improve employees' attraction and retention. By offering the flexibility and autonomy that remote work provides, organizations can attract and retain top talent who may not be able to work in a traditional office setting (Adeosun and Ohiani 2020). In fact, a study carried out by Knardahl and Christensen (2022) highlighted that companies offering options for remote work have a lower turnover rate than those that do not allow this choice to their employees. Finally, remote work has proven to have a positive impact on the environment. Remote work in fact reduces greenhouse gas emissions and traffic congestion, since it reduces the need for commuting. A study by Global Workplace Analytics found that if the U.S. workforce shifted to remote work half the working time, it would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 54 million metric tons per year (Reynolds 2022).

However, while remote work during COVID-19 has proven to have many positive effects, there are also some potential negative consequences and challenges that should be taken into consideration.

2.2. Negative Implications of Remote Work

One major concern is represented by the possible feelings of isolation, disconnection, and loneliness among remote workers, particularly those who are used to working in a traditional office setting. Studies have shown that social isolation and loneliness may have negative impacts on mental health and well-being and may lead to decreased productivity and motivation (Montreuil and Lippel 2003; Toscano and Zappalà 2020). It is interesting to note that these negative effects were observed even before the outbreak of COVID-19 showing that the feeling of loneliness and isolation are not only connected to the rapid changes and challenges that occurred during the pandemic. In fact, a study of Golden et al. (2006) found that remote workers reported higher levels of social isolation than office workers; this, in turn, led to lower job satisfaction and higher turnover intentions. Remote workers experiencing social isolation and lack of support from coworkers, show higher levels of emotional exhaustion, lower levels of job satisfaction, and higher levels of job strain (Gajendran and Harrison 2007; Kreiner et al. 2009).

Unsurprisingly, several studies conducted after the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak show that remote work may have negative impacts on employees' mental health and well-being. More specifically, two studies of Wang and colleagues found that remote workers who had lower levels of social support from coworkers were more likely to experience job burnout and emotional exhaustion (Wang et al. 2021, 2020). These studies underline the need to prevent the risk of employees' feeling of being unsupported, promoting social connection and work-life balance. In fact, a study by Wong et al. (2020) found that remote work during the pandemic was associated with higher levels of employees' stress and anxiety, due to the lack of sufficient support such as instruction, feedback and social interaction. Remote work may blur the boundaries between work and personal life, leading to increased stress and burnout, especially if workers feel that they must be always available (Bhat et al. 2022; Lazauskaite-Zabielske et al. 2022; Park et al. 2021). Wang et al. (2021) found that remote workers reporting higher levels of work interference with family life experienced also higher levels of emotional exhaustion.

In the light of the studies about the effects of remote work on employees during the pandemic, the issue of work-life balance and gender has also been addressed. A study by Dunatchik et al. (2021) found that women were more likely to report feeling isolated and disconnected from their colleagues while working remotely. This was particularly true for women who had children at home, as they often had to juggle their work responsibilities with caring for their children (Cannito and Scavarda 2020).

These studies suggest that remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to increased stress and burnout if workers feel that they must be constantly available to their employer, and if work and personal boundaries are not clearly defined. Thus, establishing clear expectations and boundaries for remote workers, plays a pivotal role in supporting work-life balance. Another potential risk of remote work during COVID-19 was the decreased level of co-operation and ability to innovate from the employees' side (Fonner 2015). In fact, in-person communication and collaboration can often lead to more creative and effective problem-solving and idea generation. Thus, remote workers may struggle to be engaged in effective collaboration and brainstorming, when face-to-face interactions and opportunities to build personal connections with their coworkers are reduced (Pentland et al. 2012; Wang et al. 2021).

Finally, remote work requires new ways of monitoring and assessing the employees' performance (Cannito and Scavarda 2020). However, due to the rapid shift to remote work during COVID-19, managers and supervisors have attempted to physically observe and control their employees' work behaviors and productivity in the same way they can in an office environment. This control has taken the form of tracking software, mandating video calls, virtual performance metrics, and the frequent use of communication tools to check in remote employees. Recent studies underlined that these control systems can lead to feelings of mistrust and a lack of autonomy among workers, as well as concerns about privacy and the ethical implications of monitoring employee behavior (Galanti et al.

2021; Gerke et al. 2020; Barabaschi et al. 2022). Gerke et al. (2020) provided evidence of a decrease of autonomy and privacy of remote workers due to increased strict surveillance and monitoring by employers. On the other hand, remote working requires self-leadership and time management skills (Galanti et al. 2021; Gerke et al. 2020) in order to counterbalance the absence of structure and routine of a traditional office environment.

