

Learning from the COVID-19 emergency. The remote working organizational experience in Italian SMEs

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Sommario: 1. Addressing the issue – 2. Remote working in SMEs: a delicate matter – 3. The survey – 4. Results – 5. Discussion – 6. Learning from the experience: remarks and recommendation for a “Humane Entrepreneurship” approach – 7. Limitations and future research

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has put several SMEs in the position of having to deploy remote working. The analysis is focused on the adoption of remote working during the first wave of the pandemic in Italy and conducted on 60 SMEs of the Piacenza area (one of the most affected in Italy) with the aim to study the adoption of remote working in SMEs to verify how the organization of work has changed. It involved 391 employees and investigated the issues of perceived productivity, technological preparation, coordination, programming, and control. Results show that the way work has been organized remotely hasn't changed substantially: in the first wave of the epidemic, remote working has been considered as a mere replica of face-to-face work, without considerable variations other than the physical location of the workplace (from the office to home). Thanks to the availability of technologies and ability to use by workers - even without adequate training - productivity has not decreased and SMEs can trust their employees even without a direct control.

Keywords: remote working, perceived productivity, SMEs.

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Arrivato il 4 ottobre 2021; approvato il 20 gennaio 2022.

DOI: 10.15167/1824-3576/IPEJM2021.3.1423

1. Introduction

In Italy SMEs represent the great majority of companies. According to the permanent business census conducted by ISTAT in 2019 approximately 280,000 companies with 3 or more employees were surveyed, representing more than a million units, almost a quarter of the Italian companies present on the Italian territory. Two thirds of the companies (821 thousand, equal to 79.5% of the total) are micro-enterprises (with 3-9 employees), 187 thousand (equal to 18.2%) are small (10-49 employees), while medium-sized companies (with 50-249 employees) and large companies (with 250 employees or more) represent 2.3% of the companies observed (24,000 units), of which 3,000 are large.

A joint ILO-Eurofound research (2017) shows that Italy is the last state in Europe (preceded by Greece, The Czech Republic, Poland, Slovachia and Hungary) in terms of remote working adoption. In some countries, the work culture makes organisations reticent to introduce some types of flexible work arrangements and individual employees can be reluctant to use those options even when they are available. For example, the work culture in Italy is characterized by relatively high levels of presenteeism and is not primarily driven by objectives in many workplaces.

While some large companies, even before the health emergency, had in place Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and well-being policies for their employees (e.g. agile working, part time, work-family balance, corporate welfare), the vast majority of SMEs have been forced to suddenly approach practices often far from their corporate culture, both for objective (e.g. poor digitization¹, poor division and specialization of roles, dimensional constraints, low trade unions representation) and subjective reasons (e.g. predominance of direct supervision by the entrepreneur, low propensity for innovation to change, absence of formal systems for assigning objectives and measuring results, work culture linked to the "hours worked" rather than performance (Wigert and Barret, 2020), control systems, social loyalty, poor delegation and decision-making autonomy of employees) (Bhagat, Haron and Bhatti, 2021).

Concerning organizational culture and human resources management, a relevant approach we considered to interpret our research is that of Humane Entrepreneurship - HumEnt. Ki-Chan, ElTarabishy and Bae (2018) define HumEnt as a "virtuous and sustainable integration of Entrepreneurship, Leadership, and HRM, in which successful implementation leads to a beneficial increase in wealth and job quality, perpetuated in a continuous cycle." It argues that companies generate higher profits when they respect and encourage employees, rather than considering labor as

¹ According to DESI (Digital Economy and Society Index), the index created by the European Commission to measure and monitor the progress of European countries in terms of digitization of the economy and society, the level of digitization of Italian SMEs is below the European average. In 2019, 88% of entrepreneurs consider digital innovations as necessary for the development of their business, but only 26% demonstrate that they have an adequate digital maturity to compete on global markets.

a mere cost, and when they adopt a multi-stakeholder perspective, conceiving the environment and society at large in their strategies. Among HumEnt characteristics, researchers have recently focused on the concept of empathy as a key driving factor for employee engagement and a communicative business culture, leading to better understanding between organizational members needs and all stakeholders. In particular, firms should foster a culture that takes these needs into account, considers the ethical impact of actions, and motivates people around them to acquire virtues in order to build a strong community. That's why in times of crisis and organizational difficulty this approach can certainly help SMEs.

