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LAVORO **ENGLISH VERSION**

## What happened to remote work?

In 2024, **Italy** recorded a slight decrease (-0.8%) in **remote workers**; but there's no going back to the pre-pandemic years: here are all the tools that **companies and institutions** should use to properly manage their remote workers.

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This is a very legitimate question especially considering that many companies, in Italy and abroad, have started a real battle against **remote working**. Behind this move is the assumption, often incorrect, that only a presence in the official workplace will contribute to improving production and activity within organizations. In reality, the objective seems to be linked more to the need to regain a certain form of **control** over people rather than over work performance. This line of thought does not seem to take into due consideration the need (even after the pandemic) for **flexibility** on the part of those who do the actual work.

Of particular note, according to the latest data from a recent research report from the **Polytechnic of Milan's Smart Working Observatory** shows that Smart Working (in Italian "*Smart Working*" or "*Lavoro Agile*"), in its traditional form (working from home one or two days per week - or in its evolved component as a form of hybrid work which sees workers partly on-site and partly remote) is still not only a popular working method adopted by many companies but also the working method most requested by employees.

In 2024 it was estimated that there were approximately **3.55 million remote workers in Italy**. This figure is close to the 2023 figure of 3.58 million – although it does demonstrate a slight decrease (-0.8%) potentially stemming from a lack of benefits and simplifications in favour of fragile workers (such as disabled workers).

Remote work, in its most linear form - is seen as an organizational model of a contractual nature aimed at defining the legal and regulatory framework of reference within which to merge **work-life balance and productivity** (articles 18-23 L. n. 81/2017), is also mentioned in the Polytechnic's Observatory report as slightly increasing this year (2025) by 5+%. This is believed to be driven to a greater extent by large companies that are increasingly being convinced of the advantages – both organizational and economic - linked to the adoption of this working method.

Here an even more relevant consideration comes into play for the detractors. The fact is it is now impossible to go back to the pre-pandemic period despite the many voices (including institutional ones) that have been raising concerns over the past months on what they see as critical issues linked not only to remote working – but also its hybrid manifestations.

Today's reality sees the **new generation of workers** actively seeking this very way of working, so much so that they do not even want to consider any job offers that do not include forms of flexibility. Even more so, it is not just remote work that is being sought by new generations of workers, but rather the possibility of accessing forms of flexibility that allow them to move fluidly in the labor market, seizing those opportunities that are most responsive to their aspirations and expectations.

Work-life balance is a real need and should not be seen as a whim. This is also reinforced by data which is periodically released on this topic. In fact, work, while maintaining its centrality in everyone's life, has seen its role reduced after the pandemic based on some variables that have become increasingly important. The latest research highlights four distinct priorities for workers today:

- For 89.5% of those surveyed in the report - **family** stays at the top of their list;
- For 86.5% taking care of one's **health** at the top of their list;
- 82.7% prioritise acquiring an **education**;
- 80.9% make **free time** a priority.

Only 69.4% of respondents indicated '**work**' as a priority in a survey carried out by researchers Daniele Marini and Irene Lovato Merin in their 2024 book *Il posto del lavoro: La rivoluzione dei valori della Gen Z* (The Workplace: The Revolution of the Values of Generation Z).

It is good that **companies** (but also **institutions**) are learning to be fully aware of this change in perspective – as accommodating individuals' desire for flexibility presents an opportunity for growth in terms of value for organizations.

This opportunity has already been seized by many companies which - instead of dismissing the desire for flexibility by judging it a form of reduction of commitment to work - have been able to enhance their relationship with their workforce by listening to their needs and by adopting the appropriate **organizational models**. This is in addition to approaching in a different way the management of working hours.

Let us not forget that there are also those forms of hybrid work which involve a short work week - which today constitutes the most linear evolution of the Italian *Lavoro Agile* discipline. However, these innovations can really only be adopted by those companies that are already mature in terms of flexible work organization.

There are indeed employment relationship **management tools** that, if correctly adopted starting from the evaluation of the organization's needs and listening to the workforce, will allow businesses to experiment with new organizational models beyond *Lavoro Agile* or in combination with it (Articles 18-23 of Italian Law no. 81/2017).

The first and most important management tool is the **law on working hours** (Legislative Decree no. 66/2003). This is a tool that organisations are applying - together with company-level union agreements - for the introduction of experimental forms of the reduction of working hours, thus embracing the objectives of the **short work week**. This type of model is based on a different way of breaking down working hours - made possible through collective bargaining by-laws and also because in some cases they derogate from the relevant Collective CCNL rules.

This also refers to the use of holidays and some kind of permits i.e. ROL (or Reduction Hours Permits) - which can at times introduce broad forms of flexibility that allow for the reduction of working hours for defined periods. There are many examples, such as from **Lavazza** - where the company concentrated the reduction of working hours during the summer months. Also the latest **SIAE** agreement has defined a type of multi-period timetable which increases the weekly working hours during some months of the year and reducing them in other months according to a "seasonal" type breakdown. The re-modulation of work shifts can also come into play, as evidenced by **Lamborghini** and **Luxottica** with their innovative and flexible work agreements which was widely covered by the Italian press in 2023.

Ultimately, if with the discipline of *Lavoro Agile* work we have begun to familiarize ourselves with a new way of working, it would be a real shame not to seize the opportunities that this discipline offers us today to move towards new organizational models.

Flexibility must not be a luxury, but instead a way to give work the place it deserves in the scale of workforce life values.

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