When Does Teleworking Become Smart Working?: Literature Review

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Abstract

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has imposed the application of social distancing measures aimed at containing contagion, highlighting the need to identify alternative forms of work organization to the traditional ones.

To guarantee distancing and allow a partial continuation of work activity, a massive use was made of Smart Working, a practice that makes work more flexible, allowing you to operate without time and place constraints.

This work presents a review of the literature regarding the meaning of smart working, with the aim of being able to identify the characteristics that allow it to be distinguished from other forms of teleworking.

1. INTRODUCTION

The work proceeds at a systematization of the contributions produced by the academic-scientific community on Smart Working, with reference to theoretical conceptualizations and empirical investigation.

We will proceed to examine the different definitions of Smart Working present in the scientific and academic literature, with the aim of identifying the elements that characterize it.

Since the early 2000s, interest in Smart Working has emerged in international literature, interpreted as an innovative method of organizing work (Boorsma et al 2011) that goes beyond traditional organizational models, imposing an update of the traditionally focused concepts of hierarchy and control oriented leadership(Brewer 2000).

The traditional model of organizing work and professional activities no longer seems to respond to the needs and expectations of individuals and organizations, and we are witnessing more than one attempt to overcome it, experimenting with new management paradigms that allow a re-definition of working conditions.

The common element in the various attempts to modify the traditional paradigm of work organization is to be found in flexibility, which is accompanied by greater discretion granted to collaborators to organize their professionalism, in terms of time and space, focusing their attention no longer on the control of tasks, but rather on the verification of the results achieved.

It is believed that an increasing flexibility in work organizational models favors the improvement of performance , to the advantage of the durability and competitiveness of companies (Haines et al 2012).

The most recent forms of work flexibility are characterized by the role that the enormous developments in ICT have had in recent decades: in other words, the technological revolution, with the rapid development and massive diffusion of communication technologies , with the relative ease of use of increasingly high-performance and powerful devices, significantly enters the world of work, changing its contours (Morgan 2014).

Developments in technology, in addition to the widespread diffusion and availability of powerful and intuitive devices, offer the opportunity to experiment with innovative solutions, changing the way of working, the time dedicated to work, the place in which to do it (Ahuja et al 2007).

Smart Working has, therefore, become the subject of a heated debate regarding the opportunity of its diffusion and the regulation of its boundaries, I consider this paradigm more suitable to respond to the needs of efficiency, productivity, but also of work-life conciliation and private life, which emerge among workers.

The academic-scientific literature examines the changes that have affected the world of work and the effects on it of the growing use of information technologies (Colbert et al 2016), to analyze what is sometimes defined as 'digital work', above all to highlight the skills demands and implications in terms of work organization (Holland et al 2015).

It has been found that technological developments have been accompanied by the emergence of working formulas that make the boundary between life and work increasingly blurred, and which require new behavioral and relational protocols (Carillo et al 2017).

Many of the contributions present in the literature, at least until the massive diffusion of Smart Working due to the social distancing imposed by the pandemic emergency generated by SARS-CoV-2 (commonly COVID-19), analyzed the phenomenon from the engineering-IT perspective, leaving aside the aspects, although very relevant, if not predominant, refer to organisational, economic and social issues (Al-Dabbagh et al. 2014).

It is precisely the notable diffusion of the practice of the phenomenon due to the pandemic emergency which materialized with the beginning of the lockdown in January 2020 in China, and subsequently throughout the world, which led scholars, policy makers, businesses, administrations to start a complete reflection on the phenomenon, also in a post-pandemic perspective.

Many studies prior to 2020 concern safety and health in the workplace (Buksh et al. 2015) and analyzes on the contexts and environments that favor the spread of Smart Working are rare (Park et al. 2018).

Considering the copious literature that has emerged due to the spread of the phenomenon caused by pandemic emergency, it is necessary to systematize and critically analyze the different research paths, to grasp the actual scope of the phenomenon and its potential for transforming working and social practices (Colbert 2016).