According to Parente et al. (2018) the constitutive elements of the HumEnt approach are:

- entrepreneurial orientation (defined by attitudes to innovation, risk-taking and proactivity);
- HR orientation (focusing on specific dimensions of human resources management, such as those aimed to foster empathy, equity, enablement, and empowerment);
- sustainability orientation (referring to behaviours aimed at environmental protection and social responsibility).

The HumEnt approach requires the contemporary presence of the three constructs to some extent, while they are not necessarily present in a firm at the same time. In particular, the presence of entrepreneurial orientation represents the first step, always valuable in a private firm, while the HR and sustainability orientation reveals a more mature level of HumEnt adoption. In this work, we refer especially to the components of the HR orientation related to internal organisational factors, while, on the contrary, the sustainability orientation is mainly related to external factors (Heilmann, Forsten-Astikainen and Kultalahti, 2020). Although the domain of employee engagement is ambiguously defined among both academic researchers and practitioners, a common definition often connotes "*involvement, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort and energy*" of a firm toward employees (Macey and Schneider, 2008: 4). This signifies introducing employees to entrepreneur values and behaviours, as well as considering them as a part of the firm strategies. To have this result, the communication is essential as well as constant feedback and updates.

In addition, it is well known that restrictions have more severe effects on SMEs than on larger and global firms. In fact, SMEs are more vulnerable, since they tend to have a lower capital reserve, fewer assets, and lower productivity levels than larger firms (Eurofound, 2020; Robinson and Kengatharan, 2020). At the same time, they explore new opportunities, because of their size and flexibility (Davidsson, 2015; Shepherd and Williams, 2018) and develop emergent strategies for sustainable business operations. Large, formalized and structured companies encountered modest difficulties as they were already technologically and culturally prepared (Papadopoulos, Baltas, Balta, 2020).

In Italy, smart working in the form of agile working is disciplined by Law number 81/2017 with two main aims: to enhance work productivity and to facilitate reconciliation of life and working times (Russo et al., 2021).

The new discipline is an incentive both from a managerial point of view, for carrying out the work performance in the best possible way; and from a cultural point of view, for a change in the concept of work, that is, the transition from "stamping" work to a "Management By Objectives" approach shared by employers and employees, where the worker is left ample freedom to self-organise, as long as he or she achieves the objectives set within the established deadlines. The COVID-19 pandemic has induced and / or accelerated sudden changes in the ways of organising and managing the work of people in companies, prompting many of them to adopt (out of necessity) remote working solutions, mostly from home. According to the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, at the end of April 2020, the number of remote workers was 1,827,792, which amounted to about 8% of the total employment (in 2019, Osservatorio Politecnico in Milan estimated 570,000 remote workers). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of workers who worked remotely increased by 69%. Globally, it has been estimated that about 81% of the worldwide workforce has been affected by full or partial workplace closures (Savic', 2020). Many workers experienced working from home for the first time every day for several weeks, often without receiving any kind of remote working preparation before (Nakrošienė, Bučiūnienė, Goštautaitė, 2019; Barbuto et al., 2020). The big challenge was that of SMEs, who found themselves at a crossroads: to resist remote working or to try and adopt it (Kniffin et al., 2021)

It is therefore intriguing to carry out a survey that examines the lesson learnt by SMEs from the COVID-19 emergency in terms of organizational implications. Indeed, the paper objective is to understand how SMEs faced the emergency in adopting remote working. The study is of great interest in that remote working implies a great autonomy in the organization of employees' work both for managers and clerks while in SMEs a strict supervision and direct control on employees are the norm. This is a cultural obstacle that until the COVID emergency has inhibited the remote working adoption. Through our analysis we will verify if remote working can be a possible option of work organization in SMEs even after the pandemic. We aim to verify if during this long period of emergency employees working remotely had the impression that their company's results, in term of perceived productivity, could suffer and decrease, overcoming and breaking the stereotype typical of SMEs in which the physical presence of the worker is necessarily link to productivity. We aim to analyse if remote working during the COVID lockdown has given SMEs the chance to transform a threat in an opportunity to empower and engage their employees adopting a more agile work organization. We aim that our study's results can help the SMEs future organizational and managerial decisions learning from this difficult situation to improve company's results and the quality of life of all stakeholders.