2.3. The Italian Context

Before the pandemic, Italian SMEs did not feel the necessity to adopt a structured policy on remote working. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled organizations to recognize the possibility and benefits of remote work, highlighting its potential in terms of autonomy, motivation, and trust (Barabaschi et al. 2022). This shift in perspective has shown that physical presence is not necessarily crucial for ensuring productivity, as remote work can still yield positive results. Moreover, while certain large companies had already implemented corporate social responsibility and employee well-being policies prior to the health emergency, many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) found themselves facing significant challenges in adopting such practices. These challenges can be attributed to a combination of objective factors, such as limited digitalization, lack of role division and specialization, size limitations, and low representation of trade unions. Subjective factors, including a predominant culture of direct supervision by entrepreneurs, resistance to innovative changes, absence of formal systems for goal setting and performance measurement, a work culture focused on "hours worked" rather than performance, control-oriented systems, social loyalty, and inadequate delegation and decision-making autonomy for employees, also play a role in hindering the adoption of these practices (Muzio and Doh 2021). Italian SMEs are widely recognized for their management approach, which emphasizes physical presence, personal control, and supervision. This traditional approach is rooted in a country that faces challenges in its labor market, including high job insecurity, frequent downsizing, and a strong focus on preserving employment by intensifying workloads. However, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly disrupted this established mindset by necessitating the adoption of remote work, self-organization, and remote supervision. These changes require a fundamental shift in leadership style and mindset, impacting the maturity of organizations, groups, and individuals (Stoker et al. 2021; Ruhle and Schmoll 2021). Furthermore, implementing an agile work model necessitates a transition towards delegation and coordination for effective cooperation (Toscano et al. 2022; Lal et al. 2021). These organizational elements, though common in other contexts, may be unfamiliar to workers and entrepreneurs in Italian SMEs. Finally, the sudden introduction of remote work and the need for self-organization challenges the existing organizational culture and demands a reevaluation of leadership practices (Müller and Niessen 2019). This shift requires SMEs to develop new strategies for managing teams, promoting trust, and fostering collaboration in a remote work environment. Additionally, it necessitates providing support and resources to help individuals and organizations adapt to the new ways of working and embrace the benefits that remote work can offer.

2.4. Aim of the Study

This exploratory study aims to investigate the opinions of a group of Italian HR managers about the introduction of new ways to work, which rapidly spread during COVID-19 pandemic, in Italian SMEs. In fact, the rapid adoption of remote during the pandemic has created a need for comprehensive research that examines the long-terms effects on employee wellbeing, team dynamics, performance evaluation, and organizational culture. However, it is worth noting that there have been relatively few studies that have delved deep into the implications of this shift in terms of human resource management. More in-depth studies in these areas can provide valuable insights and guidance for effectively managing remote workers and teams and optimizing the benefits of remote work arrangements. While remote work was the most adopted choice during the first pandemic wave, it has gradually made way to hybrid forms of work, characterized by

work arrangements where employees have the flexibility to work both remotely and in a physical office.

Starting from these premises, this study aimed to advance the literature that explains the effects of remote working on individuals and organizations by examining its implications in the context of Italian SMEs. Moreover, this study aims to provide practical insights and recommendations for Italian organizations and managers to effectively manage remote teams and promote employee wellbeing in the post pandemic work environment. By identifying challenges, best practices, and strategies, we strive to offer actionable guidance that can support decision-making and enhance remote work arrangements. Last, but not least, this research introduces an innovative methodology, such as the Delphi interview method, to gather expert opinions and insights on remote working. By utilizing the Delphi interview method, researchers can tap into the collective wisdom of experts in the field of human resource management and remote work. In fact, these interviews can shed light on the intricacies of managing remote teams, uncover best practices, and highlight potential challenges that organizations may encounter. Furthermore, though this iterative process of collecting and analyzing expert opinions, a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of remote work in human resource management can be achieved. Thus, this study may help to deepen the knowledge about the implications of these new ways of work on organizational wellbeing as well as to identify good practices when implementing remote and hybrid work.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants and Procedure

A Delphi interview methodology with a panel of 19 HR managers and directors of Italian SMEs, was adopted for this explorative study (10 men and 9 women, average tenure in the same organization: 13.2 years). We consider HR managers and directors as experts based on their professional experience and expertise in the field of human resource management. They are in fact typically responsible for overseeing various aspects of employee management including remote work arrangements. Indeed, it is necessary to specify that all the experts involved in the research had implemented, before or during pandemic, agile working arrangements within their respective organizations. The experts were identified through professional organizations and industry associations. The experts were personally invited and the objective of the study, the importance of their experience, and the reason for their selection were explained to them. Confidentiality of information and anonymity throughout the process were assured to them before they signed the informed consent.

To maximize the heterogeneity of professional experiences and to obtain a broader and more exhaustive understanding of the different points of view, participants were chosen from different Italian regions (center, south, and north) and from different organizational backgrounds (small- and medium-sized enterprises). These experts took part in a Delphi interview.

The Delphi interview methodology is a structured process for eliciting and synthesizing expert opinions on a specific topic. The process typically involves multiple rounds of data collection and analysis, and each round is built on the results of the previous round (Hsu and Sandford 2007; Scholl et al. 2004). In this study, three round of Delphi interviews were conducted. During the first round, experts were asked to respond to a series of open-ended questions related to the advantages and disadvantages of actual remote working arrangements, possibilities and risks in the future, best and worst practices, and differences between remote working experiences before and after the pandemic. Then, after analyzing the responses using a thematic analysis methodology, in the second step, experts were invited to express their level of agreement or disagreement with the content of each theme and subtheme discovered, providing explicit reasons for any disagreement. Finally, in the last round, the participants were shown again the results obtained in the second step, with

a particular focus of contrasting opinions and dissenting point of views. Then, they were asked again to express their level of agreement.

The experts were asked to provide their opinions and insights on these issues, and they were free to add comments and opinions on any other issues or concerns they believed to be relevant to the questions they answered.