The need to reduce sociality , while ensuring the operational continuity of organizations and businesses, has transformed the pandemic emergency into a social experiment of enormous dimensions, with reference to the experimentation of flexible forms of work that allow social distancing and continuity. The response to the health crisis has imposed a transformation of the forms of flexibility experienced up to that moment, with the need to accentuate some aspects, ignoring, for example, voluntariness and imposing full-time remote working, as almost never experienced before (Carillo et al 2021).

Through Smart Working, the traditional logic of carrying out tasks entrusted within rigid office hours is replaced, to migrate towards a logic of achieving the result, pre-established or, even more appropriately, concerted, with the organisation/company, allowing workers to have an active role in managing work, with the possibility of bringing out and enhancing everyone's skills and specificities.

Teleworking was talked about for the first time in the early seventies of the last century (Nilles, 1975) on the occasion of the first great oil shock which imposed a drastic reduction in travel to contain fuel consumption, which pushed the US Department of Transport to delve deeper into the topic, to understand its potential, disadvantages and benefits.

By analyzing technological progress and the development of essential devices in this context, it was possible to trace the evolutionary phases of the phenomenon by distinguishing three generations of teleworking (Messenger et al 2016):
- first generation (home office)
- second generation (mobile office)
- third generation (Virtual office)

The first generation developed between the seventies and eighties along the west coast of the USA, where, thanks to the notable development of technologies, many workers were allowed to avoid long and burdensome journeys, being able to carry out their assigned tasks from their own home.

 In this context, the potential of teleworking, telecommuting networks (Nilles 1975), is recognized and emerges in many studies, underlining how this can allow for the stabilization of communities and a reduction in environmental pollution

These were work services provided from one's home, rather than in the office, and appeared economically advantageous and sustainable from an environmental point of view, despite showing extreme rigidity in terms of roles and times.

The second generation is not accompanied by a coherent study of the characteristics and implications, as happened for the home office, even if the mobile office breaks the two-dimensionality that still characterizes the first generation: in the two-dimensional perspective, in fact, one can work anywhere and at any time, but the same tasks carried out in the traditional office are carried out, only by choosing different places and times.

In a multidimensional perspective, however, the nature of the work contribution is reconfigured, and technology is the enabling factor.

During the twentieth century, it seems that the predictions according to which a large part of office work would undergo a logistical transfer from the organization to the home of individuals could be realized (Toffler 1980).

In the twenty-first century, however, evolution changes its paths, in line with those who imagined that the work of the future would not be physically anchored to any place, but rather constantly in motion, thanks also to the development and diffusion of smartphones and tablets .

These are the devices that are taking teleworking towards the third generation, in a constantly moving virtual environment.

The virtual office is characterized by the constant use of new generation tools, called by some new ICTs, through which data and information can travel from one place to another, even if the process of union between information technology has not yet been completed and communication technology (Makimoto et al 1997).

It is through this transition that we are forever freed from any physical, temporal and geographical limit, only through the use of available technologies (Messenger et al 2016).

Beyond the national specificity, according to some studies, the development and diffusion of Smart Working can be traced back mainly to three factors: the growth of the Knowledge Economy, the demographic changes of the workforce and the continuous tension towards work flexibility (Felstead et al 2017).

The Knowledge Economy, as is known, uses information to generate value through the creation, diffusion, transformation and transfer of knowledge in all its forms, and therefore favors intellectual work over physical work (Charalampous et al 2019).

Knowledge Workers cannot be bound by stringent and immutable times and places, given the dense network of relationships that are activated even with subjects who are very distant from each other, who physically live in places with different time zones and which blur the boundaries of times and workplaces (Doyle 2000.)

The growing number of Knowledge Workers expands the development potential of Smart Working, since the liberation from manual work frees us from the need for a physical presence in institutional places.