2. Remote working in SMEs: overview of a delicate matter

According to many observers inside and outside the business world “the crisis is transforming management” (Ipsen et al., 2021). Before the pandemic companies were struggling to adopt new organisational models like the agile enterprise, the lean management, the holocracy. The Covid-19 experience has forced companies to adopt forms of work organisation that involved moving from the physical presence in the company to self-organisation (Ruhle and Schmoll, 2021; Lee, 2020).

It must be premised that Italy is very sensitive to the use of technology which is widely employed especially by professionals for carrying out their activities (Belluati, 2016; Prasad et al., 2020). In addition, Italy is characterized by a weak labour market, high job insecurity and unemployment, frequent downsizing, where those who have a job tend to intensify their workload in order to preserve it.

Even if the literature shows the positive aspects of remote working that can be summarised as:

- increased productivity (Abdellatif, 2021; Abujarour, 2021; Alkadash and Alamarin, 2021; Awada et al., 2021; Guler et al., 2021; Huls et al., 2021; Nuur et al, 2021);
- greater autonomy (Wong et al., 2021);
- the ability to work flexibly and from different locations without the limitations due to office-based hours and risks related to displacement and crowding (Kniffin et al. 2021; Troll et al., 2021);

Italian SMEs have begun to tackle this new way of organizing work with a certain degree of resistance associated with the fear of losing control over the worker.

Indeed, the adoption of remote working required a change of mindset and leadership style that in normal times would have required training and adaptation times which was not possible in times of emergency (Bridgmant and Sliwa, 2021; Stoker et al., 2021; Succi, 2020).

The objective of our analysis is to study the adoption of remote working in SMEs from a managerial and organisational point of view considering in particular the learning challenges that a quick and large scale shift to remote working has produced. The analysis is strictly linked to the special situation of the Covid-19 Pandemic that has pushed SMEs to the adoption of remote working on a large scale and with urgency. Even companies that had not experimented the adoption of remote working before have been obliged to adapt to a rapid shift in the organisation of work, facing new learning challenges from the managerial, organisational, technological and cultural point of view. Our analysis is focused on the adoption of remote working during the first wave of the pandemic (beginning of March - beginning of June 2020) in Italy. The second wave started at the beginning of November 2020. It showed characteristics and impacts on companies and workforce similar to the first one.

For a variety of reasons (mainly cultural), before the pandemic, Italian SMEs didn't feel the necessity to adopt a structured policy on remote working. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced them to consider that working remotely is possible and can produce benefits and positive results in terms of autonomy (Alipour et al., 2021; Albano et al., 2018; Clear and Dickson, 2005), motivation (Amano et al., 2021; Nuur et

al., 2021; McGregor et al., 2020; Orsini and Rodriguez, 2020; Gagne et al., 2018) and trust (Sposato, 2021), to the detriment of physical presence, which is not as fundamental to ensure productivity. The shift has occurred with urgency. It was not possible to prepare for it. Workers, managers and firms faced this event without preparation and training. They had to learn on the job to adapt to the new working context. The objective of our analysis is to relate the main aspects of remote working with the productivity perceived by clerks and managers. The main aspects that we consider are the main points under discussion for firms and that stopped them to adopt forms of remote working. Our objective is to analyse if aspects like autonomy (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020; Delfino and van der Kolk, 2021; Wang et al., 2021), use of technology (Miele and Tirabeni, 2020; Molino et al., 2020), motivation (Prodanova and Kocarev, 2021), trust (Dumitru, 2020; Sposato, 2021), timing in returning the feedback (Delfino and van der Kolk, 2021), physical presence and working following objectives (Wang et al., 2021) have a positive or negative impact on productivity (Pulakos and Battista, 2020). Infact productivity is perhaps an important worry for Italian SMEs employers. They are afraid that the aspects characterising remote working can reduce the firm's work productivity. The aspects that we have considered are also the ones that request a training investment so that either employees and managers can learn to adopt a self-organized way of working based on delegation and coordination for the development of cooperation. The urgency of the pandemic with the severe lockdown did not allow any form of training. Employees and managers adjusted their way of working to the new context with a learning on the job and by experience. Our study can give useful indications to employers to plan forms of remote working in the future to develop the potential of a self-organized way of working based on autonomy, flexibility, objectives and trust learning from the experience of the first phase of the lockdown.

3. Hypothesis and methodology

The analysis is focused on the adoption of remote working in SMEs during the first wave of the pandemic (beginning of March - beginning of June 2020) in a territory deeply hit by COVID-19. The research was conducted thanks to the invaluable support provided by Confindustria Piacenza who sent the questionnaire to the SME members, regardless of the sector they belong to. However, it should be noted that 70% of the companies in the sample are in the manufacturing sector.