The number of rounds required in a Delphi process can vary depending on the nature and complexity of the research question, the number and diversity of the expert panel, and the level of agreement or disagreement among the experts (Hsu and Sandford 2007; Scholl et al. 2004). In general, the first round is used to elicit initial opinions and insights from the expert panel, the second round is used to refine and clarify these opinions, and the third round is used to achieve a consensus among the experts. In this study, this structure was adopted, inviting experts to critically reflect (in the second round) on the responses given in the first round and express their degree of agreement or disagreement (third round).

The responses were collected and analyzed at the end of the first round, to identify common themes and patterns. In the following rounds, the experts were provided with a summary of the results emerged from the previous consultation and asked to re-evaluate their responses considering information received. This process continued until a consensus was reached among the experts. There are no recognized guidelines on an appropriate level of consensus (Kenney et al. 2022), but, according to Green et al. (1999) we established an 80% consensus level before data collection had begun. So, according to the literature (Boulkedid et al. 2011; Thangaratinam and Redman 2005; Day and Bobeva 2005) starting from the second round, we added a quantitative Likert scale to measure the level of agreement or disagreement of experts.

3.2. Analysis

The analysis of the Delphi data involved several steps and different techniques, including qualitative interpretation of themes and content analysis. In each step, the research team, composed of three researchers, worked collaboratively to analyze the data.

We analyzed the results with a mixed-methods approach, including thematic analysis and content analysis, realized with the T-Lab software (Brown 2018; Cortini and Tria 2014). More clearly, we adopted a mixed-methods analysis. In fact, combining both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods can help to provide a more complete and accurate understanding of the research question being addressed (Lancia 2004; Galanti and Cortini 2019). Quantitative methods can provide statistical evidence of trends and patterns, while qualitative methods can provide context and nuance to these findings. Moreover, using mixed-methods data analysis can help to address a broader range of research questions compared to a single method alone. It allows researchers to explore complex phenomena in greater depth, and to examine the relationships between variables that may be missed by using only quantitative or qualitative methods (O'Brien et al. 2014). In the following paragraphs we present qualitative and quantitative results.

In the first step, we compiled the responses from each round of the Delphi process.

In the second step, we conducted a qualitative interpretation, analyzing the responses to identify key themes, patterns, and trends. We codified, memorized, and compared data to identify commonalities and differences in the responses.

In the third step, we performed a content analysis, using the T-Lab software, to analyze the text-based responses, identifying and categorizing the responses into topics and underlining the areas of agreement among the participants, as well as the differences in opinion and perspectives.

4. Results
4.1. Qualitative Results

We conducted a thematic analysis of the content of Delphi interviews. Each sentence or excerpt representing an idea named by a participant was considered a unit of meaning, with

the smallest unit being at least a sentence with a verb and the subject. Inter-rater validation was carried out by two trained researchers to ensure consistency, with Cohen's Kappa at 0.85. Another researcher coded a sample to clarify any ambiguities and specify the unit of meaning. From the thematic analysis, four major themes related to the remote working experience emerged: (1) work-life balance; (2) environmental sustainability; (3) work experience and (4) technological impact.

A linguistic premise seems necessary: in the Italian context, the term "smart working" is used more frequently than "remote working". For this reason, in the first round of Delphi, experts often have referred to it as "smart working" rather than "remote working". Starting from the second round, we controlled this variable by explicitly addressing the participants' attention to the specificities of remote working and inviting them to reflect on how well these practices aligned with those currently used in their organizations.

The first theme is closely related to one of the main aims of remote working, which is to promote a better balance between work and personal life. However, the experts interviewed agreed that it is not an absolute advantage. "I believe that it is indeed possible to create better working conditions, especially for those who have to balance family and work commitments, thanks to remote or hybrid ways of working" (expert #5). "Such working organizations may fit well with active lifestyles, studded with commitments and organizational management issues (family, elderly, ill). But would the same considerations apply to people who have little social interactions, higher seniority, and no particular health problems?" (expert #8). These are just two example that highlight the need to move from the general to the specific, from labor to workers, and to consider their different needs. Experts also highlighted that, in order for remote work to improve the work-life conflict, it is necessary for it to take place within a well-structured organizational context. Only in this way will remote working be able to have a positive impact on "work-life balance and, consequently, on better working conditions, employee well-being, and increased productivity" (expert #1).

This requires moving beyond a general understanding of the potential benefits of remote work to a more nuanced and individualized approach that takes into account the diverse needs and circumstances of workers. The issue of work-life conflict also raised gender considerations among experts. In particular, experts perceive a distortion in which both the literature and the business context emphasize the advantages of remote work in terms of work-life balance (WLB), suggesting that women workers would benefit from it the most. On the contrary, experts reiterate that both men and women can "benefit from remote work for better family organization" (expert #7).

Furthermore, experts underlined the risks of a "rebound effect" of remote working on work-life balance. The possibility of choosing when and how to work can result in an "always on" mode of work, in which individuals become "slaves to work" (expert #11), especially "when dealing with superiors who impose exhausting work rhythms and schedules on their employees" (expert #12). Surprisingly, the experts showed skepticism with respect to the positive effects of remote/hybrid work on the environment. "There would be positive effects on traffic and pollution, but impact wouldn't be extraordinary, since exhaust pollution is only one component of the broader air pollution in urban areas. In winter, pollution might even increase due to the heating of homes" (expert #10). Similarly, the experts highlighted the key role that individual and collective responsibility play to reach the environmental sustainability e.g., "Sustainability is such only when combined with innovation and responsibility," expert #).

