

Moro, Angelo

**Working Paper**

## Impact of the Covid-19 confinement measures on telework in Italy - A qualitative survey

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JRC Technical Report

# Impact of the Covid-19 confinement measures on telework in Italy

## *A qualitative survey*

JRC Working Papers Series on  
Labour, Education and Technology  
2020/10

Angelo Moro

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#### **Contact information**

Name: Angelo Moro

Address: Centre d'Économie et de Sociologie appliquées à l'Agriculture et aux Espaces Ruraux, Institut National de Recherche pour l'Agriculture, l'Alimentation et l'Environnement (Dijon, France)

Email: [angelo.moro@inrae.fr](mailto:angelo.moro@inrae.fr)

Tel.: +33 638721485

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# Impact of the COVID-19 Confinement Measures on Telework in Italy

## A Qualitative Survey

Angelo Moro

(INRAE, Université de Bourgogne)

### **Abstract**

This technical report presents the results of a qualitative survey conducted in April and May 2020 with 25 workers who worked in the telework regime – either full-time or part-time – during the lock-down period following the epidemic of Covid-19 in Italy. The report analyses the consequences of the transition to telework along three main dimensions: work organisation, job quality and work-life balance. We show how workers telework experience during the lock-down is extremely heterogeneous across the employment structure, depending on a number of factors and variables such as the level of skills, the type of work, the task content, the intensity of ICT use and workers' gender and household composition.

**Keywords:** Telework, Covid-19, Italy, Work organisation, Job quality, Work-life balance.

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**Authors:** Angelo Moro (INRAE, Université de Bourgogne)

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**Fana, M., Torrejón Pérez, S. and Fernández-Macías, E. (2020),** [\*Employment impact of Covid-19 crisis: from short term effects to long terms prospects\*](#), J. Ind. Bus. Econ. 47, 391–410.

**Milasi, S., González Vázquez, I., Fernández Macías, E. (2020),** [\*Telework in the EU before and after the COVID-19: where we were, where we head to\*](#), JRC Science for Policy Brief.

**Sostero, M., Milasi, S., Hurley, J., Fernandez-Macias, E., Bisello, M. (2020),** [\*Teleworkability and the COVID-19 crisis: a new digital divide?\*](#) (No. 2020-05), Joint Research Centre (Seville site).

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## Introduction

Chronologically, Italy has been the third country after China and Korea to be largely hit by Covid-19 and the first European country to implement general social distancing policies. On January 31st, all flights to and from China were cancelled and a national emergency was declared. In February, eleven municipalities in Lombardy and Veneto were quarantined. On March 9th, the lock-down was extended to the entire country. On March 21st, the Italian government closed all non-essential economic activities and recommended the application of telework even for private companies, following a disposition at the end of February that strongly encouraged its implementation for the public administration.

The Covid-19 pandemic represented thus a chance to implement telework on a larger scale given that, [according to Eurostat](#), in Italy in 2018 only 3.6% of workers regularly worked from home. In Italy, telework – relabelled “agile work” – has been officially regulated by the [law n. 81 of 2017](#). This law encourages smart-work “in order to increase competitiveness and facilitate the reconciliation of life and working time”. Smart-work is an option for both the private and the public sector, it can be implemented following a collective agreement and an individual written covenant and its time limits are anchored to the maximum statutory daily and weekly working hours. The pandemic emergency, however, has led the government to streamline a number of formal obligations, defining a [simplified variant of agile work](#) and allowing companies to arrange it also without a prior agreement.

In order to be able to telework, however, workers should have access to both the material and the immaterial infrastructure that can enable remote working: a computer at home, access to the Internet and, most importantly, work tasks and activities that can be executed from home. According to a [recent study](#), however, only 30% of all of the occupations in the Italian occupational structure can be performed from home (accounting for about 6.7 million workers) while the remaining nearly 16 million workers are assigned to tasks that *a priori* cannot be performed remotely.

According to this study, employees that may work from home are extremely concentrated among managerial and executive categories, academics, technical professionals and clerical support workers. Telework can be performed by 60% of those who are at the top of the organisational hierarchy (managers, entrepreneurs and legislators), by scientific-academic professions and technical professionals. It increases to 70% for administrative tasks. On the contrary, sales and service workers, manual operators, artisans and elementary occupations have little opportunity to execute their tasks remotely. For service occupations, such as entertainment operators, service and sales workers, artisans, plant and machine operators as well as elementary professions, the opportunities for remote working reduce drastically with variations ranging from 5% to 0%.

In addition, this occupational inequality also mirrors other kinds of inequalities, especially inequalities in wage distribution and in contractual statuses. For what concerns the first, those who can work from home are usually paid substantially more than those who cannot. With regard to the second, temporary workers are largely concentrated in professions that cannot be carried out from home, affecting almost two million workers, who therefore face the greatest risk of unemployment due to their contractual arrangement.

However, the indications coming from this study, based on a survey conducted *before* the pandemic crisis, have been only partially confirmed by another survey conducted in two waves during the restrictive lock-down period (on March 27th-30th and April 15th-17th, 2020). This [latter study](#) confirmed the disparities in the possibility of teleworking according to the occupational status. According to its results, around two thirds of white collars worked from home during the lock-down, 16% in their usual workplace and 18% stopped working. Similarly, among service workers, approximately half worked from home, one of five in their usual workplace and one of four stopped.

However, among the blue collars, only 15% worked from home, around one third in their usual workplace, but almost half of them stopped.

The study also corroborates the existence of strong social inequalities between those that are working from home and those who are idle or are working in the regular workplace. For example, 61% of college graduates were working from home, while this percentage drops to 33% among workers with a high school diploma; high earners were more likely to work from home and less likely to be idle than low income individuals; part-time workers were more likely to stop working than full-time workers.

However, this study also shows how, between the first and the second wave of the survey, large adjustments took place in the Italian occupational structure. The share of idle workers dropped from 47% to 34%, while the share of individuals working in the regular workplace increased from 18% to 25% and of those working from home from 35% to 41%. Despite being unable to assert the relevance of a comparison between these two studies, this latter figure of workers teleworking during the lock-down (41%) seems significantly higher than what predicted in the first study (30%). We could thus speculate that a larger number of workers started teleworking during the lock-down period, even if their tasks were not *a priori* entirely teleworkable, therefore going through a process of partial reformulation of their work tasks and procedures, in order to make them executable remotely.

This technical report presents the results of a qualitative survey conducted in April and May 2020 with 25 workers who worked in the telework regime – either full-time or part-time – during the lock-down period following the epidemic of Covid-19. The report is organised as follows. Section II presents an overview of the general methodology adopted and of the criteria used for the sample selection. Sections from III to VII contain the main corpus of our study and analyse the transition to telework (III), the reorganisation of work in the new telework regime (IV), the changes occurred in the job quality (V) and in the work-life balance (VI) and finally the prospects for the future (VII). Section VIII concludes the report.



## Methodology and sample selection

### *Fieldwork description*

Remote fieldwork research in Italy started on April 25th (day of the first interview) and ended on May 19th (day of the 25th and last interview). Fieldwork activities (searching for potential interviewees, conducting and transcribing interviews) were carried on jointly by Angelo Moro and Francesco Sabato Massimo.

14 out of 25 interviews were conducted through video conferencing tools (Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom). The remaining 11 interviews were conducted by phone, due either to insufficient internet connection or to personal preferences of the interviewees.

The length of the interviews spans from 48 minutes to 2 hours and 37 minutes, with an average of about 1 hour and 30 minutes. This average length is therefore longer than the 45-60 minutes expected in the research design. However, in order to complete in a satisfying way, the all the interview guidelines provided to the interviewers, it proved necessary to negotiate additional interviewing time with the interviewees.

### *Sample selection*

Respondents were reached mostly through personal direct or indirect contacts (15/25), that is to say either by contacting directly people with whom the interviewers had personal or familiar links, or by asking people in the interviewers personal or familiar circle to provide contacts among their own acquaintanceships. A smaller number of interviewees were found among the interviewers' professional links (4/25) or among acquaintanceships they made in their previous fieldwork activities (2/25). Finally, "snowball" sampling technique was used to reach 4 interviewees, thanks to the mediation of previous interviewees who kindly accepted to collaborate in the search for potential respondents.

Respondents were selected according to the selection variables detailed in the Terms of Reference (see Appendix I). The sample of the interviewees maintains thus the required gender balance (13 women, 12 men) and the minimum percentage of interviewees living in households with children and/or elderly parents (10 out of 25 living with below or school age sons and daughters, 3 with adult sons and daughters, 2 with elderly parents needing assistance).

The sample respects also the prescribed proportions between private and public sector workers (19 out of 25 respondents are employed in the private sector, that is 72%), workers in direct contact with clients/users or not (12 out of 25 respondents being usually involved in direct contact with clients and users, that is 50%), permanent and temporary contracts (8 out of 25 respondents hired with some kind of temporary and precarious contracts, that is 32%)<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, the interviewees selection process followed also the recommended distribution among different levels of skills: 11 out of 25 respondents are high skilled workers (44%), 6 medium skilled workers (24%) and 8 low skilled workers (32%)<sup>2</sup>. Finally, at least 9 out of 25 respondents could be

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1 It should be noted, however, that the focus on employees has severely limited the construction of the sample with regard to temporary and precarious workers, excluding the possibility of selecting bogus and dependent self-employed workers as well as zero-hour and on-call workers, who are probably bearing most of the brunt of the crisis.

2 This criterion, as expected, proved to be the hardest to comply with, for at least two reasons. The first one is structural: as mentioned in the introduction, with the exception of clerical support workers, the occupations that may work from

said to have experienced some form of telework either in the course of their current job or in previous jobs (the requirement was minimum 20% of people having already teleworked to some extent).

### *Other characteristics of the respondents*

Age and area of residence were not among the selection criteria detailed in Terms of Reference. In the case of age, respondents are distributed in a reasonably balanced way through the different age classes of the working life. The sample of the interviewees is thus composed by 4 people in the 20-29 age range, 8 people in the 30-39 age range, 5 people in the 40-49 age range, 7 people in the 50-59 age range and only 1 person older than 60. Concerning the area of residence, on the contrary, the respondents' distribution among Northern, Central and Southern regions appears unbalanced: 13 interviewees are resident in central regions (Latium, Tuscany), while only 8 are resident in Northern regions (Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna) and 4 in Southern regions (Campania, Apulia).

Interviews were to be conducted with employees who were working online from home because of the virus outbreak. Among our sample, 19 interviewees were teleworking 100% of their working time during the lock-down period, while 6 others were only partially teleworking (from 40% to 66% of their working time) because they are employed in productive sectors declared "essential" by the Prime Minister's Decree of March 22nd.

Respondents have a fairly wide range of occupations: 9 clerical support workers (4 accounting or purchasing clerks, 2 secretaries or personal assistants, 2 administrative or accounting officers, 1 employment centre employee), 2 sales and service workers (1 social worker, 1 call centre operator), 6 knowledge workers (1 primary school teacher, 3 high school teachers, 1 Ph.D. researcher, 1 university lecturer), 5 technical professionals (1 tax consultant, 1 data analyst, 1 service designer, 1 mobility specialist, 1 editor), 3 managers.

The intensity of ICTs use in the labour process varies among this range of occupations, spanning from occasional or complementary in the cases of social workers and teachers to essential or total in the cases of technical professionals, managers and clerical workers. The great majority of the interviewees commonly use – albeit with a different degree of "depth" – a wide range of professional tools, platforms and software, which raises the problem of their remote accessibility from home.

All the respondents had access to the internet at home. Only in one case, one of the interviewees said she was forced to move to some friends' flat during the lock-down because she didn't have access to the internet at her place. The quality of the internet connection varies through the sample: 14 out of 25 interviewees had an optical fibre connection, 9 an ADSL connection and 2 a wireless broadband connection.

Everyone in the sample declared to use at least one digital device (computer, laptop, tablet, smartphone) in their ordinary work activity in the pre Covid-19 situation. Everyone also declared to have at least one digital device available at home (in most of the cases 2 or more). In half of the cases, the employer provided one of these devices (mostly a laptop), while in the other half, interviewees declared that they have been using personal tools. In no cases the employer contributed to the internet subscription during the lock-down.

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home are extremely concentrated among high and medium skilled professions. The second one is personal and related to the social characteristics of the interviewees: the fact of being from middle class families and/or currently working in academia has made it more difficult for us to find low skilled workers among our direct contacts.

For more information on the social characteristics of the respondents, see Appendix II.

### *Methodological issues*

Interviews were in-depth and semi-structured and were conducted on the base of a grid jointly developed by the JRC team and the external experts, which proved to be a useful and complete research tool. However, the interview situation, which connects a researcher and his questions with a person (the interviewee) in whose answers information is sought, commonly produces all kinds of social and cognitive distortions that need to be known and mastered. That was the case especially in the – previously unexperienced – context of a “remote fieldwork”, in which interviews were often conducted with interviewees with whom the interviewer had little or no personal acquaintanceship.

It was therefore a question for the researchers, by their knowledge of the interviewee – often developed in the course of the interview and especially in the first stages – of adapting the interview grid as well as possible in order to make it easier and more meaningful for the interviewee. This process needed, primarily, to present the interview in an intelligible and reassuring way, and secondly to conduct it with an engaging attitude, ensuring that every interrogation made sense and had relevance for the respondent. For this reason, it was necessary to adapt, in every interview, the proposed guidelines to the specific social and personal situation of the interviewee, allowing him or her to set his/her own priorities in the narrative flow.

It was thus particularly significant – and a good measure of the success of the interview – that most of the interviewees openly expressed their satisfaction for the interview, claiming they had “enjoyed” an experience that was not what they expected to be and that it gave them an occasion of co-analysing their situation and reflecting on aspects they had not considered before. In this regard, the “remote fieldwork” proved more of a challenge than an obstacle, as it gave the interviewers the opportunity to test in a completely different situation a set of skills and tools they had previously used only in ethnographic research contexts.

## Telework during the COVID-19 situation

### *Timing of the transition*

The timing of transition to telework varies across the sample, depending on the productive sector and on the area of residence of the interviewees. Respondents who reside in Northern regions experienced an early transition to telework, often several days before the government halting all non-essential production, industries and businesses in Italy.

In that respect, the shutdown of “non-essential” productive activities seems to have been largely anticipated in at list some of the cases in our sample, the transition to telework being rapid if not immediate. An editor in a publishing house in Milan (int. 9) said that her workplace was closed on February 24th and that she started teleworking immediately on February 25th. A data analyst working in a bank in Milan (int. 16) declared that she started teleworking on February 27th, due to a company decision while no confinement measure was still adopted. The day before she received a mail urging all the staff to bring home all their stuff and tools and she began teleworking from the following day.

On March 4th a governmental decree imposed the shutdown of all schools and universities nationwide for two weeks (subsequently extended until the end of the school year). Knowledge workers are thus among those in our sample who experienced an early interruption of their work activities. However, for schools and universities, the degree of anticipation of the lock-down measures seems to have been lower and to have required an adjustment phase to allow the transition to telework. In some cases, as in those of the two public high school teachers in our sample (int. 4 and 11), this adjustment phase only required a few days, as they were able to start their online teaching activity already on March 9th. In other cases, as in those of a private high school teacher (int. 19) and of a primary school teacher (int. 10), the adjustment period was longer and online teaching activities started respectively one and two weeks after the interruption of face-to-face teaching.

As mentioned above, on March 9th, the government announced that all the lock-down measures previously applied only in the so-called “red zones” of Northern Italy had been extended to the whole country. On March 21st, the prime minister announced further restrictions within the nationwide lock-down, by halting all non-essential production, industries and businesses in Italy. In most of the cases in our sample, transition to telework took place between these two dates. But, in some of them, partial telework arrangements had been already put in place, also in workplaces where smart working was not normally allowed.

In one case, an automotive firm in Turin (int. 3, 5 and 6), an alleged Covid-19 case found among the workforce forced the company to close the factory for one week in mid-February, asking all their non-directly productive employees to telework during that week. After that, and before the permanent shutdown of the factory that took place on March 12th, telework, originally allowed only 2 days per month, was extended to 2 days per week. A tax consultant officer in a telecom firm in Rome (int. 17) referred that his company was “prompt” and that, starting from March 5th, managers allowed full-time telework, extending previous telework agreements. Finally, a commercial assistant to a financial advisor in Carrara, Tuscany (int. 1), referred that, before teleworking full-time from March 16th, she already had started teleworking in the afternoon during the previous week.

A different account needs to be done for those workers in our sample who are employed in productive sectors that the government declared “essential” and were not halted by the Prime Minister decree of March 21st. Most of the clerical workers in our sample fall in this category, whether they are employed in the public or in the private sector. In some cases, workers benefited from full-time telework arrangements adopted also in firms and services authorised to pursue their activities in the workplace. A secretary in a law firm (int. 15) declared having started teleworking on

March 9th, after its firm took the decision of closing the office, only allowing associate lawyers to go there from time to time. The same happened to a commercial manager in an electromedical manufacturing MNC (int. 23), who started teleworking every day from March 20th after the firm decided to close its offices.

In other cases, part-time telework arrangements were put in place, often several days after the beginning of the lock-down, allowing employees to work from home either part of the week or part of the day, while working in their workplaces the rest of the time. An accounting clerk in a winery in Tuscany (int. 7) started teleworking in the afternoon from mid-March onward, while continuing to go to her office in the morning during the entire lock-down period. A bank branch manager in Bari (int. 8) said he started teleworking two days per week at the beginning of April, after a company decision established that smaller branches were to be open only on alternate days. A purchasing clerk in an outsourced hospital accounting branch (int. 22) started teleworking on March 16th, going to the office only a day per week. An accounting officer in a public administration (int. 20) started teleworking from March 30th, while continuing to go to his office from time to time for particular bureaucratic necessities.

