

## **From smart working to digital nomadism: challenges and opportunities for the Islands**

### **Remote working during and after the pandemic**

The pandemic and the consequent lockdowns increased our dependency on digital technologies and drastically accelerated digitalisation in various domains, from selling products online to designing online services and products , from building new business models and digital infrastructure to working and learning from home.

One of the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was the spread of remote work wherever it was compatible with the activity in progress.

This was a sudden change that happened in the space of a few weeks.

Although it is too early to infer the evolution of this phenomenon with the return to full normality, the available information indicates that this is a change with lasting effects.

In the crisis, distance working has been a necessary learning experience for workers, managers and employers.

It has been tested for its feasibility, its concrete advantages (in terms of reconciling life time and savings) and changes introduced out of necessity improved the organisation of processes.

Remote working experienced at this stage differs significantly between sectors of activity and according to the type of functions performed by the worker. The prevalence was much higher for functions that can potentially be performed remotely , as they have long been based on the use of ICT tools.; lower, however, where there is contact with the public, as in physical activities, such as in manufacturing and construction.

The increase in remote working has been particularly accentuated for employees

For this category of workers, the prevalence of remote working has increased most for technical, clerical and professional occupations: up to 36.2 per cent on average in 2020 for highly specialised intellectual occupations (peaking at 57.1 per cent ) and over 30 per cent for managers.

.As a result, the spread of employment by level of education differs, with an incidence of close to 30 per cent for employees with a university degree and just over 1 per cent for those with at most a secondary school diploma. Smart working during the health emergency was vital: it safeguarded the health of many people, and - at the same time - prevented the total closure of a large number of production activities.

The shift towards so-called 'agile working', however, is not just one of the post-Covid-19 digital trends, but was already underway before the pandemic.

Smart Working workers in Italy in 2019 were 570 thousand, with a percentage growth of a good 20% compared to the previous year (osservatori.net).

The distance with the world average, however, is still quite pronounced.

According to the World bank data, 62% of companies worldwide have a flexible workspace policy. In Italy, 59%, a far cry from countries such as Germany (80%), the Netherlands (75%), the USA (69%) and the United Kingdom (68%)

Certainly, after the Covid-19 emergency, this trend will strengthen massively. On the other hand, care will have to be taken to find the right work-life balance,

We live now in a world in which digital technologies have transformed work. Digital work has been described in recent literature- before the pandemic - as a “grand challenge” for humanity (Colbert et al. 2016). It is such a challenge because it is accompanied by, for example, the loss of jobs as a result of more efficient production operations (Mrass et al. 2017). Nonetheless, as “the future of work itself” (Colbert et al. 2016), digital work presents an opportunity to improve human lives.

Today's workforce increasingly uses traveling to break the routine of their working life. 42% of Millennials go on holidays to reduce work-related stress, while 34% try to find more excitement in their life (Sofronov, 2018). Expectations on these holidays are extremely high as the timeframe is limited to the vacation days set by their employment contracts, for workers in the European Union to an average of four weeks of paid holidays per year (European Commission, 2016).

Recently, an increasing number of people show that this can be different. They eliminate the traditional separation between work and travel by combining them at the same time and place. They are described as digital nomads – individuals “that leverage digital technologies to perform their work duties, and more generally conduct their lifestyle in a nomadic manner” (Mohn, 2014)

Globally, the rise of a large, new group of travelling, remote workers is one of the prevailing narratives about a Covid-19-reformed work world.

Digital nomadism is characterised by mobile workers indefinitely travelling between different locations while continually fulfilling their work obligations.

Throughout the pandemic, many 'conventional' workers have already begun to move towards digitally nomadic set-ups. From Sweden to the US, workers have flocked to wi-fi-equipped cottages and cabins to work remotely for lockdown-friendly, manager-approved staycations. 'Quarantine apartments' and 'social distancing retreats' lured remote workers from miles away seeking more space for a few weeks – or a few months. In the first quarter of 2021, Airbnb reported the amount of long-term stays (at least 28 nights) nearly doubled year-on-year.

Airbnb has shifted its focus from short-stay accommodation to long-term rentals – a month or more, for example – for getaways and workcations, even after the age of 'social distancing retreats' has ended. The company believes many people might not just continue to work from home – they'll work from beach cottages, forest cabins and suburban houses outside expensive city centres.

Surveys around the world have shown that most workers want to continue to work remotely in some way – be that at home, at a seaside cottage, at a ranch house in a far less pricy suburb than the city they were living in before or in a different country altogether.

At the moment, being a digital nomad is a very Western phenomenon of people who can travel the world; becoming one is a symbol of a “privileged lifestyle”. It's easier for some people to become digital nomads, and harder for others, domestically or internationally, pre- or post-Covid-19.

There is disparity across education levels, too: one in three workers with a bachelor's degree were able to work from home during the pandemic, compared to about one in 20 workers with only a secondary-school education.

A likely outcome is that more workers might end up in situations where their organisations implement a hybrid work schedule that forces them to come into the office at least sometimes, and workers might relocate based on that requirement. If people do want to relocate, it'll just be a bit further away from the office, but still in commuting distance, so there is this trend spreading out to smaller towns and rural areas

Digital nomadism appeared in the 2000s. It was then that IT companies started accepting remote working arrangements for software developers and it is just one IT company that is trying to marry sustainable development and digitalisation in an island

## **Marrying sustainable development and remote working on an Island**

With its Work for Humankind project, the multinational Lenovo aims to amplify and expand the concept of smartworking and digital nomadism by offering work on Chile's most remote island.

Lenovo's initiative aims to find volunteers who are willing to move to Robinson Crusoe Island for a period of time and contribute to the well-being of the local community while working in one of the world's most remote offices.

Juan Fernandez Island is in fact one of the most ecologically rich biodiversity hotspots on the planet, thanks to the indigenous species that inhabit it. However, the island faces many challenges in a changing world: in addition to access to education and health care, habitat degradation and the impact of invasive species.

Thanks to the Work for Humankind project, volunteers selected on the basis of a range of skills, backgrounds and specialisations will be able to work from Robinson Crusoe Island to help prevent the extinction of endangered species and support the local community on its journey towards sustainability. This will be achieved through a series of recovery projects, in partnership with the whole community, to encourage positive change such as the development of connectivity solutions needed for the island's infrastructure.

Lenovo is creating a state-of-the-art technology hub, including high-speed Internet connectivity. A project that intends to generate sustainable and long-lasting value, even after the volunteer project is completed, with a fund that aims to develop an infrastructure to increase Internet bandwidth to at least 10 Mbps, "by developing connectivity solutions, which will accelerate the ability to implement effective conservation actions, enabling improved ability to work with the region's island communities in the years to come, preventing the extinction of globally endangered species"

Supporting the initiative is a new Lenovo survey that reveals the growing importance of remote and hybrid working for Gen Z and Millennials. The study, in fact, highlights the strong desire for flexibility, depending on the benefits for individuals and society in general. These include financial savings, more time for friends and family and a better work-life balance. In fact, three quarters of Gen Z and Millennial respondents feel more productive, creative and inspired when working remotely. 63% of respondents said they would be willing to work from anywhere in the world, and nearly two-thirds (65%) of Italians are happy to work longer hours if it means being able to do so remotely.

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