Furthermore, the changing demographics of the workforce, with a growing number of women, often mothers, who are an active part of the labor market, leads companies and organizations to introduce more flexible forms of work that better adapt to the changing needs of workers (Feldestead et al 2017).

Lastly, the flexibilization of work which is also accompanied by changes in the composition of the workforce, reflects a tendency for organizations to incorporate the expectations and requests for change from society and work (Grant et al 2020).

2. SMART WORKING: DEFINITION

The term Smart Working refers to the practice of carrying out work remotely with the support of technologies, eliminating the space-time reference of the performance (D'Amato 2014).

By critically comparing the various contributions present in the literature, a single and shared definition does not emerge that allows us to unequivocally establish what should be meant by Smart Working, but rather various definitions, each of which focuses on one or more characteristics which, evaluated as a whole, can allow, if not to define the phenomenon, at least to describe and characterize it.

Very often, various and complex forms of work flexibility are included under the label of Smart Working, which refer to autonomy in choosing times and/or spaces and/or ways of providing work performance.

In other words, the expression also includes working practices which, in the international context, fall within Home-Working and Working from Home, in which the use of technology is relevant, but a flexibility is identified which is almost exclusively limited to the choice of workplace (Chiaro et al 2015).

'*Smart working is the newly conied term that embraces the entirety of new ways of working opportunities in an integrated manner – be spatial and temporal autonomy, the required cultural and trust transitions, technological advances, wider intellectual connections and stimuli, social, ethical and environmental sensitivities – all harmonized to suit the individual working style'*(Blackwell 2008).

The proliferation of concepts such as 'Telecommuting', 'Teleworking', 'Remote Working', 'Mobile Working', 'Agile Working' sometimes tends to overlap of concepts, sometimes towards a contrast, and represents a significant obstacle for the definition of theories mature and complete studies on the determinants and effects of different forms of flexibility based on remote working (Garrett et al 2007).

Let us remember in this regard that the expression telecommuting appears for the first time in the literature in 1975, in the writings of Nilles who defines it as an unconventional way of working that makes extensive use of telecommunications and information technology (Bailey et al 2002.)

A clear boundary between the different categories is difficult to trace, also by virtue of a continuous recombination of the same characteristics, such as flexibility of times, autonomy in the choice of places, self-determination of methods (Taskin et al 2005.)

The ambiguity of the definitions, far from being a minor issue, brings out a proliferation of concepts at an international level, which has pushed different countries to adopt non-homogeneous statistical classifications, also making the interpretation of the data and their comparability difficult (Grant 2020).

An attempt to systematize the different definitions of the concepts comes to define (Cruel et al 2020):

- Teleworking refers to the possibility of working in a place other than the company/organisation's headquarters, such as Coworking areas, detached offices, private homes, or in any case any place where it is possible to find an Internet connection and access to online platforms that guarantee communication and coordination. From this perspective, we also talk about Remote Working (ILO 2021). According to part of the doctrine, Teleworking is nothing more than a subcategory of Remote Working, even if the two terms are sometimes used synonymously (Mingardo et al. 2020.)
- Flexible Working, with reference to the flexibility of the place where the work is carried out, the hours and/or contractual formulas. In this area we can include teleworking, project work and other forms of contractual flexibility.
- Agile working, which includes different practices with a common denominator: the tension towards the optimization of work, with emphasis on the dynamism of the phenomenon and on coordination.

- Smart Working, a new approach to work design, aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of activities, combining flexibility, autonomy, collaboration, coordination (Bednar et al. 2019.)

Smart Working represents a more advanced way of providing work performance than teleworking, which presupposes the possibility for the worker to decide the times and places of the service, aware that the evaluation of his work will be carried out not on the basis of the time spent and busy, but rather on the results achieved.

At least from a theoretical point of view, it seems clear that Smart Working, although it originates from teleworking, is a very different practice from this, involving a greater autonomy in the management of time and work space with a view to achieving the objectives agreed with the employer (Mann 2012).