Sometimes the two solutions – full time and part-time telework – can be found in the same workplace, as in the case of the two accounting clerks in a craftworkers and small businesses association (int. 13 and 25), of which one was put into full-time telework regime on March 10th, while the other continued to go to her office on alternate days.

Finally, in one of the cases in the sample, telework arrangements were introduced during the lock-down period as a consequence of the halting of workplace activities due to a Covid-19 case found among the workforce. A call centre operator in Rome (int. 18), whose firm pursued its workplace activities during the lock-down because it provided customer care – an “essential” activity according to the Prime Minister decree of March 21st –, decided not to go to work starting from March 11th, because she feared management had taken insufficient actions to insure workers health and safety at the workplace. After a colleague of hers died of COVID-19 a few days later, the call centre was finally closed and transition to telework took place in a manner deferred in time. The operator interviewed, for instance, was enabled to telework only a month after, on April 20th.

### *Management of the transition*

According to our interviewees, the transition to telework seems to have been an early and unilateral decision particularly in big firms, not involving any negotiations between employers and trade unions. In those cases, such as a bank headquarters (**int. 16**), a telecom firm (**int. 17**), or a commercial branch of an electromedical manufacturing corporation (**int. 23**), employers simply decided to unilaterally extend existing telework agreements. It should be noted, however, that in those three cases respondents concerned by these decisions are high or medium skilled managers or technical professionals, that have no direct contact with clients or users or who, as in the case of the commercial manager in an electromedical manufacturing corporation (**int. 23**) do not usually receive their clients at their workplace. On the contrary, in the case of the bank branch manager (**int. 8**), permission to telework required a week-long negotiation between the interviewee and local management.

In an automotive firm (**int. 3, 5 and 6**), negotiations between employers and unions covered the issue of temporary lay-off schemes for directly productive workers but did not concern indirectly productive workers who had been translated into full-time telework regime. For those, management opened a virtual channel of direct communication with the CEO and the Chief of staff, through which employees could address queries and grievances concerning their telework situation. The absence of union bargaining regarding telework procedures seem to have particularly affected women. According to a mobility specialist (**int. 6**), mother of two young children, as company

managers unilaterally decided to apply workplace working hours to the new full-time telework regime, not allowing any kind of flexibility, she turned to union representatives to tackle this issue. Union reps admitted to have received many complaints on the matter but didn't take any specific action to solve the problem.

In smaller firms, transition to telework seems to have been more often the outcome of direct or personal negotiations between the employers and the employees, either individually or collectively. The accounting clerks in craftworkers and small businesses association (**int. 13 and 25**) reported that transition to telework was, in their case, the fruit of a specific demand raised by employees, most of them women, who collectively asked the manager to allow teleworking in order to facilitate childcare once schools were closed. An accounting clerk in a winery (**int. 7**) declared that transition to telework was "agreed among us" and that one of her colleagues, who had been working in the company for 30 years, went personally to negotiate with the owner, who allegedly "agreed without problems".

In the public sector, trade unions seem to have been involved in negotiations about the transition to telework. An employment centre employee (**int. 24**), for example, declared that unions put pressure on managers in order to force the halting of in presence activities and the shutdown of the centre. However, unions didn't seem to have played a much bigger role as negotiations didn't concern core issues of telework, but more marginal aspects related to workers' absence from the workplace. An accounting officer in a public administration (**int. 20**), for instance, told the interviewer that unions only asked for the suspension of meal vouchers during the lock-down period. Furthermore, unions – limited – influence seem to have stopped right at the very boundaries of the public sector, as, for instance, a purchasing clerk in an outsourced public hospital accounting branch (**int. 22**), who therefore works in close contact with public administration, said they did not receive any support from unions and that he and his co-workers had to "rebel" in order to obtain the possibility of teleworking. In the private sector, in some of the cases in our sample (**int. 12 and 17**), employers used temporary lay-off schemes and holiday leaves during the transition to telework phase (but also after), in order to compensate the reduction of work activities due to the transition to telework or to the general lock-down situation.

Generally speaking, it seems that specific telework guidelines have sporadically been introduced during the Covid-19 crisis. In those workplaces where telework agreements were already in place (mostly big firms), employers just extended and reiterated existing, and sometimes rigid, telework guidelines and policies, to which most of the employees were already accustomed, for better or for worse (as in the case of the automotive firm outlined before). In those workplaces where, on the contrary, no telework agreement was in place (mostly small firms), employees didn't receive any specific guidelines and seem to have relied mostly on self-organisation and gradual and informal adjustments.

A different account has to be made for teachers and other public sector employees, whose telework regime seems to have been regulated *ex novo* and mostly according to local or ministerial policies. Public school teachers found themselves in an ambiguous situation, being used to work from home but not at all used to distance learning. As soon as face-to-face teaching was interrupted, the Ministry of Education urged teachers to "keep in contact" with their students, but without giving any specific indication on which distance learning solution had to be adopted. As specific guidelines for online teaching were given only on April 20th, for a month and a half schools had to manage individually how to cope with distance learning. In some cases, principals provided specific guidelines for distance learning, developing detailed procedures, in others they left more freedom for individual teachers.

For what concerns public sector employees, such as an accounting officer in a public administration (**int. 20**) and an employment centre employee (**int. 24**), no telework agreement was in place, but in both cases the local administration established formal eligibility criteria in order to apply for telework, such as the availability of an appropriate internet connection or the possession of

personal tools (laptop, computer) adapted for teleworking. In the case the employment centre employee (**int. 24**), the regional administration also provided a mandatory online training course (with tests at the end of every class that employees needed to pass in order to prove eligible for teleworking) and specific telework guidelines (such as taking a break every 25 minutes or strategies to avoid conflicts in email communication with users).

Transition to telework also demanded technical adjustments in order to put employees in condition to telework full-time or part-time. Those technical adjustments concerned both the provision of tools and the remote accessibility of professional software and online business systems and platforms. As mentioned above, employers provided tools only in 13 of the 25 cases in our sample. Where smart working agreements were in place before the pandemic crisis (in 7 out of 25 cases), employees often already had professional laptops and tools provided by the employers. When lockdown occurred, the main issue at the IT level was thus the enhancing of online business networks. In the case of the automotive firm in Turin, for instance, the early shutdown of the factory in February compelled management to take all the necessary measures in order to allow many more people to simultaneously access the firm online network. In addition to that, management also introduced a sort of “netiquette” about the use of social media and online streaming data, to prevent employees from overburdening the network while teleworking. The introduction of a similar netiquette was reported also by a data analyst in a bank (**int. 16**).

Where no smart working agreement was in place or where telework was not largely implemented before the pandemic crisis, employers often had to find and distribute laptops and other tools to their employees, especially in those cases in which employees usually work on fixed computer workstations at the workplace. Where this happened, transition to telework took obviously longer, from some days in the case of the telecom firm (**int. 17**) up to a month, as in the case of the call centre operator (**int. 18**). In these cases, employers had also to take necessary measures in order to grant remote access to business networks and professional software. That often implied the creation of VPN connections or the installing of alternative remote-control software, such as TeamViewer or AnyDesk. If the first solution seems to have been implemented in big firms, which can usually count on internal IT units (as reported for instance by an editor in a publishing house (**int. 9**) and by a call centre operator (**int. 18**)), the second one seems to have been more frequent in small firms, as in the case of the Tuscan winery (**int. 7**) or of the vocational training centre in Rome, in which the installing of the software was even an individual initiative by the administrative officer interviewed (**int. 21**).

Corporate policies concerning data protection and confidentiality were largely known in big firms, especially where telework arrangements were already in place. In such cases, employers didn't appear to give further guidelines on the matter, but rather reaffirmed and reiterated the already existing ones. Specific guidelines concerning data protection and confidentiality in the (new) telework regime were instead given in medium-size companies or in those linked to larger organisations, as in the cases of the outsourced hospital accounting branch (**int. 22**) and of the craft workers and small businesses association (**int. 13 and 25**). Employees in smaller firms in our sample rarely receive any specific and formal guidelines, but rather implemented informal and practical codes of conduct. For example, a commercial assistant to a financial advisor (**int. 1**) said that she started avoiding talking on the phone or writing emails about confidential matters concerning clients. For public workers, the diffusion of privacy guidelines seems to vary according to the case: for example a primary school teacher (**int. 10**) said she had received very precise indications on the protection of personal data, especially in relation to the procedures to follow in the use of video conferencing tools with children, while a high school teacher (**int. 11**) did not receive any specific indication and was instead subjected to a privacy violation by one of his students.

Finally the dissemination of information concerning health and safety issues appears to have been rare if not episodic, as only two of the interviewees in our sample (**int. 9 and 22**) explicitly

reported to have received specific information concerning physical health risks related to telework and guidelines about the norms and standards they needed to follow in order to avoid these risks (how to sit correctly at the desk, how far to place screens, how often to ventilate the room, etc.). None in our sample reported to have received any information concerning psychological risks associated with isolation, workaholism, etc.



## Work organisation

### *Communication*

Transition to telework had a huge impact on both internal and external communication in all the different companies and organisations in which our interviewees are employed. We will try to explore this topic by looking first at the way in which the new telework regime has affected the quality of the communication between employees and clients or users and the communication among colleagues or with supervisors. Afterwards, we will try to examine the role of technology in shaping communication, by asking if organisations introduced new tools or relied on those already present in the production process and if these tools were or not adequate to support the production process in the telework regime.

For what concerns the quality of external communication, some interviewees, which usually work in direct contact with clients and users, underlined the difficulties connected to the low degree of digital skills of their public. That was the case, for example, of a commercial assistant to a financial advisor (**int. 1**) who usually personally assists – mostly elder – clients in financial transactions, or of an employment centre employee (**int. 24**) who is used to have direct relationships with the users of the centre:

*“There were difficulties, for example with people who did not know how to use bank applications correctly and we had to explain them by phone how to download the application, how to use it, how to deal with the secure call or how to use the token. For example, it happened that an old man activated the token without knowing how to use it, so we spent two hours on the phone to explain to him how to do it, when if he had come to the office it would have taken us half the time.” (int. 1)*

*“The interruption of in-presence interviews means that all relationships with users now take place via email. Users with fewer digital skills are the ones who struggle the most to request our services. We normally ask them to send us everything by email or to fill in forms online, while they maybe send us the photo of the documents made with their phone” (int. 24)*

Also, interviewees usually engaged in direct purchase-sale relationships with their clients or suppliers experienced changes related to the fact of having to deal with them remotely. A bank branch manager (**int. 8**) emphasised the difficulties connected to remote selling of services, while an accounting clerk in a craft workers and small businesses association (**int. 25**) insisted on the need to maintain personal contacts with customers by telephone even during the lock-down, almost increasing the dose of caring inherent to the service relationship. On the contrary, a purchasing clerk in an outsourced hospital accounting branch (**int. 22**) appreciated the speeding-up of interactions with the suppliers in the remote regime.

Workers, such as teachers or social workers, normally engaged in pedagogical and/or care relationships and direct (physical) contact with students or disabled peoples were also affected by the transition to telework in terms of communication. The first reason is a material one and linked to the poor quality of the internet connection of some of their “users”, especially in the case of teachers who work in peripheral or rural areas:

*“10 minutes are necessary to gather students, because the connections are not always immediate and simple. Students complain about the difficulty with connections: one or two students always fail to connect, because they live in places where the network is most lacking. So, if anything I return to the topic in the next lesson to make them recover a little.” (int. 4)*

*“There are some students who have IT difficulties in the sense that if they open the cam the connection will drop. The same if they use the microphone. So, some may manage to follow the lesson but without interacting.” (int. 11)*

The second reason is a more structural one, inherent to the very nature of the job: teacher see direct and physical interaction with the students as being one of the defining characteristics of their profession at any level (primary school, high school or university) and also the one which is more than any other affected by the constraints imposed by the telework regime. They also emphasise how this interactive dimension, in addition to being a value *per se*, is also strictly connected to learning, mostly because it allows them to constantly verify the transmission of knowledge:

*“Not being with the body at school is another matter, in the long run this is not school. Children get lost, because school is a community, it is being together, it is a relationship first of all. Instead in this way, simply by sending assignments or doing virtual classes...” (int. 10)*

*“During the video lessons I don't really realize how much people are following me. I am not 100% sure that they are following the lesson and are not doing anything else. [...] And then obviously it is very difficult to create a personal relationship.” (int. 14)*

However, while still maintaining a strong pessimism on the possibility of distance teaching or remote social intervention being able to fully replace face-to-face ones, a high school teacher (**int. 4**) and a social worker (**int. 12**) described the strategies and practices they elaborated and put into place in order to partially compensate the negative effects of telework in the relationships with their students or users. A private high school teacher (**int. 19**) also mentioned how the telework regime actually increased the possibilities and the tools to communicate with (some) of his students:

*“The attention of the students is a variable that cannot be quantified, it is the most complex aspect because remotely it is objectively impossible to consider the moment when there is no longer the attention of the students, while in presence you have the pulse of the level of attention in the classroom. But there is a strategy: to constantly remind students of aspects of reflection, about the author, the text, the topic, etc.” (int. 4)*

*“A difficulty of remote social intervention [...] was the static nature of the intervention: standing still in front of the phone and having a limited possibility of activities to do together can be complex. For a girl who has hand mobility I looked for online games to play together and she did that. We also saw videos together: we tried to interact more...” (int. 12)*

*“On the one hand communication stopped when students didn't want to answer you, but on the other hand communication got even closer: maybe, because working hours are not well defined, you talk with some students in the afternoon, you chat about the materials you gave them. They can call you on the phone or write you on WhatsApp.” (int. 19)*

For what concerns the quality of internal communication, the impact of the transition to telework appears to vary within our sample depending especially on the role and the relevance of teamwork in the different organisations in which interviewees work. Of course, the sudden interruption of face-to-face workplace interactions had an impact on every kind of organisation, and the majority of the respondents underlined two main difficulties connected to the transition from direct to indirect communication: the increase of the number of phone calls, mails, messages sent or received per day and the lower efficiency of written or indirect communication compared to oral and direct one:

*“In the end it was more or less the same workload, but now it is more complicated because for every single thing I have to do I have to make several calls. I have to contact my boss by*

*phone, while at the office I could ask her personally. Now with my boss we use WhatsApp audio messages or calls, in an important amount during the day.” (int. 1)*

*“The computer tools, WhatsApp, e-mails are enough, but in my opinion, they do not compensate for the human relation which is however another thing: the verbal communication but also the physical relationship. The verbal relationship is important because writing is not very effective at times: you have to be careful to think what you write, while direct communication is more of a discussion.” (int. 21)*

In other cases, however, despite the interruption of face-to-face workplace interactions and the transition to remote communication through various means (phone calls, WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, Skype, etc.), interviewees emphasised the absence of significant variations in the quality of communication with colleagues and supervisors. This kind of assessment seems to be associated in particular with low or medium skilled clerical workers or technical professionals embedded in labour processes with a low degree of interdependence (e.g., accounting and administrative clerks, secretaries, editors). Some of these respondents even stated that remote communication had positive effects on efficiency and productivity:

*“The fact of working distant from the colleagues and the supervisor did not create problems. We usually work in the same room with the supervisor, but since we are at home we often talk via WhatsApp and we are very much in communication, so more or less we see what both of us are doing.” (int. 7)*

*“Communication takes place mainly with my supervisor who is the chief of the editorial staff; there was only one meeting with the manager of our area: a large meeting used more to greet and align all the editorial staff on the telework situation, on the projects in the various areas. I have a peaceful relationship with my supervisor through Microsoft Teams and phone calls on the most urgent things. Communication with him remained unchanged.” (int. 9)*

On the contrary, for medium or high skilled workers for whom the degree of interdependence in the labour process is greater and teamwork requires a higher level of coordination, transition to telework and to remote communication had a heavier impact on work organisation and especially on the quality of internal communication. The main difficulty is associated with the holding of online meetings, which are perceived as less efficient and effective compared to face-to-face meetings. This is due not only to technical problems linked to the quality of the internet connection or to the limits of video conferencing tools, but also and more significantly to the greater effort necessary to individually and collectively maintain the focus and keep the concentration high during online meetings. In some cases, these difficulties also had repercussions on the quality of work relationships within the teams, in terms of loss of mutual confidence or even of exacerbation of competitive dynamics:

*“For the most part we have always had face-to-face meetings [...] but now everything is online so it is a bit different. On the one hand, I get distracted very quickly when I attend meetings because you have the screen, the phone in your hand, the input of other people in the house who talk to you, the thought of what I want to cook, various things. On the other hand, there is also a much greater level of misunderstanding, both for technical connection problems and for communication issues. [...] Then the lack of clarity in the work also created competitive dynamics within the team which were more difficult to clarify remotely.” (int. 3)*

*“We do at least two meetings a day at best. Meetings are not heavy, but they must be well structured because everyone wants to have their say. The problem is that the focus is lost and the concentration must be kept high in order to optimise time and ensure that it actually has value. [...] For example, when we have a meeting with the sales network, we are at least 40 people. Not all of them can connect, the software does not let you see them all and they cannot talk to each other.” (int. 23)*

The recognition of the inefficiency and the ineffectiveness of online meetings also led some interviewees to criticise their managers or supervisors for insisting on organising frequent meetings. In some organisations, in fact, managers and supervisors seem to have been excessively worried about the inadequacy of coordination among their subordinates or even about their lack of moral support. As a reaction, they are said to have called an excessive number of online meetings, which often appeared redundant and counterproductive at the eyes of their subordinates:

*“Since telework has started, every day at 2 p.m. we have a meeting with our supervisor. This meeting is a waste of time, it's useless: the supervisor is not our psychologist! I understand the idea of the team, but doing it every day... it would be enough to do it twice a week. Doing it every day is a bit too much, it's always the same people who speak, those who have a more expansive character [...], the others mainly listen or pretend to follow.” (int. 3)*

*“We held meetings, first on Skype and then on the school platform after it was activated. We did more meetings than usual because maybe our manager was a little paranoid because she always wanted to call for a meeting... Here I have the impression that maybe we did a few more meetings than usual.” (int. 11)*

On the contrary, confronted to the proliferation of formal channels of communications created by managers and supervisors, often employing tools ordinarily used for informal communication (such as WhatsApp or Telegram), some workers appeared to have reacted by autonomously creating or reinforcing their own parallel and informal channels of communication, excluding managers and supervisors. These channels (WhatsApp groups, Skype chats, etc.), can be used for leisure purposes (chatting, commenting news, etc.) but can also be used to exchange information about work, or even being deeply integrated in the labour process (as in the case of the call centre employee, **int. 18**):

*“Now we work a lot with WhatsApp. We created several groups: a group with colleagues from the accounting unit to exchange information, as needed. Then there is another WhatsApp group created by the supervisor to manage more technical aspects. We also use the group with the colleagues in the accounting unit for leisure – maybe we talk about this and that – as well as to organise ourselves for the attendances at the office... On the contrary, on the “standard” one, where there is the supervisor too, we only talk about work stuff.” (int. 25)*

*“With colleagues we have created WhatsApp groups to manage call requests: we do a “round”: we are 5 and therefore we take requests in turn as they arrive. And the WhatsApp group is used to say to the colleagues: “I’ll take this request”. It is a way to maintain the order, otherwise we forget whose call it is. Before, we did it verbally and now we use WhatsApp in order to remember the round and to be careful that everyone takes her own calls. We are 5 on the WhatsApp group: all colleagues, no supervisor. We are all of the same level and of the same Customer care department. Then there is another group where there is also the supervisor and it serves for technical support if we have problems.” (int. 18)*

Technology has played a prominent role in enabling the transition to telework and in particular in sustaining and facilitating the flow of communications and information both within the organisations and between the organisations and their public (clients, users, students, etc.). However, we should not see the possibility of a successful transition to a telework regime as deterministically attributable to the technological density of the work environment, neither to the degree of integration of ICTs in the labour process, since it depends on the intrinsic characteristics of the labour process itself and on how the technological properties of ICTs are implemented in different organisational contexts.