With respect to the implications of remote work on the work experience, the results seem to stress the need for a reformulation of typical work practices into new, agile practices characterized by a focus on objectives, process evaluation, and prompt feedback systems (e.g., "One of the most difficult aspects, in some types of work, I think, is just properly defining the goals, how to monitor them, and setting up proper feedback to stakeholders," expert #13). Another issue is the lack of adequate training due to the erroneous idea that remote work corresponds only to working from home (e.g., "Lack of smart working habits

has led many resources to isolation and acting individually, not as a team," expert #1). Furthermore, the experts have highlighted the forced nature of the change, which has "compelled organizations to revisit their processes in order to manage them remotely" (expert #4). It is evident in these words the experts' difficulty in disconnecting from the experience of remote work during the pandemic and the long road ahead to transform a necessary yet imposed choice into an opportunity to seize.

Regarding the direct impact of remote working on productivity and performance, experts highlighted multiple levels of problems: the first one relates to the method of measuring the performance of so-called "agile" workers. This is because companies often lack a forward-looking vision and are not aware of their medium-to-long-term objectives, effectively contradicting the "management by objectives" approach, which is emblematic of remote work. The second level, on an individual perspective, refers to the need to identify the type of workers who, based on professional and personal factors, have the potential to work remotely. In fact, although during the pandemic period it was not possible to carry out a specific selection of workers for remote work, now, during this transitional phase, it becomes of fundamental importance to identify some individual predictors of an effective remote work. This would allow companies to identify and recruit individuals with the right abilities and predispositions to work in a virtual work environment, thus improving the overall performance of the organization.

Finally, the experts underlined a cultural issue common to Italian organizations: the supervision culture, for which it is possible to assess a workers' performance only by observing them while they are working in the office. In contrast, the experts suggested a new management culture, based on the employees' autonomy and mutual trust, connoted by a constant exchange of know-how among colleagues. This, in the experts' opinion, may promote autonomy and work self-efficacy as well as counteracting the risk of feeling isolated by the employees.

Continuing the analysis of remote working impact, the issue of technology is also worthy of attention. The experts agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed tremendously towards the use of ITC among the Italian organizations (e.g., "COVID emergence and smart working have been a powerful stimulus to digital literacy," expert n°5; "During the emergency phase, it was possible to introduce remote working that in normal times would never have been initiated due to distrust," expert n°11). Moreover, they highlighted the risk of looking at remote or hybrid way to work without a specific IT training. According to the literature (Molino et al. 2020; Pansini et al. 2023), it is particularly true for senior workers, who probably perceived the highest levels of technostress, in its components of techno complexity and techno overload.

Another aim of this Delphi study was to define, starting from direct experience of HR experts, the best and worst practices for implementing remote or hybrid work forms in a post-pandemic scenario. With best practices we mean the methods or strategies that have been found to be effective in achieving positive outcomes in remote or hybrid work arrangements. These practices may include clear communication and expectations, regular check-ins and feedback providing the necessary technology and infrastructure, promoting work-life balance, and creating a culture of trust and accountability. On the other hand, with worst practices we refer to ineffective or detrimental methods and strategies, which may include poor communication or inadequate technology, micromanagement, lack of trust or accountability, lack of boundaries between work and personal life, and inadequate support for work-life balance. By identifying the best and worst practices for implementing remote or hybrid work, organizations can learn from the experiences of others and make informed decisions about how to design and implement their own work arrangements. This Delphi study aims to identify these practices by gathering the opinions and experiences of a panel of experts in the field.

The Table 1 shows the results obtained.

In the discussion section we provide a point-by-point discussion of these results.

Table 1. Best and worst practices for implementing remote work.

Best Practices	Worst Practices
Involvement of the workers in the clear definition of the company mission and goals	Poor organizational communication and inefficient communication strategy
Transparency in defining the criteria for employees opt for remote work, clearly stated in the employment contract	Lack of clarity and transparency in the remote work policy, which can create confusion and uncertainty among employees and erode trust and loyalty to the organization
Constantly updating technology equipment and IT support	Outdated technology equipment and inadequate IT support
Implementation of a monitoring and evaluation system that is not based on surveillance (management by objectives)	Absence of a system for performance assessment and regular feedback
Creation of a workplace culture that enables employees to effectively balance work responsibilities with personal and family commitments	Workplace culture based on work-life imbalance (excessive demands and little flexibility in work schedules)
Enhancing internal communication and mutual trust	Lack of coordination and communication among workers

4.2. Quantitative Analysis

The interviews were also analyzed quantitatively using the T-Lab statistical software, which mapped the contents of the interviews. To prepare the text for analysis, lemmatization was used to cluster words with the same root meaning, such as "work" and "working". This operation was only performed for interesting words, like "innovation", "advantages", and "good practices". Then, we conducted an automatic analysis based on word occurrences, with the idea that the more specific language used by the interviewees, the more important those concepts were to them. Therefore, frequent references to specific topics indicated their significance (Galanti and Cortini 2019).