The rate of redemption was 40%: the high adhesion is certainly justified by the high interest on the topic of remote working in the period of the lockdown.

Clerks (N=278, average age 42) and managers (N=113, average age 48), belonging to different functional units (as shown in Tab.1 - Unit of reference) and different education (Tab.2 - Education of employees) have been reached with an electronic questionnaire

Table 1 – Unit of reference

Functional Unit	Clerks	Managers/ Executives
Finance and Administration	57	27
Selling	72	10
Marketing	10	2
Human Resources	18	24
R&D	22	4
Logistics	8	3
Buying	15	6
IT	20	7
Production, quality assurance, and others	56	30
Total	278	113

Table 2 – Education of employees

Educational qualification	Clerks	Managers/ Executives
Middle School Diploma	3	1
Diploma	132	48
3-year degree	41	9
Master's degree + PhD	102	55
Total	278	113

The empirical analysis is aimed at verifying the following three hypotheses.

H1: physical presence is secondary to the achievement of objectives

The adoption of a new managerial culture in SMEs has become a reality during the pandemic with employees and managers who need to learn how to adapt to the new context (Lal et al., 2021). The use of a model based on an agile approach requires a managerial style oriented to delegation and coordination for the development of cooperation (while the management approach that nowadays characterizes Italian SMEs is based on personal control and supervision. Introducing forms of managing by objectives is an important and challenging change for SMEs (Zang et al., 2021; Hunter, 2019) which can make of little relevance the presence of the worker in the workplace.

H2: there is a positive relationship between productivity and:
 - timing in returning the feedback

- autonomy
- use of technology
- motivation (soft)
- trust (soft)

With H2 the aim is to analyse if aspects like autonomy (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020; Delfino and van der Kolk, 2021; Wang et al., 2021), use of technology (Miele and Tirabeni, 2020; Molino et al, 2020), motivation (Prodanova and Kocarev, 2021), trust (Dumitru, 2020; Sposato, 2021) have a positive impact on productivity. Infact productivity is perhaps an important worry for Italian SMEs employers as they are afraid that the aspects characterising remote working can reduce the firm's work productivity. The aspects that we have considered are also the ones that request a training investment so that either employees and managers can learn to adopt a self-organized way of working based on delegation and coordination for the development of cooperation. The urgency of the pandemic with the severe lockdown did not allow any form of training. Employees and managers adjusted their way of working to the new context with a learning on the job and by experience.

H3: there is a positive relationship between ease of switching (from presence to remote) and regularity in the evaluation of work.

According to Delfino and van der Kolk (2021) timing in returning feedback is fundamental to guarantee productivity especially if the worker is goal-oriented (Cianci et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2021).

For the purpose of data collection, we felt that the questionnaire was the most suitable tool to guarantee a fast and anonymous response. Compared with other approaches including interviews, the ability to provide anonymity with an online questionnaire is a significant benefit. Indeed, anonymity puts respondents at ease and encourages them to answer truthfully, which is of great relevance to get a more honest and accurate picture of the subject of investigation. In this case we surveyed employees and about their company culture.

Accordingly, two questionnaires were prepared: one addressed to clerks and one to managers/executive. The need to prepare a double questionnaire is underlined by the fact that the research intends to investigate the perceptions of the two workers' profiles, highlighting any perceptual assonances or dissonances.

In other words, this decision responded to the need to have a more complete vision, that is the point of view of those who have had:

- to face this experience for the first time and without any training (clerks) and, on the other hand,
- the difficult role of dealing with management practices unlike those usually deployed with physical presence (managers/executives).

To limit any doubts of an interpretative nature and to facilitate the respondent in replying, questionnaires were structured in autonomous thematic blocks concerning:

- personal data (to map age, qualification, position, area of operation within the company);
- level of awareness of the questionnaire theme;
- technology readiness;
- perceptions and opinions on:
 - o productivity
 - o coordination and control
 - o control

Through the questionnaires - which required closed-ended answers - we asked clerks and managers their perceptions on the different variables we considered. This means that we asked the respondents their opinions, thoughts and impressions on the different aspects under analysis. Our aim wasn't to measure the different variables like productivity, trust, control or regularity in the evaluation of work. The aim was to collect impressions and opinions on how the respondents perceive the organizational and managerial change from working in person to working remotely. We cannot prove that productivity has actually increased. The company, through its internal measuring system, could. We just wanted to know if the respondents had the impression that the different variables have undergone a change.