It could seem evident that a higher level of digitalisation of workplace communication represents a necessary precondition for a successful transition to the telework regime. However, for some of the cases in our sample, remote coordination among colleagues and supervisors or distance communication with users and clients didn't seem to have required any particular communication

technology, apart from ordinary tools such as phones and cell phones or widely used email services or messaging platforms like WhatsApp. That appears to have been the case especially of some low skilled clerical workers working in positions of low interdependence with their co-workers or of low interactivity with the public:

*“We keep communication among colleagues on the phone. In the normal situation, once a month there was a meeting where work was organised. During this period, video-conferences were organised to find out how telework was going. However, I have participated only in a few video-conferences because of the characteristics of my job. I communicate with my colleagues on the phone and ask what they need. If I had been at the office, I would have had these contacts verbally, but hearing them on the phone didn't bother me.” (int. 13)*

*“Up to now I have not done any online meetings [...] The work is quite ordinary, when I have some doubts I ask. But it's not that I have many contacts, because my job is mainly secretarial, it's a quick white-collar job. The tools I use are the mobile phone and emails. I call the other secretariats or make phone calls with the administrations. In this phase I exchange a few emails, three or four or at most five a day.” (int. 21)*

In other cases, the lack of direct personal communication among colleagues or with users was compensated through the deployment of specific communication tools and platforms aimed at enabling collaboration, continuous communication, document sharing or visual interaction<sup>3</sup>. This was the case especially of organisations where the labour process is essentially based on teamwork or on close consultation or where interactivity with users is the core mission (for example schools). In some of these cases, those tools were not already implemented in the labour process, or their technological properties were not fully activated and exploited before the pandemic crisis. Therefore, their introduction or activation during the telework regime produced a sudden and significant change in the work practices of our interviewees and implied the gradual creation of new (tele)work routines:

*“We coordinate with the colleagues of the research group via email or through Microsoft Teams. It is a videoconferencing tool that we have started to use specifically in this situation and that allows everyone to see and interact with each other in real time and also allows desktop sharing. We mainly use it for text revision. So, there is one of us, usually the boss or his delegate, who has the source file and who shows it and shares it with everyone else. And there is a person who reads aloud this source file, where there is the edited text, the introduction to the text, the critical apparatus to the text etc. As we read, we interact to understand what needs to be done, if it's okay or if there are formatting errors.” (int. 14)*

*“We entered the Microsoft Teams platform to have meetings, but it was just us teachers. From a certain point onwards, we had started to see the kids on Skype and we had video lessons, dividing the class into two groups. [...] Then the parents were given the credentials to access the school electronic register and we began to upload homework there. At the beginning there was the contemporaneity of sending homework by email and uploading on the electronic register. When we made sure that everyone was regularly accessing the electronic register, we stopped sending homework by email, keeping it only for exceptional cases. [...] We created a virtual classroom and from that moment on we used that.” (int. 10)*

However, workers' reactions to the introduction of these tools appear to be quite heterogeneous across our sample. In at list two cases, these innovations seem to have been at list partially rejected

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<sup>3</sup> The list (indicative and non-exhaustive) includes Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, Zoom, Google Hangout, GoToWebinar, etc., plus school electronic register platforms, such as ClasseViva Spaggiari or Axios.

by respondents. Due especially to their lack of training or to their low level of digital skills, these interviewees refused to fully exploit the communicative potential of these tools and preferred to use them at minimum level or even to covertly boycott them, resorting to “traditional” means of communication such as phone calls or emails:

*“You can do many things with this new platform, except that obviously my concrete digital skills are limited. Reason why I turn it on, I start the call, I teach and then nothing, I use chat if I have to write something. You can also upload documents, you can also do homework with this platform, but I just do frontal lessons.” (int. 11)*

*“We are all connected with Microsoft Teams, they will also give us a course to learn how to make the best use of this system, but at the moment we do it ourselves. We mainly use it as a chat, but we have used it very little... Because there are a lot of sections, I spend a lot of time before I find the right one... And then they get angry if you upload a file in the wrong section. So, we mainly contact each other by phone or email, because it’s a little messed up on Teams.” (int. 24)*

In those organisations where specific communication tools and platforms had already been introduced or where their implementation was at a more advanced stage, the telework regime seems to have fostered and accelerated their further integration into the labour process. In fact, if some respondents perceived their organisation as more technologically “ready” to face the transition to telework, this does not imply that the transition didn’t produce significant, although less disruptive, transformations. Communication tools such as Skype for Business or the school electronic register, that were before complementary and/or subsidiary, became absolutely primary and essential, as they were used to funnel the communication flow that previously depended on face-to-face workplace interactions. In this way, telework not only increased the use of these tools from a quantitative point of view (**int. 16**), but from a qualitative point of view their supervening centrality in the labour process also restructured and reshaped work practices (**int. 4**), especially those related to communication with users:

*“For us the main communication tool, in addition to mails, is Skype for Business, which is a messaging software. I log in via email and company login with a password and I can connect with everyone else. So, if I need to speak a little faster than in an email, if I am doing an analysis or another activity and I need to communicate instantly, the contacts of all the colleagues are already loaded on this platform and also those of all external consultants. In this period [...] I receive messages almost continuously: the flow has increased because with colleagues with whom I used to work side by side, now we write each other on Skype for Business, I’m speaking of thousands of messages per day!” (int. 16)*

*“Before the lock-down, there were already some moments of distance learning: I communicated with the class through the electronic register, I sent teaching materials. These were ongoing experiences even if they were not implemented on a continuous basis. [...] So, I learned to use these tools in the best possible way, through the interactive whiteboard and other tools. Because the video lesson cannot be done only in spoken language, you must present slides, you must share a file, otherwise you cannot attract the attention of the students only by speaking. I already used slides in face-to-face lessons, but through the platform I also have the opportunity to share this material. So now the lesson is more structured, because it must be contained in a completely different technical space.” (int. 4)*

In some of these cases, however, specific communication and collaborative tools, despite being used from before the lock-down and being already highly integrated in the labour process, seemed not able to fully replace workplace communication during the telework regime. The reason of this is to be found in technical limitations of the available tools and platforms (**int. 23**) or in the lack of fit

between the possibilities offered by these tools and specific needs of the workers, which were of course reshaped and redefined in the transition to telework (**int. 3**). In other words, if these tools seemed to be well suited to assist workplace communication when supported by face-to-face interactions, they proved unfit to sustain and enable all the necessary flow of communication by themselves:

*“To communicate we mainly use webinar platforms. [...] In the past, we used GoToWebinar, then lately we tried to use some free platforms, also to evaluate them a bit, like Zoom or others. But none was perfectly suited to our purposes.” (int. 23)*

*“We have collaborative tools that are not always adequate. On Skype you can share the screen, but if you want to write a shared document you cannot do it. So, for example I can access a document that is loaded into a folder that is in the network area accessible through the VPN only if my colleague who is on the other side of the city has closed it. We cannot work together or comment on things simultaneously. [...] We need more collaborative tools than those we already have to do team work, but the company is not willing to make an investment in such a software right now.” (int. 3)*

### *Autonomy*

Autonomy, supervision and proceduralisation are of course very interconnected aspects that define work organisation. In this section – as in the following two – we will try to examine individually all three of these aspects, while bearing in mind the existing and often conflicting relations among them. The effects of the transition to telework experienced by workers regarding their autonomy at work have been investigated by exploring three items: tasks, procedures and objectives/deadlines.

Transition to telework and, more generally, the global lock-down situation has had a significant impact on the production processes, sometimes leading to a reformulation of production targets and of individual tasks attributed to workers.

In some of the cases in which the regular performance of work activities was severely affected by the lock-down situation, workers in the telework regime were able to enjoy greater autonomy in the definition of the content of their work, deriving in particular from the reduction of the workload. This seems to have been the case especially of some low skilled clerical workers, employed both in the private and in the public sector, who used to spend part of their working time in direct contact with users and whose activity was largely limited by the transition to telework. In these cases, two in our sample (**int. 21 and 24**), workers autonomously decided to reuse part of this working time in mostly bureaucratic tasks that were left out in the ordinary work routine. In other cases, where workers previously enjoyed great autonomy in defining the content of their work, the pandemic could lead some of them to modify their objectives to adjust them to the new situation, as in the case of the researcher in economics (**int. 2**) who has adapted its research projects.

However, this process of task redefinition has not taken place in every organisation. Some of our interviewees reported that their work process has remained substantially unchanged and that consequently their degree of autonomy in defining their tasks has not undergone substantial changes. This appears to have been the case especially of workers particularly accustomed to telework – who therefore have been able to continue working on projects already underway or on objectives already set – or of medium skilled technical professionals and low skilled clerical workers who work in firms that are part of sectors declared “essential” by the Italian government – which therefore have been asked to maintain their work activities as if they were working (full-time) at the workplace:

*“My work at this stage is roughly the same. [...] I feel autonomous in the same way, also because luckily, we already did smart-work before. Luckily, I work on something that I have*

*not started now, on which I had already worked before, so I already felt autonomous before the confinement... just like now, nothing has changed.” (int. 16)*

*“What I do right now is always the same. In addition, there is only some work linked to this contingent situation: getting everything in order, buying all the devices to protect employees, the delivery of the devices and the management of all this. At the accounting level, however, everything has remained the same. [...] There is no one who tells me what to do, I know what I have to do in this period.” (int. 7)*

On the contrary, a more significant effect of the transition to the telework regime on the autonomy of workers could be found with regard to work procedures. Workers who worked in direct contact with customers and users were certainly those who saw their work more transformed by the transition from direct to remote communication. It is therefore not surprising that in the situation of uncertainty created during the transition phase, spaces of autonomy have opened for some of these workers for the redefinition of their own work procedures. This greater autonomy mainly found its source in the absence of precise guidelines from employers or managers and manifested itself in the possibility of choosing or modifying the methods of carrying out the work and the technical tools to support it, as in the case of two teachers (**int. 11 and 19**) or of a social worker (**int. 12**). In the case of an employee of an employment centre (**int. 24**), this even produced a significant change in the shape of the relationship with the users. In addition, this greater autonomy was not enjoyed only by workers individually, but in some cases, it also manifested itself in the form of collective self-organisation and horizontal cooperation as a reaction to the management's shortcomings (more on this in the final lines of this paragraph):

*“At the beginning it was a mess. Older colleagues wanted to do everything on WhatsApp, while others wanted to use Zoom, so we had to mediate. We – three young professors – said to each other: “At the beginning we will only use WhatsApp, then we will go step by step”. So, we created WhatsApp groups for each class and we sent homework using those groups. Then we trained our colleagues to use Classroom and started doing lessons there.” (int. 19)*

*“In my case, I was told that, among the users I already worked with, remote work arrangements could be used with two girls. The indications received on how to carry out the remote intervention were very indicative: I was told to “have a chat”, and I have not received any protocols or guidelines, so I invented the ways to do the remote intervention.” (int. 12)*

*“There was a need to get back in the game and to create a new approach to work. So maybe instead of being a passive subject waiting for the arrival of users, in this case it is as if I had to go and look for them, there is a more proactive work.” (int. 24)*

Furthermore, the increase in procedural autonomy was also experienced by some low skilled clerical workers or by some medium skilled technical professionals, who were able to detach themselves, at least partially, from the procedures usually followed in their work. It is useful to note, however, that these are often workers who already benefited from a moderate degree of procedural autonomy (**int. 9**) or were not usually subjected to excessive pressure from their supervisors (**int. 13**). Besides, it is interesting to note that the effect of this greater autonomy on the quality of work can be twofold: in one case (**int. 13**) an accounting clerk took advantage of the greater autonomy granted by telework to carry out her work with greater attention to details, while in another (**int. 9**), an editor had to compose the quality standards of his work with the family commitments deriving from the care of young children left at home. Finally, it is interesting to underline how, in the case of a call centre employee (**int. 18**), greater autonomy resulted from being withdrawn from the social control exercised by her colleagues in the workplace, as she feels free to spend more time on the phone with the clients now that she is working from home:



*"[In this period] the content of the work has not undergone any changes compared to the previous period. But I had to give in a bit: maybe a little on some parts of the book that I thought were less in need of changes, I had to run faster on those. I don't know if in a normal working situation, I would have made the same choice: but now the time is what it is and it is a question of making a compromise between all the commitments of a day, which do not stretch as I would like." (int. 9)*

*"In theory, I should only record data, someone else does the check. Now instead I check and if I find things that are wrong, then I call the colleague, we compare and fix things. [...] Having more time available, I can fix things that I would not have noticed before." (int. 13)*

*"My colleagues criticise my way of working because I lose too much time on the phone with customers while they tend to hurry up and make as many contracts as possible. Me, on the other hand, I have a different way of working and in this context of telework if I want to stay a little more on the phone with a client, explaining something or solving a problem, I can do it. At work, on the contrary, all telephone stations are stuck and everyone hears everything." (int. 18)*

The emergency situation linked to the epidemic and more generally the lock-down has also influenced the possibility of fulfilling pre-established objectives and deadlines, both by workers individually and by organisations. This general reconfiguration of objectives and deadlines will be addressed more systematically in the paragraph on standardisation. For what concerns more specifically the issue of workers' autonomy in setting their objectives and deciding their deadlines, the transition to telework does not generally seem to have had a significant effect, neither in the sense of an increase nor in that of a reduction in autonomy. Some individual cases, however, allow us to highlight some organisational dynamics that have been able, even to a limited extent, to increase the autonomy of the workers. In fact, the need to meet pre-established deadlines in the new telework regime has increased the need for horizontal coordination between workers, often implemented by autonomously introducing online collaborative tools into the labour process (**int. 22**). Furthermore, in some limited cases and at least at an early stage (**int. 3 and 25**), the emergency situation has allowed some groups of workers to gain decision-making power over the definition of priorities, sometimes to the point of temporarily appropriating the prerogatives usually attributed to the management:

*"Since the beginning of the quarantine even the supervisors have not known how to handle it. So, we have all had to organize ourselves a little. That is, you have to try to give yourself deadlines and an organisation of time in order to understand what is your priority. [...] In the first period, therefore, I found myself replacing the supervisor, not in a hierarchical perspective, but trying to propose work organisation tools, tables, documents, etc. At a time when there was general chaos, it is as if we had taken over, in the self-management of time, that part of activity that should actually be purely managerial." (int. 3)*

### *Monitoring & supervision*

The analysis of the various forms of control at play in the telework regime will follow a classical taxonomy adopted by organisational literature: personal control, bureaucratic control, and social control. Personal control consists in the direct supervision of workers' performance by supervisors to ensure compliance with orders. Bureaucratic control includes impersonal rules, procedures, and schemes that define standards and requirements, allowing to evaluate workers' performance according to specific and measurable criteria. Finally, social control means the sharing of codes of conduct, beliefs and values through which the organisational identity is built and the behaviour of the members of the organisation is oriented. The latter relies on the idea that social control may assume the form of self-discipline and reciprocal peer scrutiny of workers.