Analysis of Occurrence and Co-Occurrence

Firstly, we conducted an analysis of word occurrences and co-occurrences of all the textual material. The most frequently mentioned word is placed at the center of a visual output, and the words that co-occur with it the most are displayed around it. This association is measured using the Cosine coefficient, that is, the closer the words are, the more frequently they co-occur. Users can interact with the software by asking it to display a specific word at the center, providing a customized analysis option.

Our study found that "remote working", "work", and "organization" were the most cited words. By clicking on the associated words, users can view the exact phrases in which the words co-occur. This feature is beneficial in mixed-methods research, as it enables access to the original textual material for further discourse analysis. We established a frequency threshold of four, and the thematic elements' association values were depicted graphically in Figure 1 based on their distance from the central keyword.

The most cited word is "smart working" (Figure 1). This result is significant in of itself because "smart working" is a term widely used only in the Italian context to refer to remote work, specifically conveying an idea of greater work agility, simplification, and acceleration of work experience. This word is strongly associated (see Table 2) with the lemmas "organization" (Cosin 0.35), "people" (Cosin 0.34) and "opportunity" (Cosin 0.30), highlighting the fact that smart working can bring benefits both for organizations, in terms of productivity (Cosin 0.23) and goal achievement (Cosin 0.30), and for workers, in terms of work-life balance (Cosin 0.20), individual wellbeing (Cosin 0.20) and flexibility at work (Cosin 0.19).
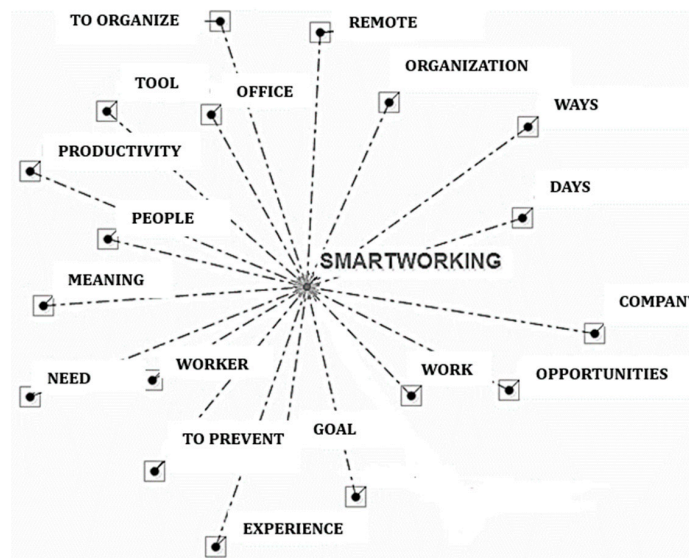
Figure 1. Co-occurrence with the lemma smart working (remote working).

Table 2. Coefficient of Cosine and Chi2 of co-occurrence with the lemma.

LEMMA	COEFF	C.E.(A)	C.E.(AB)	CHI^2
Work	0.589	163	82	0.464
To organize	0.349	54	28	0.264
People	0.34	29	20	5.372
Office	0.328	20	16	8.504
Opportunities	0.3	21	15	4.721
Goal	0.295	28	17	1.806
Need	0.232	10	8	4.07
Productivity	0.229	27	13	0.005
Time management	0.190	29	11	1.548
Culture	0.183	9	6	1.198

The second most cited word was "organization" (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Co-occurrence with the lemma organization.

Smart working (Cosin 0.35) seems to be represented in an articulated way (Table 3). On the one hand, the experts emphasized that it is the under the organization's responsibility (Cosin 0.20) to promote ways of working that offer greater "flexibility" (Cosin 0.21), "productivity" (Cosin 0.27), and "work-life conciliation" (Cosin 0.30). On the other hand, it was stressed clearly that these innovations also present risks for management (Cosin 0.21). More in detail, the challenges are to be seen in the reduced opportunities of sharing knowledge (Cosin 0.19), the need for a different management strategy with employees and for endorsing new ways of monitoring individuals' performance (Cosin 0.17) and remote work activities and, finally, the need to regulate (Cosin 0.17) remote or hybrid work.

Table 3. Coefficient of Cosine and Chi2 of co-occurrence with the lemma.

LEMMA	COEFF	C.E.(A)	C.E.(AB)	CHI^2
Work	0.522	163	49	17.918
Smart working	0.522	163	49	17.918
Work-life conciliation	0.34	29	20	5.372
Productivity	0.262	27	10	3.914
Responsibility	0.246	15	7	5.583
Flexibility	0.219	19	7	2.588
Results	0.218	14	6	3.702
Risk_management	0.206	18	4	5.126
Sharing	0.180	6	3	2.772
Monitoring	0.180	6	3	2.772
Regulation	0.180	6	3	2.772

We also conducted a personalized analysis, asking T-Lab to map the co-occurrence with some stimulus words suggested by the thematic analysis. These words are "wellbeing" (Figure 3) and "productivity" (Figure 4). This analysis was conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts related to wellbeing and productivity in the context of remote work. By mapping the co-occurrence of stimulus words suggested by the thematic analysis (in this case, "wellbeing" and "productivity"), we could identify patterns and connections between different concepts that may not have been immediately obvious from the initial data.

Figure 3. Co-occurrence with the lemma Wellbeing.

Figure 4. Co-occurrence with the lemma Productivity.