The finalization of the questionnaires made it necessary to rephrase some questions to eliminate implicit positive or negative judgments and make them more neutral. Finally, we used a Likert scale (0-7) that gave the opportunity to measure behaviors, perceptions, and opinions.

To make it available to companies wishing to join this initiative the questionnaire was translated into an electronic version.

Based on the source of data and the survey technique, we proceeded with the collection and organisation of data; however, prior to their statistical analysis, revision procedures were carried out using manual techniques to highlight the presence of missing data (which make statistical analysis difficult) or errors, for which corrections were made.

4. Results

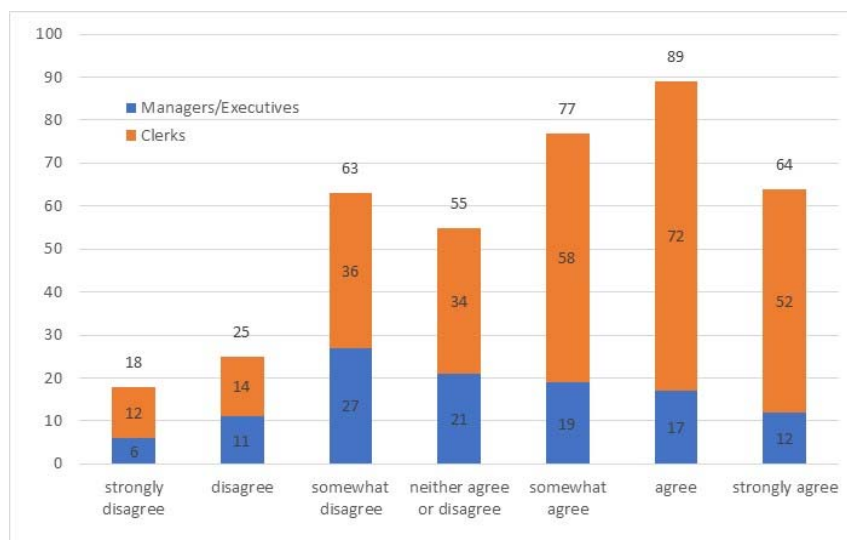
To test the hypotheses, we conducted an empirical analysis on our dataset of 60 SMEs focusing on the relationships existing between the variables of interest (for a definition see Tab.A.1). Specifically we use a graphical analysis to test hypothesis 1, and a correlation analysis (simple and partial) to test hypotheses 2 and 3.

We consider appropriate to specify that most of the clerks experienced working from home for the first time every day for several weeks, without receiving any kind of remote work preparation before. Managers/Executives had already had the opportunity to experience it but only in a very sporadic and occasional way and just

for few days. In fact, we believe that in some cases the previous experience can influence the perceptions detected.

Hypothesis 1. With regards to the first of our hypotheses, i.e. “physical presence is secondary to the achievement of objectives”, as we can note from the histogram reported in Figure 1, most of the interviewed agree with this idea and believe that the objectives can be achieved even working remotely.

Figure 1 - Physical presence is secondary to the achievement of objectives (N=391)



Hypothesis 2. Firstly, we considered how the main aspects of remote working can be related with the productivity perceived by employees. The magnitude of these relationships is examined by means of the Pearson correlation index ρ (see Tab. 3).

Table 3 - Correlations focused on impact of the perceived productivity

	Impact on the perceived productivity		
	managers/executives (N=113)	clerks (N=278)	employees (N=391)
Timing in returning the feedback			
Regularity in the evaluation of work	0.473***		
Regular feedback relevance		0.062	
Autonomy			
Empowerment	0.663***	0.539***	0.576***
Autonomy in achieving objectives		0.377***	
Sharing of objectives	0.451***		
Use of technology			
Technological capabilities		0.207***	
Motivation			
Individual motivation	0.741***	0.638***	0.675***
Trust			
Importance of trust		0.280***	

*** Significance level at 1%

With regards to the *timing in returning feedback* we considered both the managers/executives and clerks' points of view. As to managers, the *regularity in the evaluation of work* and the *impact on the perceived productivity* show a positive and significant correlation ($\rho = 0.473$): the reception of regular feedback from collaborators is significantly related to the perception of a greater worker's productivity. Differently, the clerks feel that their productivity is not affected by receiving *regular feedback* by the manager ($\rho = 0.062$).