Within this framework, it is possible to evaluate the impact of the transition to telework on the forms of control and supervision to which workers are subjected. Moreover, the fundamental implication of telework could be a potential deeper embedding of technology in all the three forms of control compared to the previous situation. A long tradition stemming from organisational studies analyses the interaction between the use of technology and its implementation to strengthen and refine forms of control. As technology often allows managers to overcome direct (physical) supervision, control therefore becomes implicit, and moves from direct physical surveillance to the more nuanced notion of monitoring. Additionally, while direct supervision allows quality control, conformity, and compliance to the standards only after the product (either material or immaterial) is completed, electronic control enables the real-time tracking of operators and product performance along the whole work process. In this paragraph, we shall thus explore the hypothesis that transition to telework has increased the role of technology in the exercise of control.

First of all, this hypothesis must be immediately relativised, underlining how some workers in our sample did not find significant changes in the way control was exercised in the new telework regime. This is particularly true not only for those workers, like academic researchers (**int. 2**), who enjoy a high level of autonomy and freedom from direct supervision, but also for those clerical workers whose work was already controlled more on results than on procedures and who therefore were not imposed new forms of monitoring:

*“Usually during the weekly meeting, we set ourselves the objectives of the week and then we take stock of the progress of the following meeting. With the confinement there were no particular difficulties.” (int. 15)*

Other low skilled clerical workers (**int. 13, 20, 21**), but also some medium skilled technical professionals (**int. 9 and 16**), did not experience significant changes in the level of control. This is mainly because their work was already carried out on online platforms accessible by their supervisors or which provided mechanisms for controlling their working hours. In these cases, therefore, the technological tools implemented in the labour process already enabled real-time tracking of operators and product performance, both in a procedural way (log-in, log-out) and in the form of indirect supervision:

*“We have a website where every day we have to insert holidays, absences etc. For all these days of confinement we have written on this website the fact that we are not at the office, but at the domicile we have declared [...] it performs the function of punching in.” (int. 16)*

*“Our managers were already following us remotely through the computer: if there were things to do, they could see it and if you hadn't done them, they could see it too. [...] When we log in it's like punching in, but other than that there is no great control.” (int. 20)*

For what concern direct supervision, in some cases the telework regime did not seem to have led to the introduction or the strengthening of specific control mechanisms implemented through technological devices. Workers like a personal assistant to a financial advisor (**int. 1**) and an accounting clerk in a small winery (**int. 7**) work in small organisations and are often in direct and personal contact with their respective supervisors at their workplace. Therefore, during the lock-down, control was exercised mainly through direct personal communication tools, such as phone calls or WhatsApp:

*“During the lock-down with my manager we exchange audio messages on WhatsApp or phone calls, in an important amount during the day. Usually we call each other at 9 a.m., then several times during the day and then at 6 p.m. when we have finished working to take stock of the situation. So, my manager sees if I did what I had to do, because when she calls me if I don't know what to say it means that I haven't been working.” (int. 1)*

In the cases of some high skilled workers, however, the introduction or the deeper integration of specific communication tools and platforms (such as Skype or Skype for Business) within the labour

process, following the transition to telework, has activated mechanisms of remote personal supervision. The implementation of these tools in some cases has not simply compensated for the absence of direct physical supervision by virtualising it (as in **int. 14 and 19**), but has also increased its intensity and its disciplinary power, at least in the perception of some interviewees (**int. 3 and 18**). In this way, the use of these tools for disciplinary purposes seems to have contributed to a greater integration of direct supervision with the bureaucratic control exercised through rules and procedures (activating in green on Skype when working, activating in yellow when on break, etc.). In one case, it also appears to have created the conditions for greater peer scrutiny among co-workers, resulting from the fact that all members of a team can track the situation of their colleagues:

*“Our school is a Panopticon: there is a single corridor with all the classrooms on the right and on left and the doors have windows with glass. So, the principal occasionally goes for a walk and stops to look inside the classrooms. The same thing happens on Skype: he has been able to enter the video-lessons from the beginning. He did it with me once and then he never did it again.” (int. 19)*

*“We have a tool that I have always abhorred and never used which is Skype for Business. Before we did not have a strict obligation to use it, but now in telework it is mandatory. It has various status modes: status in which you are connected, available, busy at work, not on the computer... So, there is the eye: your boss can know if you are at work, if you are busy in a videoconference... For example, if I go to the restroom or if I take a coffee I put on yellow, “not on the computer”, so if the boss is looking for me, he knows I’m having a coffee. I am quite precise in using it. When I go to my work group, I know what all my colleagues are doing: if they have been offline for 10 minutes, 3 hours, 4 hours... I can see it.” (int. 18)*

With regard to bureaucratic control, in some cases (**int. 9, 11, 12 and 24**) and within a very wide spectrum of professions, supervisors have tried to counterbalance the absence of direct supervision by activating new bureaucratic procedures that workers have to follow in order to self-certify their work (written reports detailing the activity carried out or the hours worked). These actions, however, seem to have been taken solely to monitor workers’ activity in this specific context and do not seem destined to be reproduced beyond the lock-down period (so much so that in some cases they have already been abandoned, for example **int. 9**):

*“The first two weeks they asked us to send a report via email in which we reported what we had done during the week. After the first week of March they asked us nothing.” (int. 9)*

*“The supervisor has asked us to make a report of our weekly activities: how many registrations, how many calls etc...” (int. 24)*

In other cases, however, the transition to telework provided the organisational context necessary to carry on the virtualisation of some control procedures – specifically: the control of the training carried out by employees in the case of a bank (**int. 8**), the authorisation for the concession of gifts or discounts to customers in the case of an electromedical manufacturing company (**int. 23**) – aimed essentially at preventing episodes of workers misbehaviour (not following the training or trying to get gifts without being entitled to them). In these cases, the virtualisation of these control procedures would seem destined to become permanent, precisely because such virtualisation seems to guarantee greater effectiveness of these procedures, reducing the possibility of misbehaviour for the employees:

*“There are processes that require hierarchical authorizations and many times it becomes confusing because people outside [commercial agents] either do not know or pretend not to know that there are hierarchical levels and try to override for personal benefits... and this situation must be kept under strict control and it is much easier to control it when we are all grouped at the workplace rather than remotely. Let me give an example: if a commercial*

*agent calls because he wants to have certain gifts or some special discounts, perhaps he asks the person in charge of making the invoices claiming to have been authorized by the director or deputy director. Working at the workplace, before issuing the documentation, the employee of the invoices comes to the deputy director and asks for authorization. Instead in this situation maybe they try to speed up the procedure with the excuse that the customer needs it urgently. [...] So we have prevented this situation and we have started to provide authorisations through virtual devices before proceeding to issue the documentation... So, the processes have remained the same but are now virtual.” (int. 23)*

Finally, the transition to telework seems in some cases to have allowed the activation of forms of remote technical control of workers, implemented not by supervisors, but by higher levels in the organisational hierarchy (for example by the Human Resources Department, **int. 3**). Made possible by the intrinsic technological properties of corporate virtual networks (corporate VPN type), these control devices, which often seem opaque in the eyes of workers, also risk to incentive self-regulation mechanisms: the sheer possibility of being controlled activates forms of self-control in the workers. Together with the greater reciprocal peer scrutiny allowed by some communication tools, this example shows how the implementation of these devices can lead to the reinforcement of social control in the organisations. At least in one case (**int. 3**), however, this situation seems also to have clearly generated in the interviewee the feeling that the trust pact between the employer and the workers, seen as an essential component of the smart-work regime, had not been respected, leading her to develop a feeling of distrust towards her employer:

*“We understood that they can track us if they want, if they see that you are not online. For example, one person was told by HR that they would not pay him the full day because he was only connected for 5 hours. This thing should not theoretically be possible, because in official communications smart-work is an “act of trust” that the company does towards employees, assuming that we are responsible and therefore there is no software on which when you start to work in the morning you have to punch in virtually. [...] In theory, therefore, we have no control tools, but from what I understand, HR can see how many hours we have been connected to the PC, through the VPN. [...] So the perception we all have is that you cannot do your own things and we have to show that we are there, that we are doing something and that we are connected. Because nobody really believes in the idea of trust in reality.” (int. 3)*

*“The moment I connect with the company, I immediately log in and the system starts counting the working hours from there. [...] When I log out, the computer counts how many hours I have worked, how many hours I have been on break and they pay me according to what it says. [...] The first thing that I open is the VPN connecting with the company, which is necessary for as long as you work. Then I open the software that we use to call...” (int. 18)*

### *Standardisation*

Standardization occurs through impersonal rules and procedures that specify what, how, and when production tasks should be accomplished. It implies a uniformity of performances and outputs associated with the reduction of the need for continuous communication (both internal and external). From this point of view, the transition to telework opens the question of whether, by accelerating the digitalisation of production processes, this process has strengthened the tendencies to proceduralisation and standardization already present in organisations. In this paragraph, therefore, we will analyse the extent to which the transition to telework has had an impact on production goals, procedures required to carry out work tasks and pre-established deadlines.

First of all, in many cases the transition to telework has generated a process of adaptation and redefinition of production targets. This dynamic appears to have happened essentially for two

reasons: 1) the impossibility of continuing ordinary workplace activity, especially for those companies linked to the production of tangible goods and operating in productive sectors declared non-essential by the Italian government, which has imposed an interruption of production targets and consequently to a redefinition of workers' tasks (**int. 3 and 5**); 2) the emergency situation created by the epidemic which, especially in companies producing services and intangible goods (**int. 8**), has led to a redefinition of priorities and production targets, but without necessarily modifying workers' tasks. The latest was also the case of teachers (of all grades), even if in their case the ways in which this redefinition of the objectives took place varies from school to school (**int. 10**):

*"We have a large part of engineering, of product development, but we also have a large part of construction, workshops, and therefore those like me who follow the entire production area, because the production stopped, they have less work to do. So those who are directly in production have been put on temporary lay-off. Instead, those who do back office work, like I do, can do smart-work, but they cannot do the same activities they did before. So, they try to fill that part somehow. [...] Right now they are asking me to really do every type of job: the pitch to sell the product, communication, marketing, etc. [...] Activities that are outside my job title and on which I did not even plan to try my hand in my near future." (int. 5)*

*"Since the end of April, the activity has intensified considerably. [...] Now we need to disburse the loans guaranteed by the state. [...] This is the activity I also do in telework and in addition to this there is the ordinary activity of the branch which in this period however is more difficult to manage. [...] As for commercial goals, everything was suspended in April, there were no goals." (int. 8)*

*"We had to redesign the teaching objectives and we redefined them by simplifying them. All teachers shared this document. We have removed some things – because distance learning did not allow us to do them – and we have simplified other things. However, these are things that will have to be done in the coming years." (int. 10)*

Moreover, if in the first period after the lock-down and the transition to telework some of the interviewees had enjoyed a higher degree of autonomy in the definition of their objectives (**int. 3**, see also par. 3.2.b) or they had benefited from a temporary suspension of production targets (**int. 8**), the progressive stabilization of the situation has generated an inverse movement, leading managers to restoring their decision-making prerogatives or to re-establish production targets. This inverse movement has therefore generated a dynamic of re-formalisation of the definition of objectives, through the creation of new and specific procedures (**int. 3**) or more simply through the transposition of those already in place (**int. 8**):

*"In early April, a weekly planning device was set up. Previously we had no weekly activity planning devices. On Monday the supervisor is now forced to give the HR department a weekly planning, so we started having a meeting every Monday with my team, where there is a discussion on the priorities of the week. [...] No there is a schedule with all the projects, the people assigned to the projects for that week and therefore a much more organized planning, because it must be presented to the HR." (int. 3)*

*"From May on commercial activity is resumed, even if reduced and revised. [...] In this period I didn't have time to look at the budgets because I was overwhelmed by the credit disbursement business. I will do it shortly; I already know that my branch is not doing really well." (int. 8)*

If in some cases the lock-down has redefined the production goals, in others the transition to telework has required some workers to adapt to new procedures developed by their respective organisations. As always, however, it should be noted that this was not the case for all the workers in our sample. Some of these, especially low skilled clerical workers or medium skilled specialized

professionals, previously carried out extremely standardized tasks using digital devices or tools, even if with different degrees of autonomy (see **int. 16** for example). In their case, therefore, work procedures do not seem to have required any particular adaptation following the transition to telework:

*“I follow the same protocol that I followed before. [...] The procedures are standardized: when I have to prepare documents, make electronic filings, etc. The tasks that are assigned to us by the lawyers by email are already standardized too.” (int. 15)*

*“We IT technicians decide the technical design of the tools, but the rules we use to produce these tables, which must be sent to the ECB and the Bank of Italy, are provided to us by colleagues from the financial-functional department and in turn receive these rules from the ECB and the Bank of Italy.” (int. 16)*

On the contrary, a dynamic of proceduralisation of telework seems to have touched some of those (high, mid, or low skilled) workers who carry out jobs in direct contact with the public. We have previously highlighted how some of the interviewees who fall into this category are the ones who have experienced a wider degree of procedural autonomy due to the organisational uncertainty generated by the transition to telework. In other similar cases, however, the introduction of precise guidelines by managers, which detailed the way in which online work activities were to be performed and communication tools were to be used, has helped to align and standardise telework across the organisation (as in the case of two teachers, **int. 4 and int. 10**). In other cases (**int. 20 and 24**), new procedures have been implemented to replace direct and personal communications between employees (medium or low skilled clerical workers) and users. Now mediated through digital means, these relationships seem to have become even more bureaucratic and to have lost the relational or interactive character they could assume when carried out face-to-face. As an employee of an employment centre points out (**int. 24**), if such a process seemed already on the horizon, the transition to telework has contributed to accelerate it considerably:

*“According to the principal's guidelines, video lessons must not exceed 20 minutes, because the students struggle to follow a video lesson and the teacher must necessarily prepare his lessons to carry them out on audio and video platforms. [...] Even the methods of distance learning regarding the use of the electronic register were specified in the guidelines. The guidelines specified through which sections of the electronic register the teaching activity should be carried out.” (int. 4)*

*“As for the enrolment certificates, users could already request them via email. The only thing that could not be done was enrolling in a totally dematerialised and remote way. If something like that was there, it was still a long way to go... [...] Now, instead, they must send us via email the identity document and all the documents that we used to fill in the presence of the users.” (int. 24)*

lock-down and transition to telework also influenced the possibility of fulfilling pre-established deadlines, both by workers individually and by organisations. This reconfiguration of deadlines did not affect all the workers in our sample. Low skilled clerical workers and medium skilled technical professionals who are employed in companies that work in sectors declared essential by the Italian government have not seen any changes in the deadlines. This is also the case when, as for an editor in a publishing house (**int. 9**), the transition to telework has made it hard to comply with the objectives, due to the overload of care work deriving from children staying permanently at home. The situation also seems to have remained the same for other low skilled clerical workers and medium skilled professionals in our sample, whose deadlines are defined externally, by customers or government agencies (**int. 13, 16 and 17**):

*“There are no remodelled administrative deadlines, everything has remained almost as before: we only had the opportunity to postpone some payments. [...] In this period the*

*budget was to be finalized: we usually do it in the office together, this time it went differently: we carried it forward from home anyway.” (int. 7)*

*“Everything has remained unchanged; the deadlines have not been postponed. Publishing is one of those sectors whose companies have been able to continue producing. We have finished the delivery of the manuscripts and the prints have started now that we are out of the lock-down. [...] So, despite having pointed out the effort we are making, because of the lessons of the children, of homework to be made and sent to the teachers, the housekeeping, cooking twice a day and doing a little of everything without help because babysitters couldn’t come anymore, everything remained unchanged.” (int. 9)*

*“The deadlines for the work I do depend on the agreements with the firms: some want some services to be rendered to them monthly, others have longer times, based on this I choose the priorities. These deadlines have not yet changed.” (int. 13)*

In other sectors, however, the transition to telework forced organisations to review deadlines. This is the case, for example, of knowledge workers in our sample (two university researchers, **int. 2 and 14**) who were able to benefit from a certain flexibility with respect to their deadlines, sometimes renegotiated directly with their supervisor:

*“I think there will be great flexibility on the delivery of the outputs. This problematic phase will be considered, especially for those who carry out applied or experimental research. I think there will be elasticity on the delivery of the outputs, also because we are not bound by business objectives or profit maximization.” (int. 2)*

*“Because of the confinement I can no longer go to the library to look for the books I need so I have less tools. Not having a library is not a very serious handicap, not as serious as it could have been until a few years ago, but still... it is serious. I can't do some things because the sources are not available. So, for some deadlines we pointed out this situation to the supervisor and some things were postponed.” (int. 14)*

## The job quality

### *Pay and compensation & employment quality*

The overwhelming majority of the interviewees in our sample (17 out of 25) didn't incur in any loss in pay or compensation because of the Covid-19 crisis. Some of them actually benefited from considerable savings in travel expenses to commute from their residence to the workplace. A tax consultant officer in a telecom firm (**int. 17**) affirmed that he used to spend about 100 euros per month in gasoline to go to work with his car. A research assistant (**int. 14**) working in Naples but living in Florence said that telework allowed him to save almost half of his monthly salary that he used to spend on train tickets. Interviewees who had also worked at their workplaces for some days during the month of March were also eligible for the wage bonus given by the Italian government to employees, with income lower than 40.000 euros, who physically worked at their workplaces during the lock-down.

Loss of earnings concerned overtime or additional compensations in only two of our cases. In one, a service designer in an automotive firm (**int. 3**) estimated her wage loss at 250 euros per month. In the other, a public high school teacher (**int. 4**) said that the interruption of extra-curricular activities in his school resulted in the loss of the related compensations for those teachers who were supposed to carry them out. In most of the other cases, overtime was either non contractually envisaged (as often the case for high skilled professionals) or not usually recognised and rewarded (as often the case for low skilled workers). In two other cases (**int. 2 and 16**), interviewees experienced loss of earnings linked to the interruption of the provision of services and benefits, such as the canteen or meal vouchers.

