

Work from home: results beyond expectations with some open questions about the future

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The data illustrated by Bruno Lepri during the webinar organized by FBK Academy are the findings of studies conducted by Harvard Business School, Austin Business School and Humanyze

What happened during this pandemic when offices closed to an extent never experienced before? What was the particular impact of working from home on productivity during last spring's lockdown? The webinar held by **Bruno Lepri, head of Fondazione Bruno Kessler's ICT-MobS Unit, as part of the "LAVORARE SMART. Best practices and tools to drive change together" program**, organized by FBK Academy this fall.

"Pre-pandemic studies", **Lepri** stressed, "had most of the time shown that working from home – I prefer to call it that way as it is not actually smart working in this case – caused performance to drop and the same forecast had been made by many leaders in the workplace, who generally expected a decline in performance".

And instead: surprise! "Work from home," said Lepri, "has shown **excellent performance**, so much so that **large companies like Twitter have declared that they want their employees to continue in this way forever**, even when the pandemic emergency is over, and a study by Manpower found that in general 8 out of 10 workers would agree to continue like this".

For those activities where it was feasible, **those who worked from home proved to be more productive and improved the level of efficiency, attention and concentration compared to when working on site**. Not only that, compared to working in the office, the **levels of work-related stress, negative emotions and conflicts related has dropped**. The data presented during the webinar is the result of a [study conducted by Harvard Business School, Austin Business School and Humanyze, published in the Harvard Business Review](#). One of the authors of the study is Ben Waber with whom Bruno Lepri had worked at the MIT Media Lab in

the US. The analysis was conducted on 680 workers. “The results”, said Lepri, “refer to the period from March to May as they are the ones published so far. But the study is still going on and the trend is the same. ”

Among the positive aspects also emerged **the possibility of avoiding unnecessary business trips, of shorter and more focused meetings, more flexibility to manage the family and above all the total elimination of commute time.**

The reasons why the situation has evolved compared to the past seem to be mainly two. First, previous studies were rather dated and in the meantime **there have been a big advances in technologies that allow people to work and communicate remotely.** Actually the big new element this time is that, due to the lockdown, the situation affected all those who could work remotely, **no one in the different work groups felt excluded and everyone felt part of a team.**

Therefore, thanks to remote work comes **not only a lower risk of infection, less traffic, pollution and related risks, and a better work-life balance, but also better work performance and team spirit.** A dream come true? Not really, as there are different elements and questions about future developments.

First of all, work from home was not the same for everyone. **Stress management was easier for people in a relationship compared to singles and for workers without children compared to those with children to care for** (in the latter case with situations that varied depending on whether schools were open or not). Within all categories, **the highest levels of adaptability were seen in people able to maintain positive and empathic relationships with others.**

Almost everyone **had trouble disconnecting from work to move to private life.** The data shows that **working from home extended working time by 10-20% on average.**

As for companies, the most effective were those that found **a good balance between time spent on online meetings and the time left for workers to pursue their goals.**

“Among the negative aspects” Lepri pointed out “is the **loss of informal and unplanned face-to-face interactions.** Furthermore, workers tend to communicate more and more with close collaborators and the **opportunities for communicating with other teams are becoming more rare,** since at the workplace it is easier for workers to meet casually and chat. This leads to less collaboration and less creativity at work, according to a study by Stanford and Columbia University. There is also the **difficulty in welcoming new colleagues** who arrive while working remotely and in building or maintaining the so-called weak links capable of allowing knowledge flows between parts of the organization that normally would not be connected. **It is also harder to build long-term relationships or friendships.** In the case of remote work, it is important that companies make an effort to strengthen internal communication”.

Among those questions: what does the future have in store for us. “My impression”, Lepri replies, “is that in the long run creativity could be affected. However, this is an opinion based on ongoing analysis and studies on the subject have yet to be completed”.

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