The first result of this personalized analysis (see Figure 3) emphasizes the close relationship between productivity and wellbeing and, therefore, the impossibility of promoting the former without protecting the latter (Table 4).

Table 4. Coefficient of Cosine and Chi2 of co-occurrence with the lemma.

LEMMA	COEFF	C.E.(A)	C.E.(AB)	CHI^2
Health	0.302	4	2	19.55
Productivity	0.29	27	5	13.843
Sharing	0.27	5	2	14.937
Innovation	0.261	12	3	12.311
Awareness	0.246	6	2	11.872
Trust	0.246	6	2	11.872
Improvement	0.228	7	2	9.694
Goal	0.228	28	4	7.024
Quality of life	0.213	36	2	8.068
Smart working	0.193	119	7	1.019
Work-life conciliation	0.180	28	3	2.83

In fact, the word "wellbeing" is strongly associated with the words "health" (Cosin 0.30), "productivity" (Cosin 0.29), and "smart working" (Cosin 0.20). Others significant associations with "wellbeing" are: "innovation" (Cosin 0.26), "improvement" (Cosin 0.21), and "awareness" (0.25). This seems to underline that promoting wellbeing also involves promoting innovation and improvement of the quality of life (Cosin 0.21). Besides it is necessary, first and foremost, that both organizations and workers have a clear understanding of their own strengths and limitations when it comes to remote work. For organizations, this may involve assessing their own infrastructure, policies, and management practices. For workers, it may involve assessing their own work habits, communication skills, and ability to manage their time and work independently. In addition, the co-occurrence with the word "trust "(Cosin 0.25) clearly underlines that every effective change should be not imposed by organizations but rather shared with employees. This finding can be read as closely related with one the best practices emerged from the Delphi that is the involvement of the workers in the clear definition of the company mission and goals.

Co-occurrences with the stimulus word "Productivity" suggest (Table 5) some positive outcomes of the implementation of remote working, such as: the promotion of individual responsibility (Cosin 0.25); more flexibility (Cosin 0.31) at work, linked with achieving the

organizational goals (Cosin 0–29); the opportunity to organize (Cosin 0.27) in autonomy (Cosin 0.16) their workdays. Another important issue, emerged already in the thematic analysis, is the need of a regulation (Cosin 0.24) of these new ways of working, so that they may become efficient and viable models of work (Cosin 0.26), promoting organizational and individual well-being (Cosin 0.30).

Table 5. Coefficient of Cosine and Chi2 of co-occurrence with the lemma.

LEMMA	COEFF	C.E.(A)	C.E.(AB)	CHI^2
Work	0.317	163	21	1.649
Flexibility	0.309	19	7	13.911
Goal	0.291	28	8	9.85
Wellbeing	0.29	11	5	13.843
Model	0.258	5	3	12.421
(To) Improve	0.204	8	3	5.873
Sharing	0.172	5	2	4.343
Autonomy	0.154	20	3	1.621

5. Discussion

One of the most interesting results of this study lies in the list of the best and the worst practices in remote or hybrid work implementation. The list provides practical guidance for organizations and policymakers who are seeking to establish or improve remote work arrangements. By highlighting the practices that have been found to be most effective, as well as those that have been found to be problematic, the study offers insights into what works and what doesn't when it comes to remote work. For organizations, this information can be used to inform the development of remote work policies and practices that are more likely to be successful and sustainable in the long term. For researchers and academics, this list can also help to advance the understanding of remote work as a phenomenon. By studying the practices that have been found to be more effective, researchers can gain insights into the underlying mechanisms and factors that contribute to successful remote work arrangements and use this knowledge to inform future research and practice.

Within the list, the first element regards the active involvement and participation of employees in defining organizational goals. Our findings suggest that a crucial factor for the success of remote work is not only having a clear definition of the company's mission and goals, but also involving workers in this process. This suggestion is consistent with literature on employee participation, showing that when workers understand the overall goals and objectives of the organization, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged in their work (Cortini 2014; Paais and Pattiruhu 2020). Involving workers in the process of defining organizational goals may create a sense of ownership among the employees, which can increase their organizational commitment. Furthermore, involving workers in the definition of the company mission and goals can help to ensure that these goals are realistic and achievable. Workers who are involved in this process are more likely to provide feedback on the real feasibility of specific goals and to suggest alternative approaches that may be more effective. This can help to prevent unrealistic or unachievable goals from being set, which can lead to frustration and demotivation among workers (Radakovich 2016; Virgiawan et al. 2021).

The second element within the list involves the transparency around remote or hybrid working conditions. In other words, the HR managers raised the need of adopting clear and shared criteria to define remote work. According to our experts, adopting clear and non-ambiguous criteria to implement remote work, stated in the employment contract, is considered one of the best practices. This means that the organizations should clearly define the criteria for determining which employees are eligible for remote work and ensure that these criteria are communicated to all employees, as well as the conditions of work and the resources that they will be put at their disposal (Donati et al. 2021; Montreuil and Lippel 2003). By doing so, the organization can ensure that remote work is fairly assigned and

that employees understand the expectations and requirements of remote work before they begin. Previous studies showed that this practice can help to prevent misunderstandings and conflicts down the line and can also help to build trust between employees and the organization (Golden et al. 2006).