Finally, in 5 cases our interviewees suffered from a loss of pay or compensation due to the pandemic crisis. Interestingly enough, these cases are located at the poles of the skills scale. For what concerns high skilled workers in our sample, that was the case of a tax consultant officer in a telecom firm (**int. 17**) and of a commercial manager in an electromedical manufacturing corporation (**int. 23**). In the first case, the loss of salary was due to the temporary lay-off schemes adopted by the firm, which were partially compensated through the prepayment of production bonuses. In the second one, compensation loss originated from consensual salary reductions linked to market performances and to the loss of the variable part of the salary associated with business trips.

For what concerns low skilled workers, in one case – a social worker in a social cooperative (**int. 12**) – the wage loss was also due to the adoption of temporary lay-off schemes. The interviewee estimated her approximate wage loss at a total of 800 euros for the months of March and April, a sum that she considered “very cumbersome compared to the total of [her] remuneration”. In the other case, a call centre employee (**int. 18**), the interviewee declared having benefited from income support measures implemented by the Italian government during the pandemic crisis, circumstance that allowed her to maintain a similar (albeit low) level of income, despite the fact of having worked only for a few days in March.

A little although significant distortion in the sample selection doesn't allow us to advance structured hypotheses concerning the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis on the employment situation of workers with fixed term contracts. In fact, among the 8 cases in our sample who fall into this category, 5 are employed in the public sector and 5 are knowledge workers. It should be noted, however, that precarious workers in the public sector seem to have similar concerns about their employment situation as their “colleagues” in the private sector. As noted by a precarious employment centre employee (**int. 24**):



*“The fact of being public sector employees does not protect us from this limbo of fixed term contracts.” (int. 24)*

It should be noted however, that, while sharing the same concerns for their long term employment prospects, public and private school precarious teachers in our sample differ in the perception of their short term employment security: while both public school precarious teachers in our sample **(int. 10 and 11)** think they will be granted a job in the next school year, this is far from being the case for the private school teacher **(int. 19)**.

### *Intrinsic quality of work*

Transition to telework has had an impact on employees' motivation and satisfaction at work, but in both directions (lesser and more). Among those who feel a lesser degree of satisfaction at work in the new telework regime, teachers have a prominent place. They all emphasize a sense of frustration associated with the fact of being deprived of the direct relations with their students, which they value as a core element of their profession and an irreplaceable source of gratification, that is only partially compensated by distant teaching. Some also relate this lack of work satisfaction to standardisation inherent to online classes or to their lesser effectiveness in terms of transmission of knowledge:

*“Sometimes a sense of frustration emerges when I realize during video lessons that some students have more difficulties than others. [...] I feel a sense of frustration that I feel less when I'm in the classroom, because then it is possible to intervene on that gap between the students, while now I feel that my work is more levelled and undifferentiated. An important prerequisite of our work is also in differentiation, the perspective of being able to reach everyone. And instead I feel this frustration regarding this particular aspect.” (int. 4)*

*“Undoubtedly teaching at home is not rewarding. It is not gratifying because teaching is based on interaction and right now the interaction is severely invalidated.” (int. 11)*

Some medium or high skilled technical professionals also mentioned a lesser motivation or a lower level of work satisfaction among the consequences of the reorganisation of work in the new telework regime. However, the specific reasons behind this reduction in work motivation and/or satisfaction are plural and many worth to be mentioned. An interviewee **(int. 2)** significantly associated, from a gender perspective, the lesser degree of work satisfaction she was experiencing during the lock-down to the fact of being locked up in the family space and to the impossibility of finding social recognition in the workplace. Another interviewee **(int. 3)** found in the impossibility of seeing the concrete results of her work in the current situation a source of dissatisfaction and demotivation, linked to the perceived futility of her work. A third interviewee **(int. 6.)** interestingly mentioned the physical distance from the workplace as a factor that prevents employees not only to preserve relationships with their colleagues but also to maintain a certain degree of “visibility” on business processes. Finally, a fourth interviewee **(int. 17)** identified in the company decision to reschedule and anticipate holiday leaves in the month of April a cause of work demotivation linked to the fact of being deprived of the possibility of fully enjoying them after the confinement.

Telework seems thus to have increased work dissatisfaction and demotivation for workers (mostly medium or high skilled) that usually perceive their work and their professional environment as a meaningful source of satisfaction and motivation. For workers who on the contrary perceive their work as usually not inspiring nor gratifying or for whom the daily experience of their professional environment is more of a source of frustration and oppression than of recognition, transition to telework seems to have had a positive impact on their work satisfaction. This positive impact seems to be particularly the consequence of the fact of not being exposed to supervisors' oppressive surveillance or to co-workers' social control, which in some cases can even lead workers to work *more* at home compared to what they would have done at the workplace:

*“Normally I have to go faster because I can't take longer to get things done, because if they check how much stuff I have done, I risk being exposed to someone who criticises me saying: “In four and a half hours you only did this!”. [...] All this because staying longer at the office was inappropriate: the colleagues would ask me why I was staying and they would dissuade me. Now I am calm because I can do things in the right way and I feel better!” (int. 13)*

*“For me, working from home has had a positive effect. That work environment is not an environment that I like. I feel... uncomfortable, because I tend not to get along well with people. [...] I am 51 years old and I have 30 years old, 25 years old supervisors. And [...] it is a work environment in which these young people receive a lot of pressure from their bosses and some are very arrogant. [...] And so, let's say that with regard to this, working from home at least I can avoid direct contact with these attitudes that I tolerate very little.” (int. 18)*

Productivity seems to follow a similar, although more nuanced pattern as what we observed concerning motivation and satisfaction. A substantial decrease in productivity and efficiency in the transition to telework has been experienced, unsurprisingly, especially by high-skilled workers with young children at home. If this experience is lived with particular intensity by women, men are not completely excluded. However, because the unequal division of domestic work and especially of mental load (which persists even during confinement in spite of some partial adjustments, see par. 3.4.b), men seem more likely to experience this loss of effectiveness in terms of “interruptions” of their work (**int. 5 and 17**), while women appear to be rather undergoing a form of “permanent solicitation” that constantly interferes, both mentally and practically, with their work activities (**int. 2 and 6**). For this reason, the fact of having a study or a separate room especially dedicated to work seems to unequally protect and isolate men and women, left alone the gender inequalities in the division and allocation of space at home<sup>4</sup>:

*“Instead of the 10 hours that I usually work at the office, I actually manage to devote 6 hours a day to work, so I can't even do 8 hours, because as soon as I can I go to see if my wife actually needs me. So, I isolate myself, however I often come back to understand if there is a need. Because what school and kindergarten used to do, now must be done entirely by my wife [...]. And this means that of the 10 hours that I normally devote to work, I manage to only do 6 and those 6 do not have the same effectiveness that they would have at the office. So, if I have to make a total percentage, I would say that I am at 30%.” (int. 5)*

*“The house is not a neutral space; therefore, it is not possible to work from home. The moment my eye settles on a messy thing, I feel the urge to tidy up. Domestic work imposes itself on me because it is the only thing I see. I don't have an aseptic space to concentrate for my work: my space is populated by my family life. The attic where I work does not isolate me acoustically. It is different from being away from home: if I am at the office I cannot act on the domestic space and I say to myself: “I'll think about it later.” (int. 2)*

*“I'm not 100%, it's impossible. I don't know from what age of the children this can be different. But as far as my experience is concerned, the older one is 6 years old, the younger one is 3 years old; they still can't understand that I'm in a meeting and they don't have to talk to me for the next few minutes. And therefore, it is a continuous, permanent solicitation.*

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<sup>4</sup> From the interviews we also drew the impression that, when both the members of a heterosexual couple are teleworking and a study or a separate room is available in the house, this space is more likely to be occupied by the man, while the woman more often works in the bedroom or in the dining room, which are of course less “neutral” spaces where is more difficult to self-isolate and concentrate.

*[...] It is difficult to talk about it in the company because you are saying that you are not working well, but it is the truth: I'm not working well. Or at an immense emotional cost, because it generates continuous anger because I cannot isolate myself.” (int. 6)*

On the contrary, mid or low skilled clerical workers, but also high skilled workers who usually work in direct contact with clients or users, seem to have experienced an increase in their productivity. Used to work in crowded or noisy workplaces – the image of the always-ringing-phones is often evoked in the interviews – these workers described telework as a more peaceful experience, allowing significant gains in concentration and effectiveness and less interruptions due to solicitations by colleagues or clients. The fact of not having to care for children at home and/or of having a separate and isolated work environment in the house are of course necessary preconditions to this experience of quietness which elicits productivity and efficiency gains **(int. 8 and 13)**. However, disturbances and interruptions linked to being solicited by family members or to the fact of not having an isolated work environment appear sufficiently compensated by the bright sides of telework (or, at list, by the absence of the dark sides of working at the office) **(int. 7 and 9)**:

*“Working from home is more beautiful and peaceful. At the office, the fact that the phone was always ringing distracted me. At home, the environment is more familiar and I often work better and more thanks to this mood of serenity: I take a coffee, a biscuit, and take a little break. There is also the risk of working more, but in the sense that you work a lot and being more serene you produce more. The positive effect of not being in contact with customers is that you work more calmly. Of course, after so many years in the bank, I'm used to the pressure of the customers and I can manage it, but in this period, it is better to stay at home since people are out of their mind and you need to be more patient than before.” (int. 8)*

### *Health and safety*

One of the consequences of the transition to telework was the on-screen transposition of many work activities previously fulfilled in presence (meetings, lessons, etc.). That was also the case for many leisure activities, either conducted with colleagues (informal coffee breaks, etc.) or with friends and relatives (happy hours, etc.). For this reason, the sudden increase of the time spent in front of a screen was perceived as problematic by a good number of our interviewees, especially those who weren't used to pass all their working time in front of a screen (and especially in front of a laptop screen):

*“I am suffering a lot from this overexposure to screens. Since work is the main form of screen exposure I live, to which I add the university study which now is mainly online, but also video calls with family and friends... I'm having many eye problems and a lot of tiredness due to this overexposure to screens. I crave Sunday mainly for this.” (int. 3)*

*“I noticed that often when I finish working, I end up with a headache: my back hurts but especially my eyes. In my opinion it is due to the fact of being working with the laptop: the fact that you are glued to it for eight hours, you feel it in the long run.” (int. 22)*

On the other hand, interviewees whose work activities are usually fulfilled in front of a screen, mostly clerical workers, didn't appear to perceive a significant difference. Instead, they seem to have been more prone to experience postural problems associated to the lack of adequate ergonomic chairs or to the increased use of phone, although some of them have underlined the fact that at home they are freer to move than in the office **(int. 20 and 24)**:

*“Now discussing on the phone creates the problem of the number of calls. Even before we worked on the phone, but now there are many more calls and also to avoid neck pain I do them with the speakerphone.” (int. 8)*

*“The lack of an ergonomic chair did not affect me much. Having freedom of movement, I am not fixed in the position even if I am in a more uncomfortable chair compared to that of the office.” (int. 24)*

Regarding psychological risks, isolation was felt only by a small part of our sample (5 out of 25 interviewees). However, for most of them it was either a minor issue or it was more related to the general isolation produced by the lock-down situation (the fact of being isolated from friends and relatives) than to a specific isolation from colleagues and work environment. The fact of living with one’s own family or partner was also mentioned among the factors who helped avoiding the risk of isolation. For what concerns workaholism, it seems to have been experienced especially in the first phase of the transition and especially by young medium or high skilled workers living alone or without partner/family:

*“I went through a very hectic quarantine, full of things to do, my perception is of breathlessness. So, I feel I need to stop and I didn't stop at all after all. [...] I feel a physical fatigue, which is a paradoxical thing because in reality it feels like I did nothing, I was sitting on the sofa or on the bed. This thing puts me in a bit of anguish and self-judgment. I say to myself: “You haven't done anything; how can you be tired?”. The fact of not having worked at the workplace is as if I had not really worked.” (int. 3)*

*“In the first period, there was a heavy workload. And isolation certainly did not allow me to face things with a psychological serenity that I would have had if things had been different.” (int. 11)*

In other cases, interviewees managed to deal with workaholism tendencies they experienced in the first period by reducing their workload and adopting more stable routines and schedules, sometimes similar to those of ordinary office work:

*“There have been risks of overworking, but I managed to establish my routine early enough and it helped me a lot. The fact of giving myself hours and schedules made me live this moment in a more relaxed way.” (int. 10)*

*“At the beginning I noticed signs of workaholism. Then I stabilised my schedules and reduced the workload: there were no longer just homework but there were online lessons, so it was better, but at the beginning with only the homework, it was heavy...” (int. 19)*

Family life also seems to have played a role, at list for men, in containing workaholism tendencies (int. 17). On the contrary, issues related to work-life balance (see par. 3.4) seem to have particularly affected women psychological well-being, producing a sense of “irritability” related with the fact of having to cope simultaneously with work and the care of young children (int. 2 and 6):

*“I once worked until 1 a.m. but this is my way of working. I see colleagues who are able to disconnect enough while I would tend to continue instead. But having the duty of having dinner with the family... Family has become very united... we saw a television series together, “Money Heist”, and it was beautiful... otherwise I tend to go back to work.” (int. 17)*

*“What the confinement is costing me is having to do too many things simultaneously, is being needed on all fronts and not having the natural transition between work and home. There is no transition and there is a permanent demand, a permanent solicitation. So, there is a lot of stress which results in irritability and above all in the feeling of never getting there.” (int. 6)*

Finally, it has to be noted that for some interviewees telework, far from being associated to increased psychological risks, produced on the contrary a sense of “relaxation” related, for example, to the fact of not having to work in a very noisy environment (as in the case of a bank branch manager, int. 8, or in that of a call centre operator, int. 18), of having more autonomy in

controlling their working hours (as for some low and medium skilled clerical workers, **int. 13**) or not having the stress of frequent work related travels (**int. 14**):

*“Working from home has not tired me: I am more comfortable and better controlling things has allowed me to be more relaxed.” (int. 13)*

*“I am much more relaxed because I don’t have to travel for work anymore.” (int. 14)*

### *Working time*

Both the transition to telework and the general lock-down have had an impact in the way working time has been allocated and distributed throughout the confinement period. We will try to explore the extent of this impact by looking first to the effects on working time duration and intensity and secondly by analysing how working time has been scheduled and what degree of flexibility has been granted to the workers interviewed.

Some of the workers (**int. 8, 13, 18, 22 and 25**) in our sample experienced an increase in the duration and/or in the intensity of their working time following the transition to telework. For some of them, however, this increase seemed to have been influenced more by the pandemic than by the transition to telework *per se*. This is the case, for instance, of the interviewees who work in sectors declared essential by the Italian government (some of whom, like a bank branch manager, **int. 8**, have continued to carry out at least part of their work activity in their workplace) or of the workers who (as in the case of a call centre operator, **int. 18**) work in companies that saw a pick in their activity due to the contingent situation. These workers, regardless of their skill level, experienced a substantial increase of their workload and consequently reported to have worked for an overall weekly duration equal to or greater than the usual one and/or to have perceived an increase of the intensity of their working time:

*“The intensity of the work has increased because there are so many requests. We normally have a 6-hour shift, then when there is a greater amount of work, they ask you for the hourly extension. Since this is a job where there are often requests, instead of working from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. we often work from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and therefore we do hourly extensions. Right now, we have been asked to work from 9 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., there is a big difference...” (int. 18)*

However, for many of these respondents, the increase in the workload implied non only a longer duration of the work schedule but also an informal extension of working time over non-working time, often determined precisely by the fact of being working from home. In fact, the weak distinction between working space and non-working space seems to have caused a consequent porosity between working time and non-working time, all to the advantage of the former. This means that these workers have increased their working time, by working for several more minutes after the formal end of the working day (**int. 7 and 22**), by working on holidays (**int. 8**), or even by being reachable via telephone by customers beyond official working hours (**int. 25**):

*“Working at home, I happened a couple of times to work beyond the work schedule, for about twenty minutes, maybe because I wanted to finish the thing I was doing.” (int. 7)*

*“The work has changed in the sense that the day is never enough, the funding activity is a flood. I am 24 hours on this. [...] Before, I wasn't working on the weekend. It was very rare. Now it's a constant to carry on with my work, so on Monday in the branch I have some of the work already done.” (int. 8)*

*“Because we are not always present at the office, we also gave our mobile phone numbers to customers. With your mobile phone you can be contacted at any time, so you work a little more.” (int. 25)*

This informal extension of working time after the transition to telework has been also experienced by some clerical support workers (2 secretaries) in our sample, for whom working from home has implied the possibility of reinvesting in work activities part of the time spent in commuting from home to work **(int. 1 and 16)**

*“I also dedicate to work part of the time spared [from commuting]. [...] I have the impression that I am working more than when I am at the office. Before I used to work 7 hours a day, 35 a week, now I have the impression of working at least 38 hours.” **(int. 1)***

In other cases, the increase of the duration and of the intensity of working time seems to be linked to organisational problems generated by the transition to telework, as in the case reported by a service designer in an automotive firm **(int. 3)**. In this case, this kind of organisational problems seem to have stabilized over time, thanks to organisational but also individual adjustments that reduced the workload, consequently normalizing or even reducing the duration and the intensity of working time. Similar adaptation processes were also experienced by some of the teachers in our sample **(int. 4, 11 and 19)**. For them, in fact, the transition to distant learning, although apparently reducing their working time (through a reduction or a temporary suspension of their teaching activities), actually generated a sudden increase in their workload. That was the consequence of initially having to “split” the lessons in two, in order to allow all students to be able to connect (Skype being unfit to support video-calls with more than 20 participants), or by having to convert on written supports (handouts, homework, etc.) part of the teaching activity normally carried out in the form of oral communication. Also, in this case, however, the gradual implementation of appropriate technical tools for distance learning allowed them to stabilize their workload, thus normalizing the duration of their working time.