Teleworking, on the contrary, is characterized by less autonomy especially regarding the choice of work times, methods and organization: in many cases, in fact, it involves replicating in a place other than the company headquarters, often one's home , the processes and procedures that are normally carried out in the company (Hardill et al 2003).

Smart Working is an advanced form of work organization, in which the worker operates on production processes and is evaluated based on performance and results, rather than based on the time dedicated to work.

'The term smart working has been used to describe an evolutionary change taking place over a number of different dimensions in the world of work…… changes in approaches to work, work cultures, business architectures, premises, decision making, communications and collaboration' (Boorsman, Mitchell 2011).

'Smart working practices are agile, dynamic and emergent. They are the outcomes of designing organizational systems that facilitate customer-focused, value-creating relationships that are good for business and good for people'(McEwan 2013).

To define such a complex and evolving phenomenon, the existence of subsystems that interact and include management values, enabling technologies and working environments must be highlighted: in the CIPD perspective these interactions are more likely to make the action of any organization if they are designed to promote the self-determination and autonomy of choice of the actors.

The Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development defines it '*managing and optimising both the physical and philosophical work environments to release energy that drives business performance.*'(CIPD 2008).

It is a work performance carried out with the massive use of information technologies that allow the remote management of data and procedures, with consequent redefinition of relationships, increasingly mediated by devices, with performances whose focus shifts from time to result.

Smart Working replaces the traditional logic of carrying out assigned tasks within rigid working hours to migrate towards a logic of achieving objectives, predefined and shared between the organization and the provider, with the aim of allowing greater involvement of the worker in the destinies corporate, with the valorization of the individual's skills, and growing autonomy in carrying out.

We are describing a varied group of unconventional organizational models characterized by great flexibility and autonomy, for the choice of places, times, tools and methods, with a view to defining better conditions for achieving objectives.

The most important reference model for the definition of Smart Working is the Clapperton-Vanhoutte model, according to which the change introduced in an organization with the practice of Smart Working leverages three essential elements (model 3B)

- Bricks
- Byts
- Behaviors

Bricks, with the focus on the physical spaces in which to operate: in order for a working practice to present itself as Smart Working, it is necessary to reconfigure the physical dimension so as to support the workers by making the environment capable of facilitating procedures and the achievement of high levels of performance. In other words, work areas, even virtual ones, must be identified that allow the maximization of the results achieved by the individual worker, creating collaborative environments that are also different from institutional offices.

Byts, i.e. survey of technologies, with reference to devices and instruments, essential in the implementation of Smart Working, since the possibility of communicating effectively between members of an organization (business) depends on these, overcoming the obstacles deriving from physical distance and 'asynchrony of working times. Technological equipment is essential for the full realization of Smart Working, because technological devices allow you to work remotely, collaborate and share information, process a lot of data, even complex ones. The technological element is also necessary for organizations to fill physical and

temporal gaps, thus making performance 'mobile'. The Smart Worker, as a result of technology, is a 'nomad' for times and places of work (Carbonara et al 2021).

Lastly, Behaviors of workers, more responsible for the results to be achieved, which activate relationships of trust with colleagues and representatives, with a redefinition of the perspectives of analysis of hierarchies. In this regard, it is worth remembering that the theory of self-determination demonstrates that workers are more motivated and reach higher levels of productivity the more autonomous the performance they provide is, that is, the more they control the times and methods of carrying out tasks, the more they can define their areas of work and understand that their result is part of a larger project.

Emphasis is placed on the need for behavioral protocols and routines that are based on a new corporate culture, based on mutual trust, in which management does not present itself essentially as a supervisory body, but rather as a facilitator/facilitator of the performance of the team (Clapperton et al 2014).