A third issue emerging from the list of best and worst practices concerns the technological tools and specific training. According to the analysis of the contents emerged during the Delphi rounds, participants stated that the pandemic gave substantial input to Italian organizations to implement new technologies at work. This point is even consistent with the co-occurrence between the terms "smart-working" and "opportunity". In other words, the need to switch to remote work forced Italian organizations to provide employees with technological resources. Providing workers with up-to-date technology equipment and IT support is a crucial best practice for remote work implementation (Elvie 2019). When employees work remotely, they need reliable and high-quality technology to perform their tasks effectively. Outdated equipment and insufficient IT support can lead to delays, technical difficulties, and frustration for workers (Sheveleva and Rogov 2021). Employers can ensure that their workers have the necessary technology and support by regularly updating software and hardware, providing access to necessary tools and programs, and offering technical assistance when needed. In addition, it is important to consider that the lack of such tools can cause stress and frustration among employees, leading to decreased productivity. At the same time, as emerged during the rounds, the introduction of new technologies at work requires the organization to foresee dedicated training initiatives, as well. Providing training on the use of technology tools is also a way to show interest and support for employees, helping to build trust and cooperation in the organization. This can also help reduce the risk of errors and IT security problems by providing employees with the skills needed to use the tools safely and responsibly. In this way the employee feels supported by organization and intent to reciprocate.

The fourth and fifth points emerging from the best and worst practices list regards the need for objective-based performance management systems to oppose surveillance-based organizational cultures. It emerges, indeed, that implementing forms of remote work also requires a change in the system of monitoring and assessing the employees' performance. This means a shift from behaviors' surveillance to management by objective. In other words, the focus of individuals' assessment should be put on setting clear goals and objectives for workers, and regularly monitoring and evaluating their progress towards achieving them (Von Bergen and Bressler 2019). The emphasis then would be on the outcomes achieved, rather than the process or the time spent working. These practices are consistent with the analysis of co-occurrences, where the term "productivity" was connected with the promotion of individual responsibility, more flexibility at work, the achievement of organizational goals and the opportunity to organize autonomously.

According to previous studies (Allen et al. 2015; Toscano and Zappalà 2020; Wang et al. 2020), this approach helps to promote a culture of trust and autonomy, where workers are empowered to manage their own workloads and take ownership of their tasks. It also allows for greater flexibility and adaptability, as workers are able to adjust their priorities and schedules in response to changing circumstances or unexpected challenges. By contrast, a surveillance-based approach to monitoring and evaluation can create a culture of mistrust and micromanagement, where workers feel constantly monitored and scrutinized. This can lead to feelings of stress, anxiety, and burnout, as well as decreased job satisfaction and productivity (Pentland et al. 2012). These points of the list are also consistent with two of the four themes that emerged throughout the Delphi rounds, namely work-life balance, and work experience. The need to individualize employees' access to remote or hybrid forms of work emerged, thus hypothesizing that a personalized approach could create a better work-life balance in employees' lives. The emphasis on individualization is consistent with the promotion of employee autonomy when working remotely. Several studies, indeed, showed that the higher the flexibility and the autonomy perceived by the remote worker, the higher the quality of the performance and the perceived well-being (Vander Elst et al.

2017; Giovanis 2018). Consistently, with regard to the work experience theme, references to the need to implement a more agile form of working and to counteract the supervision culture emerge during the rounds.

Finally, the list emerging from the Delphi procedure underlined the strategic role played by communication and mutual trust in organizations, especially when new ways of work were introduced (Jankelová 2022). Effective communication from and within the organization is essential for remote workers to collaborate and stay connected with their colleagues and managers. This can be achieved by using several communication tools, such as video conferencing, instant messaging, and project management software. Additionally, building trust among team members is crucial for effective collaboration, and this can be fostered by regular communication, setting clear expectations, and providing support and feedback. Again, this point is not separate from the other practices mentioned in the list. Communication and trust, indeed, are strongly connected with transparency and autonomy, as well as to counteracting of surveillance culture (Jankelová 2022; Kodish 2014).

According to the literature, paying attention to good communication while working remotely also means paying attention to the timing and amount of communication, so that there is no inability to disconnect and at the same time not being drowned in information (Spagnoli et al. 2021; Secunda 2019; Avogaro 2018).

Overall, our findings are consistent with the study from Pérez et al. (2005) on more than four hundred organizations, where they found that, in order to implement remote work successfully, organizations need to gather and pursue human, technological, and organizational resources. With regard to human resources, our findings underlined the need to train employees' IT skills, give them more autonomy, and involve them in building the organizational strategy. With regard to technological resources, the need to provide adequate tools, software, and equipment emerged. Finally, with regard to organizational resources, the crucial role of culture, the transparency in accessing forms of remote working, and the need to curate internal communication and feelings of organizational trust emerged as key factors.

Finally, it is worth briefly discussing the advantages and limitations of the methodological choice made. The Delphi interview methodology has several advantages (Green et al. 1999; Boulkedid et al. 2011). Firstly, it allows for the collection of expert opinions and insights on a particular topic, which can be valuable for decision-making and problem-solving. Secondly, it provides a structured process for synthesizing these opinions and identifying shared themes and patterns. Thirdly, it allows for anonymity and confidentiality, which can encourage experts to be more open in their responses (Thangaratinam and Redman 2005; Day and Bobeva 2005).