On the contrary, another part of the interviewees experienced a reduction in the duration of their working time. This seems to have been the case especially for those workers employed in firms that produce tangible goods and work in sectors declared non-essential by the Italian government. The activities of these workers, although managerial or conceptual, have consequently been seriously affected by the closing of the production sites. This is for example the case of a product manager and a mobility specialist in an automotive firm **(int. 5 and 6)**, who, despite being formally bound to their ordinary work schedule, declared having nevertheless performed fewer working hours during this period than they normally do. This is also the case of the social worker present in the sample **(int. 12)**, who had the possibility to carry out only a small part of her interventions remotely and who therefore suffered a significant reduction in her working hours, only partly covered through the redundancy found.

Finally, some respondents **(int. 10, 17 and 21)** reported that the intensity of their working time in the telework regime was lesser than at the workplace. The fact of working from home and, in some cases, a lower workload deriving from the lock-down situation, seem to have allowed them to “dilute” the working time throughout the day, consequently slowing the pace of the work. The decrease in the intensity of work, however, has not always occurred with the same number of working hours. At list in one case **(int. 13)**, the lower intensity of working time, due to the possibility of carrying out work activities without being subjected to the strict workplace schedule, resulted in an increase in working time:

*“In this period, I work more, even if the things to do are less, because I carry out my tasks more accurately: I check if there is something wrong for every customer. On the contrary, before I did everything faster because I had more things to do. Now I tell myself that it doesn't matter if I work an hour more because I can check better, while before when the time came that I had to leave the office I left.” **(int. 13)***

For what concerns working time scheduling, at least a third of our respondents said they had kept the same work schedule they would have done in the workplace. This seems to have been the case particularly for managers and technical professionals working in large organisations in the private

sector: the three interviewees working in an automotive firm (**int. 3, 5, 6**), a bank branch manager (**int. 8**), a data analyst in a bank (**int. 16**) and a tax consultant officer in a telecom firm (**int. 17**). In these cases, management maintained the same degree of flexibility normally granted to employees (1 hour and a half of flexibility at the beginning of the work shift in the automotive firm as well as in the telecom firm), without introducing new elements of flexibility (for instance, in the automotive firm it is impossible to combine smart-work with any form of short leave). In one case (**int. 6**), however, a certain degree of flexibility in work schedule was the outcome of informal negotiations between workers and their direct supervisor, without this flexibility being officially sanctioned by specific company policies. Once again, curiously, this dynamic seems to assimilate these workers to the case of the call centre operator (**int. 18**), who also maintained the same work schedule, without benefiting from any forms of flexibility.

*“You are compelled to respect the schedule that you would have respected at the workplace. In the last company agreement, they changed smart-work, making it telework, and this thing was very badly seen by most people. Since the start of the lock-down we have entered the classic work schedule regime, as we usually did when we were teleworking.” (int. 3)*

*“We expressed our concern to our supervisor for the fact that there is no flexibility and he himself said: “To me it is the same, for me if you want to work at 5 in the morning because it is convenient for you, for me the important thing is the result”. So, for our direct manager there is this trust, which however has no legal validity within the company.” (int. 6)*

*“My work schedule is imposed. At 9 a.m. I have to connect with the company and then in any case before 9 a.m. by law we cannot call people. They asked us for availability to work until 6:30 p.m., but of course, a bit for the type of contract that we have and a bit if you see that there are no requests, sometimes I finish a little earlier while other times I finish at 7 p.m., because maybe the last call gets longer... In any case my availability is from 9 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.” (int. 18)*

Ordinary work schedules have also been maintained for those workers who perform support functions that require simultaneity and coordination with the work of their colleagues or supervisors. This is the case, for example, of the two secretaries in our sample (**int. 1 and 12**), who kept their office hours even in the telework regime, adding some degree of flexibility which, however, implied the possibility of performing part of their duties even outside of the official work schedule:

*“I kept my office schedule also at home. We didn't consider the idea of making the schedule more flexible. [...] Since I have been working from home, it has become a custom for me to send a message to my supervisor on Sunday around 7 p.m. to remind her of the conference calls scheduled for the week. On Sunday at 7 p.m. I also take a look at the emails. It is not something that she asked me to do but that I decided to do.” (int. 1)*

On the contrary, clerical workers (**like int. 7, 20 and 22**), who were previously subjected to rather rigid work schedules, after the transition to telework were able to benefit from some forms of flexibility and autonomy in managing their working time (starting to work earlier or later in the morning, being able to taking short leaves and having the possibility of recovering later). Although reduced and often granted informally by their supervisors, these forms of flexibility have generally been well appreciated by these workers:

*“As for the schedule, I do the ordinary working hours that I used to do at the office. The only thing is that it is a little more flexible: if I am ready at 2:30 p.m. I don't wait until 3 p.m., as I would have waited if I had to go to the office, but I start again immediately and instead of finishing at 6 p.m., I finish at 5:30 p.m.” (int. 7)*

*“I do the same work schedule that I would do if I was in the office, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. [...] But in this situation I can adapt my work schedule. For example, if I have to do some*

*errands or something. I can easily do it and I recover by working an extra half hour later. [...] The essential is to do the things that you have to do..." (int. 20)*

Finally, a small and heterogeneous group of interviewees was given a large or full degree of flexibility in managing their work schedule during the telework regime. This possibility seems to have been granted to the two accounting clerks in the craftworkers and small businesses association (**int. 13 and 25**), to an employment centre employee (**int. 24**), to an editor in a publishing house (**int. 9**) and to a marketing and commercial manager in an electromedical manufacturing corporation (**int. 23**). There does not appear to be a single organisational factor that explains this element, which seems rather to be attributable to different factors depending on the cases, combined with the managerial will to allow, at least momentarily, an organisation of work by objectives: a high degree of informality in the organisation of work in the case of the two accounting clerks, a significant drop in the workload in the case of the employment centre employee, a low need for coordination with colleagues in the case of the editor and finally a large degree of autonomy deriving from his hierarchical position in the case of the manager. If achieving goals rather than respecting predetermined schedules was already a feature of the work of some of these respondents, the transition to telework seems to have extended this principle of work organisation, sometimes leading (as for **int. 9**) to a considerable dilatation of the working day:

*"I kept my office schedule but I have the opportunity to be flexible. If there is a positive aspect of smart-working, it is that the schedule is more manageable, there is no fixed office schedule. For this reason, even if someone called me on Saturday, I replied nonetheless: I feel like doing it precisely because being at home, managing my schedule as I want, basically leads me to answer even outside of my office schedule." (int. 24)*

*"Goal-oriented work was an already existing model [...] but before, not being able to work from home, when you finished your working hours you also stopped working. We never took work home. We could have gone out at 5 or 6 p.m., but the working day was still over. Instead in the smart-working mode the computer is always open on the desk, the emails arrive at any time and, I don't say I feel obliged, but if I have the possibility to reply I do. Everything has become much more dilated during the day." (int. 9)*

In these last excerpts, two points seem interesting to underline: the first one is respondents' appreciation of flexibility in the management of the work schedule; the second one is that, despite this greater degree of autonomy in the management of their working time, these workers tend not to deviate strongly from their usual office schedule, but rather to lengthen the working day to carry out the expected working hours and to preserve the weekends as rest time. This latter point seems to represent a significant difference between these workers and the interviewees who, like university researchers, already routinely benefit from complete control over their work schedule. These interviewees, in fact, either they did not experience significant changes in their work schedule during the lock-down (**int. 14**) or, since they had to devote themselves to the care of children at home (**int. 2**), they suffered from an even greater interpenetration between working time and not-working time (or, better to say, between time dedicated to work and time dedicated to care work), thus tarnishing the differences between days and having the impression of living in a "continuous Monday":

*"There is no weekend, there is not even a time that we decide to spend all three together. The time that we spend together at home is so long that the differences between days have completely disappeared: it is an eternal present or a continuous Monday, in which I have the duties that I did not do on Saturday and Sunday and that I should do, but I can't do. My perception of the week is as if it was always Monday." (int. 2)*

Finally, with regard to breaks, the transition to telework has generally led to greater autonomy for workers in the allocation and duration of the moments of pause. Even those workers who continued to follow the ordinary work schedule in the telework regime declared that they could take their



breaks more autonomously, varying their number and/or their duration and changing their distribution over the day. This greater autonomy does not seem to have led workers to increase their break times. In some cases (**int. 8 and 13**), workers have reported that in telework they take more breaks, but of shorter duration. In other cases (**int. 1 and 18**), the interviewees even declared that the higher degree of flexibility or the greater tranquillity that they enjoy in the telework regime has pushed them to take fewer breaks than at the office. Lastly, in the case of two managers (**int. 5 and 22**), the transition to telework seems to have "forced" them to take more breaks, since it has made it impossible for them to continue working during break time, as they usually do at their workplaces. Furthermore, by moving workers away from their work environment, teleworking also entailed the possibility for many interviewees of autonomously deciding the content of the break, i.e. what they actually can do during these non-working moments. If some respondents have continued to keep them as moments of rest (for example, **int. 22**), others, contrary to what they usually do in their respective workplaces, reported having filled their breaks with other activities, like studying (**int. 3**), doing household chores (**int. 21**) or, especially in the case of women, executing care tasks for family members (**int. 7, 13 and 25**).

## Work-life balance

### *Changes in work-life balance since lock-down*

Variations in the global appreciation of changes in work-life balance since the lock-down generally mirror differences in the domestic and care workload that interviewees had to sustain throughout the confinement, but also, even if secondarily, differences in the degree of autonomy enjoyed by workers in deciding their work schedule. Young respondents in our sample, living alone or with their partner but without children, seem to have particularly appreciated the possibility of teleworking, regardless of their skill level and of their degree of autonomy with respect to their work schedule. For them, the transition to telework allowed to have a considerable amount of extra time (resulting mainly, but not only, from not having to commute from home to work) which in turn allowed a better balance of waged work with domestic work but also a gain in free time to devote to various activities (to physical activity for example).

Adult men in couple, especially if with young or adult sons and daughters at home, also seem to have appreciated telework because, by “forcing” them to spend more time at home, it has made it possible to reconcile work with family life, allowing them to better appreciate (with limits) the company of their beloved ones. As underlined by an interviewee (**int. 20**), the fact of not having to go to work, by reducing risks of contagion, has also contributed to appease health related worries, especially for the elderly. For these interviewees (**like int. 8, 20, 21 and 24**), mostly low skilled clerical workers, the overlapping between work and family spheres does not seem to have represented a major issue:

*“I am happy to do smart-work: you are better able to manage the family, you are more present, you are able to better reconcile the two, even if they intersect much more.” (int. 24)*

Some women living with their partner, even with young children or non-self-sufficient parents at home, declared having managed to balance work and family life, despite the overload of domestic and care work generated by the confinement situation. Among the factors that seem to contribute to a positive – or at least non excessively unbalanced – work-life balance, respondents have mentioned the fact of not having to take children to school (**int. 9 and 18**), the flexibility in work schedule allowed by their employers during the lock-down period (**int. 9 and 25**) and the possibility of taking breaks when needed (**int. 25**):

*“The management of the days was calmer because I did not have the everyday worries related to getting the children ready, to the risk of queues on the road etc. and the initial part of the day is much more relaxed: I just have to get ready and sit at the desk in my room. As for the rest, there are all the problems related to the fact of having two primary school age children at home to follow: it was and it is very tiring.” (int. 9)*

*“Being at home, I can stop working if I need to go to my mom’s because she woke up. I have the opportunity to manage my parents directly now that the daytime care centre for the elderly is closed. At least 3-4 times a day I have to go downstairs to help her go to the bathroom because she is not able on her own.” (int. 25)*

Finally, respondents below school age children at home declared having experienced greater difficulties in successfully balancing work and family life, often at the expense of the former. Since it takes away from the worker the autonomy in the distribution of working time, having to respect rigid work schedules also during the telework regime was mentioned by a respondent (a woman, mobility specialist in an automotive firm, mother of two sons of 3 and 6 years old. **int. 6**) as a serious obstacle for a successful work-life balance. In fact, because care work “schedule” is rigid in itself, it can hardly be combined with an equally rigid work schedule and this makes therefore

impossible to establish an effective separation between the two spheres. At the same time, even when a larger degree of autonomy is granted to the worker (as in the case of a young woman Ph.D. researcher, mother of a 3 years old son, **int. 2**), employment precarity seems to represent a factor that increases even further the feeling of anxiety linked to the impossibility of effectively pursuing work objectives during the lock-down. Also, men (**int. 5 and 23**) seem to have experienced difficulties in successfully balancing work and family life, as they underline the impossibility of completely self-isolating or the absence of distinction between working time and time spent with their families. However, it is worth mentioning that in both these cases, their partner has stopped working during the confinement, therefore taking care almost entirely of the young children at home. It seems, thus, that even when the gendered division of domestic and care work is unbalanced within the couple, men still perceive full-time telework with children at home as a situation that potentially destabilise an equilibrium founded on the centrality of (their) work:

*“In smart-work we are asked to respect the exact same schedule that we follow at the office. This is a problem, particularly in this lock-down situation, because it doesn't allow me to run errands, it doesn't allow me to go to the post office at noon during the lunch break because I can't. And it is something that requires a total dedication to work in the hours of the day when we have also to look after the children who no longer go to school. [...] telework in the eyes of the company is the same, however the reality is that working from home with school-aged children is absolutely impossible. It can't be done.” (int. 6)*

*“I have a profound restlessness with respect to the possibilities that I would have in the future because in fact I cannot take advantage of the present time to accumulate knowledge, advance in my ability to read things. I will find myself competing (even if I don't like this rhetoric), looking for a job with a series of incomplete, unfinished, not well-done things. [...] In this period I struggle a lot and I know that this will damage me in the future, but I have given up a little: I'm not going to turn into a robot that is on the computer and puts her son in front of the television to be able to work or that works until 3 a.m.!” (int. 2)*

*“When I work on site normally, my wife travels for work between different cities and often asks me if we can have lunch together. But there are days when it is impossible to get away from work and get back into the family atmosphere. So sometimes I refuse because maybe I just want to eat a sandwich on my own. In this period of forced smart-working, however, I lose this dimension of time dedicated to myself. But this is a normal condition for those with children, because children are machines that dry up: they ask for 200%, and you feel guilty if you only give 100%. From this point of view, working in this way is more tiring.” (int. 5)*

### *Division of work at home*

Changes in the division of work at home during the lock-down situation will be explored along three integrated variables. Firstly, we are going to look at the household composition, in order to distinguishing among: 1) respondents who don't live in couple (and who therefore live alone, with their parents or in a shared flat); 2) respondents who live in couple with their partner or with school-aged or adult sons and daughters; 3) respondents who live in couple with their partner with below school age children or with non-self-sufficient relatives. Subsequently, within these categories, we are going to analyse separately the cases of women and men. Finally, whenever possible, we will try to further distinguish respondents according to the work situation of their partner: whether the partner is not working, teleworking or working at the regular workplace during the lock-down.

In our sample, only three respondents – two young women and a young man – don't live with a partner. One respondent (**int. 1**) lives at home with her parents, another spent the confinement period in a flat with two other persons, despite ordinarily living by herself (**int. 3**), the third spent the confinement period on his own (**int. 11**). In their case, though, it is difficult to appreciate

changes in the division of domestic and care work. However, it can be said that in all the cases these respondents experienced an increase in their domestic workload. This increase, although minimal, deserves to be mentioned especially when is linked to tasks that respondents don't usually carry out when they work at their regular workplace – such as the cleaning of their “workstation” or preparing the meal usually consumed at the canteen –, thus raising the share of unpaid work:

*“I used to have lunch in the company canteen. On the one hand, since I had already eaten at the canteen for lunch, in the evening when I came home from work I did not really want to cook, therefore, living by myself, I always cooked fast things or I often had dinner outside. Now of course I cook more. Which on the one hand is better for the quality of the food, on the other it takes me a lot more time in my day, especially in the evening, because at lunch I often do not cook while working. I am not sure if I will continue to do so even after quarantine.” (int. 3)*

For what concerns respondents who live in couple with their partner<sup>5</sup> or with school-aged or adult sons and daughters, the large majority of our interviewees (16 out of 25) fall in this category, thus giving us the opportunity of better appreciating differences depending on gender and on the partner employment situation during the lock-down. Starting with women, both respondents in our sample whose partner did not work during the lock-down period seem to have experienced a better balance in the gendered division of domestic work, with their partners taking charge of more house-working tasks than usual (like shopping or preparing meals, but also ironing). This dynamic seems more evident in the one case where the partner stopped working during the lock-down because placed in temporary lay-off (**int. 7**), whilst in the other case, where the partner was already retired, this dynamic seems to precede the lock-down situation (**int. 13**):

*“At home I don't have more things to do than usual. [...] I leaned very much on my husband who was at home doing nothing. His presence was very helpful. He has done more housework than usual, but his housework is summed up in one word: preparing food. During this period, he has always done the shopping and prepared lunches and dinners: this has been a help for me. Maybe before, I prepared lunch myself because he wasn't home during the day.” (int. 7)*

Female respondents whose partner teleworked during the lock-down did not seem to have experienced significant changes in the division of work at home. Due also to the younger age of these respondents (3 out of 4 are in the 30-39 years old age range), the division of domestic work seemed already quite balanced in the eyes of the interviewees. However, in some cases, the increase in the load of housework generated by the confinement period (because of the impossibility of getting regular help by cleaning personnel or because of the increase of the number of meals consumed at home) appears to have been placed more on the shoulders of women (**int. 10**) than on those of men. On the contrary, partners' higher degree of flexibility in deciding their work schedule during the telework regime was highly appreciated by women as a factor allowing to divide housework more evenly (**int. 15 and 18**). Finally, in only one case in our sample (**int. 16**), a woman was teleworking while her partner was working in his regular workplace, but unluckily the interview has not allowed to collect significant information about the division of housework during the lock-down.