The analysis shows a contextual positive effect of smart working on autonomy and productivity: a greater *empowerment* and a greater productivity (perceived, at least) belong together ($\rho = 0.576$), in a manner that is slightly more significant for managers ($\rho = 0.663$) than for clerks ($\rho = 0.539$). As to clerks, a higher (perceived) productivity goes along with a greater *autonomy in achieving objectives* ($\rho = 0.377$), but to a lesser extent than empowerment. As to managers, instead, a higher (perceived) productivity is directly associated with a wider *sharing of objectives* with collaborators ($\rho = 0.451$).

As far as the clerks' *technological capabilities* are concerned, the greater the perceived adequacy of the training to the use of the software tools, the higher the perceived productivity, although the correlation between the two is not particularly strong ($\rho = 0.207$). The greater the degree of *individual motivation* due to the use of smart working, the greater the impact on perceived productivity ($\rho = 0.675$), both for managers and clerks (albeit to a slightly greater extent for managers $-\rho = 0.741$ vs $\rho = 0.638$). The greater the importance attributed to the relationship of trust with

their manager, the greater the increase in productivity perceived by clerks (even if the relationship is not particularly strong with a $\rho = 0.280$)

Hypothesis 3. To test if, from the managers' point of view, the "*shared Management by Objectives is easily applicable in the SMEs where the evaluation of work is regular and frequent*", we investigated correlation between *integration of Management by Objectives* and *regularity in the evaluation of work*.

Because in finding to what extent there is a numerical relationship between *integration of Management by Objectives* and *regularity in the evaluation of work*, the correlation coefficient may give misleading results if there are other, confounding, variables that are numerically related to both variables of interest, (i) in a first step we consider also *compatibility of the performance management system* and the number of employees (as a proxy of the firm's *size*) in the general correlation matrix (see Tab. 4), (ii) and in a second step we also consider partial correlation including *compatibility of management performance system* and *size* as control variables (Giacosa et al., 2018) to remove their effect on the degree of association between the first two variables (see Tab. 5).

The *integration of Management by Objectives*, the *regularity in the evaluation of work*, and the *compatibility of the performance management system* are significantly correlated with each other in a rather strong manner. On the contrary, the firm *size* (i.e., the number of employees) doesn't seem to be significantly correlated with the other variables (see Tab. 4).

Table 4 - Correlation matrix (correlation indexes computed on the N=113 managers)

	Integration of Management by Objectives	Regularity in the evaluation of work	Compatibility of management performance system
Integration of Management by Objectives	1		
Regularity in the evaluation of work	0.645***	1	
Compatibility of management performance system	0.505***	0.533***	1
Size	0.070	0.129	0.054

*** Significance level at 1%

Partial correlation confirms the significant positive relationship between *integration of Management by Objectives* and *regularity in the evaluation of work*. Moreover, the *size* of the firm, which we included as a control variable, is again not significantly correlated with the *integration of Management by Objectives* (see Tab. 5).

Table 5 - Partial Correlation between Integration of Management by Objectives and Regularity in the evaluation of work controlling for other relevant variables (Number of Obs. = 113 managers)

Regularity in the evaluation of work	0.51*** (0.000)
<i>Compatibility of management performance system</i>	0.25*** (0.009)
<i>Size</i>	-0.01 (0.881)

P-values in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10

5. Discussion

This research allowed us to investigate and learn from the response of SMEs to the organisational emergency imposed by COVID-19. It emerged that physical presence is secondary to the achievement of objectives, on condition that goals are shared and negotiated. It also emerged, above all from the managers' point of view, that the higher productivity is directly associated with a broad sharing of objectives with collaborators and that the effect on empowerment and increase in productivity was perceived more by managers rather than by clerks, who would like frequent (at least weekly) occasions to return feedback (this request is in line with what scholars and practitioners are theorizing and experimenting in terms of performance management).

From the analysis conducted, the organisational dimensions resulted as not correlated with a performance management system based on Management by Objectives and a regular evaluation of work. It can therefore be inferred that SMEs have learnt that they can adopt the integration of Management by Objectives, the regularity in the evaluation of work and the compatibility of the performance management system (OECD, 2021).