The analysis of the model allows three dimensions and perspectives of the phenomenon to emerge: the physical dimension, in relation to the ergonomics of the environment in which the work takes place; the technological dimension, i.e. digitalisation enabling remote working and the social dimension, with reference to human resources management practices and the roles of workers within organizations (Raguseo et al 2016).

To better identify the defining elements of smart working, considering that in recent decades work has become increasingly interconnected, digital, aimed at flexibility, thanks also to the development of technologies, with evident changes in work processes and profiles, it is necessary to identify the elements that characterize it, concerns the degree of novelty of the phenomenon investigated: in other words, it is legitimate to ask whether Smart Working is an absolute novelty compared to all the forms of flexibility experimented in the past or whether, on the contrary, it should be understood as the natural evolution of forms of flexibility already in place.

According to part of the doctrine, in fact, Smart Working is simply a new label to identify the evolution of phenomena already firmly present in the organization of work, underlining that the origins of the phenomenon are to be found in teleworking, e-work, as well as in mobile work.

'*SW can be regarded as an extended version of telecommuting or distance work and defined as working efficiently regardless of time and place utilizing ICT*'(Kim et al 2015).

From the same perspective, the contributions that reveal how growing shares of companies and organizations are making use of increasingly flexible working practices, such as teleworking, remote work, e-work which allow collaborators to operate with greater autonomy: also in this case it seems that all the different forms of flexibility mentioned can be included under the denomination Smart Working.

However, there is no shortage of studies from which it emerges that Smart Working is a highly innovative phenomenon, which integrates and surpasses the concepts of teleworking and mobile working (Mazzucchelli 2017).

'*SW corresponds to a work practice that is characterized by special and temporal flexibility supported by technological tools and that provides all employees of an organization with the best working conditions to accomplish their tasks'*(Raguseo et al 2016).

From the brief examination of the doctrinal contributions aimed at defining the phenomenon, the recurrence of the reference to technology and the use of increasingly advanced ICTs, combined with increasingly refined and complex knowledge aimed at Problem Solving and the realization of objectives (Malik et al 2016). The growing use of technologies and connections in the creation of networks radically modifies the space-time dimension of life, not only with of work, transforming it, as far as we can investigate, into a sort of continuum, which makes it possible to work uninterruptedly .

Theoretically, this new working scenario would allow for growing autonomy in choosing times, places and working models as long as the subjects involved are equipped with the appropriate skills and can develop what is called ICT self-discipline, i.e. the ability to control their own behaviors and interaction with technology (Al-Dabbagh et al 2014).

Ultimately, Smart Working is the operational representation of flexibility and it is not convenient, for the purposes of analyzing the phenomenon and its development, to crystallize in a static formula that rigidly defines its boundaries, whereas it appears much more useful to observe the developments of a phenomenon still in full swing.

The pandemic emergency has enabled Smart Working to be experimented on a large scale and has made it possible to highlight how much this practice destructs work by redefining its spatial, temporal and procedural boundaries.

With reference to the contents of the work, the transition from tasks to roles is evident, with the loss of centrality of variables such as time and place to define performance: in other words, it is possible to build teams that operate in virtual environments, which self-regulate in function of the objectives to be achieved and make decisions with a wide margin of discretion, interpreting rather than carrying out the assigned work.

The transition from task to role implies a transition towards modernity since the first is a static category typical of Fordism, which identifies a service to be provided in a defined place with imposed and inflexible hierarchies, while the second has a dynamic dimension, which presupposes initiative, flexibility, mutual trust and cognitive contribution.

In other words, by defining a role rather than a task, the worker is assigned the ability to interpret his function within the organization, introducing his own idiosyncratic assets, such as intelligence, creativity, competence. This necessary transition from task to role must be accompanied by a development of management processes and a review of the concept of control, not centered on times and methods, but rather on results: management, in other words, must be able to enhance and enhance everyone's capabilities, clearly communicating the objectives, better yet by consulting them, and making the workforce responsible (De Carlo et al 2020).

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