*“My husband is also working from home. Housework has remained unchanged, although we cook much more at home. [...] My husband is shopping and for me this is a nice release.”*

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that every respondent falling in this category lives with a partner of the opposite sex, thus comments and observations that will be made in this section about the division of work at home only concern heterosexual couples or families.

*Before, we often did it together or otherwise we alternated. He does the big shopping; I make some small additions. I take care of the other things, but I get help if I feel tired, and he helps me a lot. Before he almost always cooked, now I have started cooking too. [...] Before a lady came to iron, but now she has had to stop coming. So, I started ironing again, because my husband uses several shirts a week, for when he teleworks.” (int. 10)*

*“We manage the housework, my husband and I. We do what there is to be done depending on who is freer and more relaxed, we divide the work a little. My husband is also on telework, but he has a more flexible schedule, so he is freer: he prepares lunch, maybe he can get up from his desk and go to cook, in the meantime he makes business calls. Instead I work in a fixed workstation, similar to that of the workplace, and I have less freedom to move.” (int. 18)*

For what concerns male respondents living with their partner or with school-aged or adult sons and daughters, only 1 out of 9 respondents who fall in this category has teleworked during the lock-down period while his partner stopped working. In this case, as expected, this contingent situation unbalanced even more the division of work at home to the detriment of the female partner, who also had to sustain the increase in care work generated by the lock-down:

*“The things I do are shopping, fixing things, chores, looking after the garden. Housekeeping and other things are done by my wife. I had to accompany my parents on doctor’s visits, but my wife who is not teleworking did it more often.” (int. 20)*

In five other cases of male respondents, both partners were teleworking during the lock-down. Paradoxically, the unequal division of domestic and care work – which increased during the confinement period for the reasons outlined above but also because of the closing of schools – seems to be more easily admitted (and also accepted) by men. In at list two of these cases (**int. 8 and 24**), in fact, telework does not appear to have favoured a more balanced division of housework. Furthermore, when some form of childcare is implied (for example in the case of school-aged children who still need help with their homework, as for the 9 years old daughter of **int. 8** or for the three 11 years old sons of **int. 24**), the overload produced by the lock-down situation seems to have weighted women’s burden of unpaid work, while men’s share only saw a limited increase, in an often ancillary role. An additional explicative factor of this uneven division of childcare could be traced in the age of these respondents (54 and 46 years old respectively), while younger respondents (like **int. 19 and 22**) declared having a more balanced division. Finally, once again, in one case (**int. 4**), a respondent’s higher degree of flexibility in deciding his work schedule during the telework regime seems to have been a factor positively influencing domestic and care work balance:

*“During this time my wife had the opportunity to work more time from home and also had less work. [...] I dedicate time to my daughter during the weekend, while my wife takes care of her during the week and she also looks after the school, I only help her in mathematics. [...] As for household chores: my wife does the cleaning; I help her out when I can. [...] The amount of housework has not increased much: the cleaning lady came once a week and now my wife does it on Saturday and we [sic] clean the house.” (int. 8)*

*“We divide the housework equally: it happens that maybe she rests in the afternoons and I do the housework. And maybe other times we try to balance things.” (int. 22)*

*“My wife teaches in middle school, they received a very defined schedule for online lessons, much more organized from above, while we had a more flexible organisation. [...] So we are tied to our schedule, which is different from that of face-to-face lessons, but we also have different schedules in the morning, so we can also manage other things: shopping, cooking. This situation has favoured the conciliation of family life with working life.” (int. 4)*

In three cases, male respondents were teleworking during the lock-down, while their partners were continuing to go to work at their regular workplace. Despite different “starting levels” of domestic work balance before the lock-down (very balanced in the case of **int. 14 and 17**, more unbalanced for **int. 21**), transition to telework has increased the share of domestic work done by men. However, because the lock-down also expanded the total amount of housework, this dynamic has not necessarily diminished the amount of housework performed by women, as it is possible to see in the case of **int. 17**, where the respondent’s partner had also to take care of her mother’s house:

*“I think we are an anomalous family: I cook while my wife cleans the house. I take care of my things: washing and ironing clothes. I spend at least an hour a day cooking, much more than before... My wife cleans both our home and her mother's house, because the cleaning lady is no longer coming.” (int. 17)*

Finally, the most significant changes seem to have been experienced by respondents living with their partner with below school age children or with non-self-sufficient relatives at home. This is the case of four women and two men in our sample. However, other than their gender, another big difference separates these two groups: while all the four women’s partners were teleworking, both men’s partners either usually don’t work or stopped working because of the lock-down. The consequences of the confinement and of the transition to telework are thus opposite in these two groups. For what concerns women, in 3 out of 4 cases, the transition to telework for both partners has represented an occasion for better distributing work at home, especially for what concerns childcare. In two cases (**int. 2 and 6**), the interviewees stated that during the confinement a gradual rotation routine was put into practice in the care of the children, based on more or less pre-established “shifts”. This practice eased the care work but also the mental burden usually performed or sustained women, thus helping to balance the division of work at home. In one case (**int. 9**), this balance seems to have been even reversed, thanks (once again, again) to the greater freedom enjoyed by the partner in organizing his work schedule. This freedom appears to have allowed him to take a much larger role than usual in the care of children (especially with regard to helping them with school and homework), while the increase in domestic work due the momentary absence of a nanny was equally distributed between the two partners:

*“In this situation of greater sharing and greater coexistence, I felt a decrease in the mental burden. I couldn't tell you if it has been like this since the first day, because I don't remember well, but I know I thought: "Ah, it's not just me, he has already thought about it". So, we grew up in this. In this, this situation of forced coexistence at all hours of the day in our family has helped a better division of the workload, certainly.” (int. 6)*

*“My husband has the possibility to manage his time more freely: he works both in the evening and on the weekend, he also goes on at night to work (which I don't do): during the day the children interrupt him more than me and he recovers this lost time in the evening and at night. [...] In this context, the task of following children in school activity falls a little more on him. [...] This is a change in the management of children compared to the ordinary: before, when I came home from work, I devoted myself completely to family management: now, being both at home, this management is distributed more equally between the two.” (int. 9)*

On the contrary, as said above, in the cases of both of male respondents with below school age children at home, their partner either doesn’t usually work (**int. 23**) or stopped teleworking because of the lock-down (**int. 5**). In both cases, despite the fact that the amount of care and domestic work performed by men increased during the lock-down, the division of work at home has been even more unbalanced than usual, because the largest part of the total increase of domestic and care work generated by the confinement situation (helping the kids with school, preparing more meals, remedying to the absence of cleaning personnel) has fallen on the shoulders of women, thus expanding their global share. In one case (**int. 5**), however, this situation seems to be only

temporary: because at the end of the lock-down his partner will resume working at her regular workplace, the interviewee has already decided to take a paternity leave in order to stay with the children until the reopening of schools and kindergartens:

*“During this period, I can work, taking advantage of the fact that my wife is at home and she is in fact acting as a mother and as a caregiver for me. Then we will reverse roles next week because she will go back to work on May 5th and she will not do smart-work, so she puts us in the condition that I will have to ask for a paternity leave. So, from next week I will be home to follow and look after the girls while she goes to work.” (int. 5)*

### *Time management*

For what concerns time management, interviewees living in villages or in small town (or in any case near their workplace) and who usually spend daily between 5 and 15 minutes to commute from home to work either by feet or by car (at list 7 in our sample, **int. 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, 24, 25**) declared not having spared a significant amount of time because of the transition to telework. On the contrary, respondents living in big cities or in any case far from their workplace or who commute from home to work more than once per day (for example because they have lunch at home or because they work in different workplaces) benefited not only from the sparing of time, but also from significant reductions in stress and commuting costs. In some cases, the time spared from commuting from home to work has been re-employed by interviewees in rest or leisure time: by sleeping more (**int. 11, 15 and 20**), doing physical activity (**int. 1, 14 and 22**). In other cases, however, this time spared was rather – and at least partially – used for unpaid work activities, such as domestic work (**int. 18**), studying for university (**int. 3 and 12**), or even reabsorbed as unpaid working time (**int. 13 and 16**).

Finally, in some cases, respondents regretted not having the possibility of spending (sometimes significant amounts of) time commuting from home to work. That was the case especially – but non exclusively – of respondents with young children at home (**int. 5 and 6**), who see commuting from home to work as an “inner time”, a time “dedicated to themselves”, and commuting from work to home as a time of “decompression” – allowing for serene transition from work to family life – or a time of “truce”, before starting working once again at home with the children. In one other case (**int. 17**), commuting represented instead a time dedicated to leisure (reading), which the interviewee has not been able to recreate routinely during the telework regime:

*“Telework also takes away the 30-minutes’ drive of calm, autonomy, silence and solitude that we have. [...] If I lived alone it would be a nuisance. If I live alone, I turn off the computer and that’s fine. But people with children know that they prefer to stay a little longer at the office. It is so, and whoever does not say that lies. Because when you come home you start working again. Indeed, it is much heavier. So, there is no respite. The truce is when you go from one place to another, the only time when nobody asks you for anything, nobody urges you, nobody is calling you or asking or reminding you what you still have to do.” (int. 6)*

*“Before, it took me 40 minutes to go to work. On the way, I usually stopped to get a brioche at the bar and read until 10 o’clock. Obviously, this thing has disappeared. Lately I tried to force myself to read 45 minutes a day minimum, I had given myself this routine but I managed to do it only seldom. I miss reading, I haven’t read a single book in these weeks. I used to find time to read in the breaks between home and work, that now I don’t have.” (int. 17)*

## Prospects and general outlook

### *Respondents' overall well-being during the period of confinement*

Although experiencing a situation of stress linked to the fear of contracting the virus (for themselves and for their beloved ones, especially if elderly) and to the news concerning the epidemic situation of the country spread by televisions, newspapers and social networks, the majority of the interviewees in our sample did not experience a condition of malaise or of excessive discomfort during the confinement period. Certainly, everyone experienced a sense of frustration generated by the restrictions imposed by the lock-down, from both the limitations on freedom of movement and the impossibility of seeing friends and relatives or of frequenting regular places of leisure (gym, bar, restaurants, etc.).

However, when asked to take stock of their global situation, the majority of our respondents did not find significant changes in their level of well-being and some even declared that their level of well-being had increased, especially because of the fact of having to spend more time at home. Of course, this appreciation is influenced by a large variety of factors, which is difficult to account for and most of which can also influence respondents' well-being in the opposite direction when placed in different contexts. A non-exhaustive list of the factors that have helped interviewees maintaining or even improving their level of well-being includes: a) having continued to work (but not having excessive work related pressures), b) having a sufficiently safe employment situation, c) not having to work in the regular workplace, d) having good teleworking conditions, e) living in a big house, f) spending more time with family members g) or even with neighbours, h) having spared time that can be used for leisure or for other personal or even work objectives (like studying for the university), i) getting more help from the partner in childcare, etc.

On the contrary, about a third of our interviewees declared that their personal well-being had significantly worsened during the lock-down period. While considering themselves lucky for not having personally contracted the virus and for not having any infected family members, those respondents considered that the restrictions imposed by the lock-down had negatively impacted on their personal situation at the point of affecting their global level of well-being. A non-exhaustive list of the factors that have worsened interviewees' well-being includes: a) living in small houses, b) being locked at home when the house is not seen as a "space of recognition", c) having bad teleworking conditions d) and stressful working rhythms, e) not getting regular help with childcare (especially with regard to young children), f) not having objectives other than the ones imposed by work, g) feeling isolated and missing the work environment, h) not being able to go outside, i) getting bored, etc. Some interviewee (like **int. 2**) feared for their mental health if this situation had to continue.

### *Assessment of short-, medium- and long-term prospects*

With regard to short-term prospects, about a dozen of interviewees think they will resume working in their regular workplace within a few weeks or in any case before summer holidays. Some of them have already started going back to work to their office on more or less regular basis, while others have received precise communications by their managers or employers on the schedule of the "return to normal". Others, while still having not received precise indications, felt sure that the resumption of activities at their regular workplace will take place as soon as possible with respect to government regulation of the transition to "Phase 2", although they still have doubts on how this transition will take place. Globally, the perspective of a short-term return to regular workplaces seems more widespread among workers of the private sector, especially among those working in large companies (like **int. 3, 5, 17, 23**). However, this perspective is shared also by private sector workers who usually work in direct contact with the public (like a social worker, **int. 12**, and a



private high school teacher, **int. 19**) and by a public administration employee (**int. 20**). Some of these workers (like **int. 1**) are worried about the health risks of an early return to the workplace, despite the safety measures adopted by their employers. Some others, especially women with young children at home (**int. 6 and 9**), have expressed their concerns regarding the possibility of an early return to the workplace while schools are still closed and declared they would have preferred that their employer gave them the possibility to continue to telework. Others, on the contrary, feel that they could negotiate with their employer or supervisor at least a partial extension of the telework arrangements (**int. 1 and 17**). Others, finally, especially if in managing position (**like int. 5 or 23**), are already planning the resumption of activities at the workplace:

*“I think I will have to go back to the office shortly after May 4th and this worries me, also due to the fact that staying at home it would have been quite difficult to contract the virus, while going out to work the risk increases.” (int. 1)*

*“I hope we don't go back to the office because we wouldn't really know how to deal with the children. In fact, I hope, in order to have a truly equal situation, that no one who has children will return to the office. Because when they bring us back, how do we choose between one or the other? This will create immense inequality. And this will happen.” (int. 6)*

*“I sincerely hope to stay in telework until September, but I know that since May they want to make a gradual return to the office: first the managers, then the cadres, then the staff, at least a 25% with alternate weeks... But I think I will ask my supervisor to stay in telework until September and I think I can get it.” (int. 17)*

*“I am in communication with our overseas customers who are waiting for us to start the business again, which should happen next week. So, I have no big problems, I did a couple of reorganisation meetings, because you have to start again next week and you have to be organized to be able to do it, understanding who does what, where and when.” (int. 5)*

On the contrary, public school teachers and university researchers in our sample (**int. 4, 10, 11, 2 and 14**) declared that they doubt that they will be able to resume their activities at the workplace before September (except for high school final exams that will be held in presence). One of them (**int. 11**) even doubted that face-to-face teaching will be resumed in September and assumed that distant learning will continue at least partially. Lastly, another group of respondents (**int. 7, 13, 15, 16, 18, 21, 24, 25**), mostly working in small firms or organisations, declared not knowing exactly when they will resume working at their regular workplace, nor having received any information on the matter by their employer or manager.

For what concerns, instead, long-term prospects, workers in our sample fear that their companies are not willing to continue the current telework experiences, for issues that concern the rigidity of employers (**int. 7**), organisational needs related to the labour process (**int. 3**) or the lower profitability of telework compared to work in the regular workplace (**int. 18**). Finally, a high school teacher (**int. 4**) expressed the desire that the skills developed while teleworking may not be lost but become better integrated in the educational process:

*“I know that telework cannot become normal in my company: as soon as they hired me, because I had young children, I asked to be able to adapt my schedule, but they did not allow any of this. I know the same will happen if I request to work from home.” (int. 7)*

*“I don't think my company will change telework policy. It is an old-fashioned automotive firm. [...] So I think that, given the peculiarity of the company, telework won't be extended, or if so, not much.” (int. 3)*

*“[The continuation of telework in the future] will simply be an assessment based on the level of profit. [...] At this moment the only alternative is teleworking, then over time they will*

*make an assessment: if telework has brought more money, they will keep it, this is their only criterion..." (int. 18)*

*"I hope that this opportunity will allow us to work differently in the future, we must keep track of these skills we have developed, because they give us the possibility of making the most of all the educational possibilities available." (int. 4)*

### *Sustainability of current arrangements*

For what concerns, respondents' perception of the sustainability on the long term of telework arrangements, workers in our sample seem to be quite polarised depending on the type of work they carry out (in direct contact with the public or not) and on their tasks and position in the labour process (being or not in super-visioning position). Medium skilled technical professionals in our sample whose tasks are generally target-oriented and can be easily performed remotely appear to perceive telework as being at least partially sustainable even after the lock-down situation. They tend to consider that telework arrangements could be extended well beyond the limits usually allowed in their organisations, from some days a month (**int. 3 and 6**) to most of the week (**int. 9**), depending on their task and on the degree of interdependence with colleagues. One interviewee (**int. 16**), however, declared that, for current arrangements to be sustainable, companies should provide better and more adapted equipment (like ergonomic chairs or screens):

*"A substantial part of the work I do can be done from home. Unless you have to do some very physical stuff, like following a prototype. But those are always short periods with a deadline, while normally it is possible to work in a target-oriented way, giving freedom, flexibility and trust in people." (int. 6)*

*"There are no structural obstacles to telework. Normally my work can be done wherever I am, an internet connection is enough. Some things like drafts and meetings under normal conditions require physical presence in the company. But 90% of the work can be done easily without being in the workplace." (int. 9)*

*"In my opinion you can improve the equipment or at least give workers incentives to buy equipment. As I said before, I bought the ergonomic chair personally, and the monitor is my personal too, everything was paid by the worker." (int. 16)*