The analysis also showed that there is currently a disconnection between the managers' perception and that of the clerks, as managers believe that receiving regular feedback from workers is significantly related to the perception of higher worker productivity, while clerks do not believe that productivity is affected by this aspect.

As to motivation and trust, a positive relationship emerges between individual motivation and trust and the perceived productivity for both managers and clerks (albeit to a slightly larger extent for managers). Namely, SMEs have learnt that the greater the importance attributed to the relationship of trust with their manager, the greater the increase in productivity perceived by clerks.

The analysis also showed that companies learnt that technology is an essential factor to facilitate a different organisation of work: specifically, the greater the

perceived adequacy of the training to the use of the software tools, the higher the perceived productivity (Dixit and Sinha, 2021).

6. Learning from the experience: remarks and recommendation for a “Humane Entrepreneurship” approach

Nonetheless there is ample room for improvement to plan organizational and managerial systems to give employees more autonomy in how to organize their work, several lessons can be drawn from the emergency experience. Our analysis has proved that the adoption by SMEs of a more agile work organization is possible without compromising the company’s results. After our research we can say that the cultural obstacle which represented the main inhibitor to the adoption of remote working must inevitably be shot down.

The pandemic has prompted SMEs to anticipate decisions they otherwise would have made in three to five years. In this direction, our research is inclined to affirm that remote working can represent a functional way of organising work both for managers and clerks. The prevalent formula that emerges from the study advocates and provides for a mixed form of physical presence and remote working to support and enhance productivity and limit the disadvantages that could derive from total remote working. Therefore, a first challenge for SMEs is to learn and become aware of what happened during the emergency, learning and turning critical times into opportunities (Senge, 2018)

During the period of severe crisis, SMEs have learnt that focusing on people at all levels can drive to a new era of wealth and quality in remote working management. The first and most important lesson learned unquestionably refers to the need to proceed with a profound redesign of the relationship between the entrepreneurial team, managers and clerks breaking the stereotype typical of SMEs in which the physical presence of the worker is necessarily linked to productivity.

SMEs have also learned that another concept to rethink is related to the control mechanisms that become ancillary when the company recognizes autonomy to the worker. The mechanisms of empowerment, the sharing of objectives, the agile exchanges and the regular returns of feedback, the creation of relationships based on mutual trust are key to guarantee worker’s productivity at all levels.

It’s about going beyond the profit margin (White Book 2016), that the “Humane Entrepreneurship - HumEnt” approach, presented in the first part of the work, can help by combining entrepreneurship, leadership, and HRM perspectives (Kim, El Tarabishy and Bae, 2018).

In line with this approach adopted by our research, the empowerment and engagement of managers and clerks can be approached from two perspectives, business and the employee’s:

- the business approach evaluates if and how the firm gives energy, empathy, enthusiasm, and empowerment to its workforce. These goals are particularly challenging, considering the use of technologies to support HR management and engagement, namely considering the potential problems related to the use of digital devices and home working (Kamal, 2020);

- the employee approach evaluates whether the firm is positively engaging the workforce and advancing the quality of life of the entire workforce (from management to employees) through the renewal of skills and shared coordination procedures.

Therefore, some internal factors are relevant. Ostroff, Kinicki and Tamkins (2003) highlight how corporate culture, which is the sum of beliefs, ideology language, rituals can have a significant influence on the way employees relate to each other and with their work environment. It determines how employees and management interact and handle business activities. Another internal factor concerns the organisational structures. They are composed of various mechanisms that coordinate employees and address individuals' behaviour through shared values, norms and goals (Liao, Chuang, and To, 2011), finally having significant effects on innovation, organisational performance, employees' trust and job satisfaction (Sharafutdinova et al, 2021).

During this period of extreme organizational difficulty, where working remotely was an imposed necessity rather than a choice, SMEs have learnt that this approach requires a leadership style inspired to the construct of servant leader. Linking the leadership style with the firm's strategic positions regarding ethics, virtues, and morality (Lanctot and Irving, 2010; Parolini, Patterson and Winston 2009) represented a key factor to guarantee continuity and productivity. Servant leadership can be defined as a multidimensional leadership based on the desire to serve, followed by an intent to lead and develop collaborators and finally achieve a comprehensive result beneficial for individuals, organisations and societies (Coetzer, Bussin and Geldenhuys, 2017). In addition, servant leadership is able to produce favourable individual and organisational outcomes such as enhanced corporate citizenship behaviour (Ozyilmaz and Cicek, 2015; Bobbio, van Dierendonck and Manganelli, 2012), work engagement (De Clercq et al. 2014, De Sousa and van Dierendonck 2014), organisational commitment (Chinomona, Mashiloane and Pooe, 2013; Jaramillo et al., 2009), performance (Jaramillo, Bande and Varela, 2015) and reduced turnover intention.