6. Limits and Future Perspectives

This exploratory Delphi study, like aby research, is subject to certain limitations that warrant consideration when interpreting the results.

Firstly, regarding the methodological approach, the Delphi interview methodology comes with inherent limitations. Its implementation can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, involving multiple rounds of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, it heavily relies on the expertise of the chosen panel of experts, potentially constraining the range of perspectives and ideas considered. The suitability of the Delphi interview methodology is not universal, as it is most effective for addressing intricate and multidisciplinary issues that benefit from expert insights. Another limitation pertains to the study's scope: it was confined exclusively in Italy. Consequently, the applicability of the findings to other countries or cultural contexts may be limited. It is important to note that remote work was relatively uncommon in Italy before the pandemic, and its rapid adoption occurred under unique circumstances. While parallels might exist with other European nations, generalizing the outcomes necessitates caution. o Additionally, the absence of a comparative analysis that examines the diverse industry sectors of HR managers presents another limitation. Failing to account for variations across different business domain could led to

an incomplete understanding of the distinct challenges, opportunities, and implications associated with remote work adoption in varied organizational settings. Addressing this limitation calls for future research dedicated to exploring sector-specific impacts on HR management and worker well-being, enabling a more comprehensive grasp of the subject.

Moreover, the study's reliance solely on the viewpoints of HR managers excludes perspectives from other stakeholders, such as employees, cross-functional managers, and external consultants. Incorporating a broader array of perspectives could have enriched the understanding of the remote working phenomenon, rending it more comprehensive and nuanced.

Lastly, it's crucial to acknowledge that the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period when many organizations swiftly embraced remote working without extensive preparation. Consequently, the identified best and worst practices might have been influenced, at least in part, by the unique circumstances brought about by the pandemic.

Despite these limitations, this exploratory Delphi study provides valuable insights into the views of HR managers on remote and hybrid working in Italian organizations. The identified best and worst practices can serve as a starting point for further research and practical implementation, while also highlighting the need for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to remote working. In this perspective, organizations should strive to implement the identified best practices and avoid the worst practices when it comes to remote and hybrid work. This will require a shift in organizational culture and management practices, with a focus on transparency, communication, and trust.

Further research is needed to investigate the impact of remote and hybrid work on both individual and organizational outcomes, such as productivity, job satisfaction, and employee well-being. This could involve longitudinal studies or experimental designs to better understand the causal relationships between remote work practices and these outcomes. In applicative terms, organizations and policymakers should consider the potential implications of remote and hybrid work on employment patterns, job quality, and social inequality. Remote work may offer opportunities for greater flexibility and work-life balance, but it may also exacerbate existing inequalities, such as access to technology or the ability to work from home.

7. Theoretical and Practical Implication

From a theoretical point of view, this study helped to identify the best and worst practices related to the implementation of remote and hybrid work, as perceived by HR managers in Italian organizations. This can provide a starting point for further research on the impact of remote work on workers' well-being, productivity, and organizational outcomes. The study also highlights the importance of involving workers in the definition of company goals and objectives, and the need for transparent and accepted criteria for remote work eligibility, as well as the implementation of a monitoring and evaluation system that emphasizes outcomes rather than surveillance.

From a practical perspective, the study provides actionable recommendations for organizations that are implementing or considering remote and hybrid work. Specifically, it highlights the need to involve workers in the definition of company goals and objectives, to establish transparent criteria for remote work eligibility, to provide up-to-date technology equipment and IT support, and to implement a monitoring and evaluation system based on management by objectives. Involving employees in organizational goals allows not only for a higher employee engagement, but even for a better goal setting process, as employee involvement assures the goals are better aligned with the workforce skills and knowledge. Defining clear, transparent remote work criteria support reduces ambiguity and potential biases, as well as prevents conflict among employees. Furthermore, the definition of clear guidelines allows for a better fruition of the remote work tools, facilities, and opportunities. The updating of technological tools and procedures involves regular procedures of assessment and upgrade of the effectiveness and efficacy of the technological processes and structures already implemented at work, to support employee productivity,

collaboration and information sharing. Management by objectives, finally, counteracts surveillance-based culture, by focusing on clear goals and performance expectations, as well as employee autonomy and flexibility. Furthermore, this approach allows employees to exercise their critical thinking and judgment skills and, by avoiding micromanagement, supports employee creativity. The study also emphasizes the importance of effective communication and mutual trust in remote and hybrid work arrangements. By following these best practices, organizations can ensure that remote work arrangements are implemented successfully and that workers are supported in their remote work endeavors, ultimately leading to improved organizational outcomes and worker well-being.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, this exploratory study sought to investigate the legacy of the rapid spread of remote work in Italian organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study aimed to capture the perspectives of Italian HR managers on this new way of working, in order to facilitate a critical examination of the practical implications for both employees and organizations. Finally, this Delphi study has provided valuable insights into the best and worst practices for organizations to consider. The study highlights the importance of clear communication, transparency, trust, and technology in successfully implementing remote and hybrid work. It also emphasizes the need for a monitoring and evaluation system that is based on objective measures rather than surveillance. By implementing these best practices, organizations can create a work environment that supports remote and hybrid work, fosters collaboration, and maintains productivity. The findings of this study can serve as a useful guide for organizations that are transitioning to remote or hybrid work models.

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