Most low-skilled clerical workers in our sample who carry out tasks with no or limited contact with the public also declared that in their case telework arrangements could be extended beyond what is usually allowed, without compromising the execution of their work. While they identified some structural obstacles in the performance of full-time telework in the fact that part of their tasks still rely on paper supports (consulting physical archives, printing and signing paper documents), they are also quite aware that these obstacles could be at least partially overcome through a digitalisation of the production process or simply by supporting expenses born by the employees:

*"Switching between office and home is feasible forever. But working only at home is not. For my type of work, I need to print and sign documents and being tied to paper is an obstacle, which in part could be reduced by modifying company procedures, but could not be eliminated in full because sometimes it happens that you have to look for documentation archived in past years." (int. 7)*

*"The obstacle I see to smart-work is that sometimes, while I enter data relating to a company, I may need information contained in the relative paper folder that is in the office. It's still very manual. I often need to print and am using my own printer. Someone even had to buy a printer at their own expenses. It would have been necessary to give us financial support to bear these expenses, but our supervisors have not thought about it." (int. 13)*

On the contrary, workers whose tasks are usually carried out in direct contact with the public and in which the relational engagement is seen as an essential component of the job itself (like teachers and social workers) perceive telework arrangements as being only temporary substitutes for face-to-face interactions. For them, the continuation of telework beyond a short-term emergency situation is “unthinkable” and unsustainable, at the point that some of them even declared that it would be worthless to continue distant learning or remote interventions if this situation had to be extended:

*“An experience that has very specific time terms such as the current one can be functional – but not a substitute – for some aspects that are foreseen in the teaching relationship, because the educational aspect has always permeated all this distance teaching. A lacking element is precisely the impossibility of building an educational relationship at a distance, we have been able to count on the educational relationships that we had previously built. It would be impossible to think of building these relationships totally remotely. [...] Otherwise it is better to give up: a first-year student who starts with distance learning is a student with which no educational relationship can be built.” (int. 4)*

Finally, high skilled workers in our sample that are in managerial or super-visioning positions stated that for them the main obstacle in extending telework arrangements is found in the impossibility, in their eyes, of effectively communicating with and controlling their supervisees (int. 5, 8, 23). In their opinion, the task of “making others work” requires physical presence, face-to-face communication and even “physical visual contact”, the main risk associated to telework residing precisely in workers “relaxing”, “doing the bare essentials” or “not doing things immediately” when they are not subjected to supervisors’ direct control. If this requirement is partially associated with the need to personally supervise the production process to understand the difficulties of the workers (int. 5), it is evident in the following excerpts that the effectiveness of the exercise of control is their main concern that prevails over all the others. In one case (int. 8), this need for “physical visual contact” is also associated to the relationship with the customer, when it appears necessary that the latter stands not only on formal assumptions but also on a feeling of trust:

*“Even at the workplace, I prefer to work in person. I have a cell phone, but if I can I move and go to talk to people, I try to understand. Because I often make others work. And there is also the aseptic way of making a phone call and sending an email and saying: “Do this!”. But going there and maybe seeing what the difficulties are in carrying out an operation is a different thing. [...] And then, in my experience, going in person to ask for things is a guarantee that those things tend to be done and are unlocked immediately. An email, a phone call, a video conference does not have the same effect.” (int. 5)*

*“I would like to work from home several days, but I cannot do it. From home I have no way of overseeing the commercial aspect that has now resumed. You must always control the colleagues, otherwise they simply do the bare essential. It cannot be done remotely: you have to be physically present; you need to go back to saying things. There is no maturity in my colleagues. This is the main obstacle I see at working from home. Physical visual contact is important with both the colleagues and the clients. For some stuff, I need to see the customer in the face. Like for a mortgage, I want to understand who I’m giving the money to.” (int. 8)*

The opposite side of these considerations put forward by managers lies in the already mentioned (par. 3.3.b.) loss of “visibility” on company processes, which some workers perceive as an important risk associated with working outside the workplace. Added to this is the perception of the inequalities and discriminations that would be generated in organisations if telework was not the rule for everyone, but was only granted to those who request it, most often working mothers (see int. 6):

*“For those of us who are no one in the office, not going to work means that we are no longer able to participate. So, if we are all at home and therefore we can work from home, we must all do it. If, on the other hand, only those who cannot do otherwise work from home, then there is discrimination, because in the end, mothers will stay at home most of the time, because it is always like that.” (int. 6)*

Before moving to the final paragraph, it is worth mentioning that, for many interviewees who have young children or non-self-sufficient parents at home, the main obstacle to the extension of telework arrangements resides of course in the fact that schools, kindergartens and day-care facilities for the elderly are still closed. For them the only available solutions are represented either by the reopening of these facilities or by the help of their families:

*“Only not having the baby 24 hours can make me concentrate on my work. If everything continues like this, I’ll go back to my family, at least I’ll have a support network.” (int. 2)*

*“If the services do not reopen it will be hard to reconcile the care of my parents with my work, even if they know it at work...” (int. 25)*

### *Availability to telework in the future*

With regard to respondents’ availability to telework in the future, only a minority of our interviewees declared that they would prefer not having to telework anymore. The reasons of this refusal of telework are to be found in a) the isolation from workplace social relations, b) the lack of a proper work environment at home, c) the need of a proper division between work and family life, d) the lesser productivity and efficiency associated to working from home, e) having tasks that require frequent personal interaction with colleagues and supervisees, f) the need of “leaving home”, etc.

*“I would not like to continue teleworking; despite everything I prefer the ordinary situation. Because there is the aspect of sociality that is missing and also that related to the liveability of the home, because I am not used to living 24 hours a day with my parents. Even for personal well-being, going out to work is more life, this is a little less life. After all, it doesn’t take me long to go to work and I can always get back home for lunch.” (int. 1)*

*“I prefer to divide the environments and to divide the moments. The home to relax and experience a certain type of condition, the office for work with the advantage of being more concentrated, dedicated, with less chance of being distracted because I don’t have the television, the fridge, the books, etc. So honestly, I prefer to go to work. [...] So many tasks that I do are more of personal interaction and video conferencing does not help from that point of view.” (int. 5)*

Even teachers, who, as outlined above, consider “unthinkable” the perpetuation of distant learning, nonetheless declared to be available to carry out remotely some specific activities, like remedial courses (considered feasible in distant learning because they involve only a small number of students, **int. 4**) or meetings with colleagues which usually take place in the afternoon (such as “class councils”, **int. 11**).

On the contrary, a large majority of our respondents (15 out of 25) declared being in favour of a significant extension of telework arrangements in their companies or organisations. However, while only three of them (**int. 14, 17 and 18**) declared to be available to continue teleworking full-time, most of them declared instead to be in favour of mixed and more balanced regimes: teleworking 2-3 days per week (**int. 3, 6, 9, 13, 15, 16, 22, 23, 24**), on alternate days (**int. 8 and 25**) or even part-time on daily basis (**int. 7**). It should be noted that among these respondents we also find interviewees that had found significant structural obstacles to the sustainability of current telework arrangements (like some high skilled workers in managerial or super-visioning positions, **int. 8 and 23**) or who declared that their personal well-being had significantly worsened during the lock-down

period **(int. 3 or 15)**. This should not be seen as a contradiction, as these workers either perceive that telework would have no such negative consequences once the lock-down status is removed or think that structural obstacles, while impeding the transition to full-time telework, would still allow a considerable extension of telework:

*“I would very much like to continue working from home after the end of this period, also because in the return to normal we hope that the reopening of schools will also be included and we would work from home without distractions. It would be ideal to avoid a long journey every day and save two hours of life and earn in peace of work. Hopefully my company, which was very reluctant, can draw some positive conclusions from this experience.” **(int. 9)***

## Conclusions

The qualitative survey that we have conducted with 25 interviewees gave us the possibility of studying in depth the consequences of the transition to telework along three main dimensions (work organisation, job quality and work-life balance). We have shown how workers telework experience during the lock-down is extremely heterogeneous across the employment structure, depending on a number of factors and variables such as level of skills, type of work, task content, intensity of ICT use, workers' gender and household composition, etc.

Starting with work organisation, this dimension has been studied along four different axes: communication, autonomy, monitoring and standardisation. For what concerns communication, we have shown that transition to telework had a significant impact on both internal and external communication in all the different organisations in which our interviewees are employed. Furthermore, transition to telework seems to have fostered and accelerated the integration of new technological tools into the labour process, thus producing a sudden and significant change in the work practices and creating new (tele)work routines. Transition to telework also affected workers' degree of autonomy: where the regular performance of work activities was severely affected by the lock-down situation, respondents were able to enjoy greater autonomy in the definition of the content of their work. In addition, in the situation of uncertainty created by the transition phase, spaces of autonomy have opened for some workers – especially those working in direct contact with customers and users – for the redefinition of their own work procedures and objectives. With regard to monitoring and supervision, for many low skilled clerical workers and medium skilled technical professionals, the technological tools implemented in the labour process already enabled real-time tracking of operators and product performance, both in a procedural way and in the form of indirect supervision. In other cases, however, remote personal supervision was carried out in the telework regime by introducing or integrating specific communication devices into the labour process. The implementation of these tools has not simply compensated for the absence of direct physical supervision by virtualising it, but seems also to have increased its intensity and its disciplinary power. Concerning standardisation, the report showed how a dynamic of proceduralisation of telework seems to have touched some of those (high, mid, or low skilled) workers who carry out jobs in direct contact with the public. Now mediated through digital tools, these relationships seem to have become even more bureaucratic and to have lost the relational or interactive character they could assume when carried out face-to-face. If such a process seemed already on the horizon, the transition to telework has contributed to accelerate it considerably.

Moving on to the analysis of the job quality, the overwhelming majority of the interviewees in our sample didn't incur in any loss in pay and compensation because of the Covid-19 crisis. Some respondents, however, experienced loss of earnings due to the suspension of overtime and to the interruption of services and benefits, or linked to temporary lay-off schemes adopted by their firm. The Covid-19 crisis also had consequences on the employment quality of workers with fixed term contracts: within our sample, this was the case of both public and private school precarious teachers. Telework seems also to have increased work dissatisfaction and demotivation for those workers (mostly medium or high skilled technical professionals or managers) who usually perceive their work and their professional environment as a meaningful source of satisfaction and motivation. On the contrary, for workers who perceive their job as usually not inspiring nor particularly gratifying or for whom the daily experience of their professional environment is more of a source of frustration and oppression than of recognition, transition to telework seems to have had a positive impact. A substantial decrease in productivity and efficiency has been experienced, unsurprisingly, by respondents with young children at home. On the contrary, some medium or low skilled clerical workers used to work in crowded or noisy workplaces seem to have experienced an increase in their productivity. Concerning health and safety issues, respondents not used to spend all their working time in front of a screen suffered from eyesight related issues originating from the on-screen transposition of many work activities previously carried out in presence. Clerical workers,

instead, seem to have been more prone to experience postural problems associated with the lack of adequate ergonomic chairs or to the increased use of phones. Regarding psychological risks, workaholism seems to have been experienced especially in the first phase of the transition and especially by young medium or high skilled workers living by themselves. On the contrary, issues related to work-life balance seem to have particularly affected women psychological well-being, producing a sense of “irritability” linked to the fact of having to cope simultaneously with work and childcare. Both the transition to telework and the general lock-down have had an impact in the way working time has been allocated and distributed throughout the confinement period. Ordinary work schedules seem to have been maintained for those workers who perform tasks that require simultaneity and coordination with colleagues and supervisors, like managers and technical professionals working in large organisations but also secretaries. On the contrary, clerical workers and technical professionals who perform tasks with a lower level of interdependency were able to benefit from some forms of flexibility in managing their working time.

Variations in the global appreciation of changes in work-life balance since the lock-down generally mirror differences in the domestic and care workload that interviewees had to sustain throughout the confinement. Younger respondents, living alone or with their partner but without children, seem to have particularly appreciated the possibility of teleworking. On the contrary, respondents (especially women) with young children at home declared having experienced greater difficulties in successfully balancing work and family life, often at the expense of the former. Since it takes away from the worker the autonomy in the distribution of working time, having to respect rigid work schedules was mentioned as a serious obstacle for a successful work-life balance. For what concerns division of work at home, a better gender balance seems to have been experienced by women whose partner did not work during the lock-down period and who therefore took charge of more house-working tasks than usual. Also, young women with young children at home whose partner teleworked during the lock-down period declared that the transition to telework for both partners had represented an occasion for better distributing not only childcare but also the mental burden usually sustained by women. On the contrary, older female respondents without young children at home whose partner teleworked during the lock-down did not seem to have experienced significant changes in the division of work at home. In their case, the increase in the load of housework generated by the confinement period appears to have been placed more on their shoulders than on those of their partners. This dynamic was also confirmed by male respondents: when both partners were teleworking, the unequal division of domestic and care work was reproduced and sometimes even strengthened during the lock-down and men’s share of housework only saw a limited increase, in an often-ancillary role. Lastly, with regard to time management, interviewees living in villages or in small towns (or in any case near their workplace) and who usually spend between 5 and 15 minutes to commute daily from home to work declared not having spared a significant amount of time because of the transition to telework. On the contrary, respondents living in big cities or in any case far from their workplace or who commute from home to work more than once per day benefited not only from the sparing of time, but also from significant reductions in stress and commuting costs. However, respondents with young children at home appear to have regretted not having the possibility of spending time in commuting to the workplace, because they see this time as allowing a more serene transition from work to family life and vice versa.

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## Appendix I

### Selection variables

<b>Selection variables</b>	<b>Main relevant categories</b>	<b>Approximate number of interviews</b>
Gender	male/female	50/50%
Family situation	families with children (at school age/not at school age)/couples without children/single people	minimum 50% living in a household with children
Sector	private/public	70/30% or 80/20%
Skill level	high/medium/low skilled	50/25/25%
Work type	involving direct (remote during lockdown) contact with clients or not	50/50%
Telework experience	some previous experience of telework or not	minimum 20% was already teleworking to some extent
Contractual arrangement	permanent vs. temporary contract. Self-employed not included	70-30%

## Appendix II

Table of interviewees

Code	Occupation	Age	Sex	Household composition	Telework during lockdown (%)	Sector	Skill level	Direct contact with clients/users	Type of contract
<b>int. 1</b>	Commercial assistant to a financial advisor	27	F	Living with her parents	100%	Private	Low	Yes	Training contract (3 years)
<b>int. 2</b>	Ph.D. Researcher	32	F	Couple with a below school age son	100%	Public	High	No	Scholarship (3 years)
<b>int. 3</b>	Service designer in an automotive firm	25	F	Shared flat	100%	Private	High	No	Open ended contract
<b>int. 4</b>	High school teacher	57	M	Couple with school age sons	100%	Public	High	Yes	Open ended contract
<b>int. 5</b>	Product manager in an automotive firm	40	M	Couple with below and school age sons	100%	Private	High	No	Open ended contract
<b>int. 6</b>	Mobility specialist in an automotive firm	40	F	Couple with below and school age sons	100%	Private	High	No	Open ended contract
<b>int. 7</b>	Accounting clerk in a winery	49	F	Couple with school age and adult sons	50% (teleworks in the afternoon)	Private	Low	No	Open ended contract
<b>int. 8</b>	Bank branch manager	54	M	Couple with a school age daughter	40% (2 days a week)	Private	High	Yes	Open ended contract
<b>int. 9</b>	Editor in a publishing	42	F	Couple with school age	100%	Private	Medium	No	Open ended

	house			sons					contract
<b>int. 10</b>	Primary school teacher	34	F	Couple without children	100%	Public	Medium	Yes	Fixed term contract (1 year)
<b>int. 11</b>	High school teacher	28	M	Living alone	100%	Public	High	Yes	Fixed term contract (1 year)
<b>int. 12</b>	Social worker in a social cooperative	30	F	Couple without children	2/3 of interventions	Private	Low	Yes	Open ended contract
<b>int. 13</b>	Accounting clerk in craftworkers and small businesses association	58	F	Couple with an adult son	100%	Private	Low	No	Open ended contract (part-time)
<b>int. 14</b>	Research assistant, university lecturer	31	M	Couple without children	100%	Public	High	Yes	Fixed term contract (3 years)
<b>int. 15</b>	Secretary in a law firm	32	F	Couple without children	100%	Private	Low	No	Open ended contract
<b>int. 16</b>	Data analyst in a bank	34	F	Couple without children	100%	Private	Medium	No	Open ended contract
<b>int. 17</b>	Tax consultant officer in a telecom firm	60	M	Couple with adult daughters	100%	Private	High	No	Open ended contract
<b>int. 18</b>	Call centre operator	51	F	Couple with school age sons	100%	Private	Low	No	Fixed term contract (6 months)
<b>int. 19</b>	Private high school teacher	29	M	Couple without children	100%	Private	High	Yes	Fixed term contract
<b>int. 20</b>	Accounting officer in a public administration	59	M	Couple with a non-self-sufficient parent	50% (2-3 days a week)	Public	Medium	Yes	Open ended contract

<b>int. 21</b>	Administrative officer in a vocational training centre	58	M	Couple with an adult daughter	50%	Private	Medium	No	Open ended contract
<b>int. 22</b>	Purchasing clerk in an outsourced hospital accounting branch	32	M	Couple without children	40% (2 days a week)	Private	Low	Yes	Open ended contract
<b>int. 23</b>	Commercial manager in an electromedical manufacturing company	39	M	Couple with below school age sons	100%	Private	High	Yes	Open ended contract
<b>int. 24</b>	Employment centre employee	46	M	Couple with school age sons	100%	Public	Medium	Yes	Fixed term contract (1 year)
<b>int. 25</b>	Accounting clerk in craftworkers and small businesses association	55	F	Couple with not self-sufficient parents	100%	Private	Low	No	Open ended contract (part-time)



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