7. Limitations and future research

The number of observations (60 SMEs, 278 clerks and 113 managers belonging to different functional units and different education) and the features of the sampling do not allow us to generalize the results that have emerged, but at least it has enabled us to collect some indications and draw up some recommendations. As a matter of fact, the results that emerged provide indications and guidelines that can accompany

companies towards a new and more functional work organisation, which can better benefit from the advantages outlined in paragraph 2 and limit the disadvantages.

Future research could therefore concern a larger number of observations: the analysis could be replicated in a different phase of the pandemic crisis, to verify the progress following the adoption of this working methodology; the latter seems to have established itself as an essential direction for the survival of SMEs in a territory deeply hit by COVID-19, as this was and still is the territory within which this survey was conducted.

Appendix

Table A.1. – Variables definition.

Variables	Question addressed to	Question	Likert scale
<i>Physical presence is secondary to the achievement of objectives</i>	Managers/executives Clerks	In my organization, physical presence is secondary to achieving goals	0 = Completely contrary; 1 = Contrary; 2 = Partially contrary; 3 = Neither against nor in agreement (uncertain); 4 = Partially agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Completely agree
<i>Regularity in the evaluation of work</i>	Managers/executives	Employees receive regular feedback on the work done.	0 = Completely contrary; 1 = Contrary; 2 = Partially contrary; 3 = Neither against nor in agreement (uncertain); 4 = Partially agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Completely agree
<i>Regular feedback relevance</i>	Clerks	Is it helpful to receive support from your manager through regular feedback and contact?	0 = It is counterproductive; 1 = Not at all; 2 = Doesn't help; 3 = I don't care; 4 = Help; 5 = It helps a lot; 6 = It is essential
<i>Empowerment</i>	Managers/executives Clerks	To what extent has the use of smart working increased your autonomy and responsibility?	0 = Absolutely negative; 1 = Negative; 2 = Partially Negative; 3 = Irrelevant; 4 = Partially positive; 5 = Positive; 6 = Absolutely positive
<i>Autonomy in achieving objectives</i>	Clerks	The adoption of smart working implies greater autonomy in achieving results	0 = Completely contrary; 1 = Contrary; 2 = Partially contrary; 3 = Neither against nor in agreement (uncertain); 4 = Partially agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Completely agree
<i>Sharing of objectives</i>	Managers/executives	It is essential to clearly express objectives and working methods to collaborators in order to guarantee their	0 = Completely contrary; 1 = Contrary; 2 = Partially contrary; 3 = Neither against nor in agreement (uncertain); 4 = Partially agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Completely agree

		autonomy and flexibility.	
<i>Technological capabilities</i>	Clerks	I believe that training regarding the use of tools for smart working is adequate.	0 = Completely contrary; 1 = Contrary; 2 = Partially contrary; 3 = Neither against nor in agreement (uncertain); 4 = Partially agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Completely agree
<i>Individual motivation</i>	Managers/executives Clerks	To what extent has the use of smart working impacted your motivation?	0 = Absolutely negative; 1 = Negative; 2 = Partially Negative; 3 = Irrelevant; 4 = Partially positive; 5 = Positive; 6 = Absolutely positive
<i>Importance of trust</i>	Clerks	Trust plays an important role in the relationship with my manager.	0 = Completely contrary; 1 = Contrary; 2 = Partially contrary; 3 = Neither against nor in agreement (uncertain); 4 = Partially agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Completely agree]
<i>Integration of Management by Objectives</i>	Managers/executives	WBO is easily integrated into your organization.	0 = Completely contrary; 1 = Contrary; 2 = Partially contrary; 3 = Neither against nor in agreement (uncertain); 4 = Partially agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Completely agree
<i>Compatibility of management performance system</i>	Managers/executives	Your performance management system is compatible with smart working	0 = Completely contrary; 1 = Contrary; 2 = Partially contrary; 3 = Neither against nor in agreement (uncertain); 4 = Partially agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Completely agree
<i>Size</i>	Managers/executives	Indicate the number of employees in your company	#

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