

Rediscovering Telework as a tool which improves the work life balance. The case of Poste Italiane

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to describe such the introduction of the EU Framework Agreement on telework and the “novel vague” of HR management which gives importance to the CSR’ reputation of business, have created the conditions for a new use of telework as a tool capable of increasing the wellness of the workforce and the work life balance of employees. To argue this reflection we will illustrate, using visual sociological tools, such as video interviews to employees, middle and top managers, the telework experience at Poste Italiane, the largest Italian business. In 2007 the firm implemented a first pilot for a group of call center operators, and is, at present, expanding telework to different categories of employees: office workers, data center operators, managers.

Keywords: Organisational innovation, telework, work-life balance, Corporate social responsibility

I. Introduction

There were a time, not so long ago, in which in Italy the tale of telework seems to gain public awareness and interest. In the second half of ninethy, in fact, in the Italian Parliament many different parties proposed laws (at a given point six projects were “on the table”) intended to facilitate the diffusion of telework (even if, due to the political crisis, none of the proposals were really turned into a law). In 1997 the Government, in a decree intended to reform the working procedures in the public sector, introduced the possibility, for government employees, of using telework widely, whenever possible, as “a normal ways of working”. Even in the private sectors, in the period 1993-1998, many agreements were signed, both at the firm level or at nation-wide level. But as the ninethies were a “gold age” for telework in Italy, at the turn of the millennium the idea of telework dissolved in the public interest. This was due to many factors, but mainly to the widespread diffusion, even if in Italy with some years of delay in respect to central and north European Countries, of ICTs into all kind of workplaces. Private firms and Governmental bodies feared that introducing telework in their sites would made more complex the organisation and that telework would request some new forms of management policy. ICT, perhaps, allow the firm to use widely a “stock of implicit telework”, since that many employees, took the habits of working from home in addiction to the regular office working time.

The actual situation, after the 2005, did change again. As we’ll argument in the proposed paper, the introduction of the EU Framework Agreement on telework, a better attention to the wellness of workforce, and a “novel vague” of HR management who pays large attention to CSR’ reputation of business, has created the condition, at least in some large firms, for a new attention in the use of telework as a tool for increasing the work life balance of employees.

II. Telework and work-life balance

Telework is a strategic tool thanks to which a firm can combine the company needs of economic performance and external visibility with those of its workers and of society as a whole. Telework allows a fairer balance between work time and free time, giving the possibility to carry out other activities and to improve one’s overall quality of life. This appears even more relevant if we consider that at present people tend to be less and less satisfied with the free time they have at their disposal and that they consider it a scarce resource.

It is clear that telework is an answer to the company need to adopt ethical behaviours, a response to the pressure that society places on the productive systems so that the issues of economic and company development do not diverge from the interests of the people. Thus, the

rediscovery of telework practices in many companies must be read as a request of a better work life balance by a workforce that sees women as the protagonists in many key services sectors.

III. The case of Poste Italiane

Poste italiane Spa is the first postal service company in Italy (collecting and delivering letters, prints and parcels, telegrams, express courier and online services). At present, Poste Italiane employs over 150 thousand people and its annual turnover was 17.055,6 million Euros in 2006. The introduction of telework in Poste Italiane is inserted within a favourable contractual and company policy framework. With reference to the working contract, telework is regulated by the art. 30 of the CCNL¹ signed on the 11th of July 2007 and which applies telework to non-managerial personnel; with reference to the company strategy, we can consider instead the Protocol on Corporate Social Responsibility signed on 31st of July 2007, in which the parts involved agree to promote technological and organisational innovative solutions capable of balancing both company and individual needs. In fact, within the Poste Italiane working contract telework is defined as an innovative way to work finalised to satisfy the organisational flexibility and productivity demands of the company conjugating them with the family and social life of the workers in relation to the environmental context as well as to the territorial conditions and the problems of mobility. The feasibility analysis carried out inside the company has allowed the individuation of some potential organisational contexts in which to introduce home-teleworking. The first sector where the experimentation has began for a period of 6 months is the Contact Center (CC) of Poste Italiane which manages services of mobile and phone telegram acceptance, and the working of off-line postal products. Ten employees have been chosen for the experimentation.

While this experimentation goes on, who writes this paper has been carrying out a sociological survey to monitor the progress of the project and to provide useful results for its continuation and the extension of telework to other company sectors. In particular, the aim of the survey is to investigate telework implications at organisational, relational and socio-psychological levels for the managers and the workers involved, focusing on the advantages from the work-life balance point of view. The data collection is carried out using different but complementary research tools. An informative form to collect preliminary information on the professional, social and personal profiles of the teleworkers is used, and in depth interviews are carried out to investigate on their professional and personal opinions about telework. An innovative aspect of the overall research iter is the will to integrate the data collection and the interviews with the filming of video-clips. The aim is to improve the survey contents using the typical tools of visual sociology, focusing on the emotional and expressive dimensions of the protagonists of the research (Grady, 1996).

The teleworkers' opinion

The interviews realised with the teleworkers have returned a frame of their perceptions and opinions on telework, highlighting expectations on the possible implications of the new experience both at personal and professional levels. Analysing the text of the interviews, what emerges immediately is that the decision to ask to telework has been a "choice", a "decision" evaluated and taken consciously. Moreover, for many of the interviewees it is an opportunity they have finally obtained after wishing it for a long time. In this sense, the motivations behind the choice to telework regard mainly the need to solve logistic problems related to daily home-work transfers. "Journey", "to travel", "traffic", "distance" are recurrent words in the interviewees' speeches, which are always connected to a set of expressions that evoke the idea of deep uneasiness for the difficulty to respect the work time, for the "delays", for the continues races to catch trains and other public transport, for the "breathlessness" and the "stress" which derive from all this. The interviewees live the possibility of telework as a big opportunity from which they attend important advantages. The demands they hope to satisfy are mainly related to

¹ National Collective Work Agreement.

family problems, like having more time to follow the family and manage the home. The predominant perception is that telework will not modify the work contents but instead it will have a positive impact on the level of concentration and on the tranquillity of the working environment. The teleworkers declare that the absence of the distractions typical of shared work places will make their work activity more fluid and continuous. At the same time, the expected advantages regard mainly the possibility to eliminate the “dead times” of home-work transfers. Thus, the time “saved” becomes a resource to invest in various private life dimensions: social relationships, hobbies, rest, etc. Life becomes easier and the ability to plan time increases with important implications also on one’s “personal accomplishments”. Finally, the insistence on the positive consequences of telework is also highlighted by the difficulty with which the interviewees indicate disadvantages and eventual problems of working at distance. In fact, the majority of the teleworkers do not see problems and only some of them indicate the possible sense of isolation connected to being alone at home during work.

The managers’ point of view

To catch the managers’ point of view, we have interviewed the directors of the two CC involved in the experimentation and the four tutors chosen as direct references for the teleworkers. The managers perceive the telework project as a great opportunity both for the company and the workers. This experimentation represents one of the main signals of the will of Poste Italiane to begin an important process of change and innovation. In fact the interviewed talk about a company mentality, a different organisational culture in Poste Italiane, which makes it capable of experimenting alternative processes and ways of working, focusing on the wellness of its personnel. It is known that telework can have a positive impact at social, organisational and individual levels. Thus, it is not surprising that the managers have positive expectations and perceptions about the advantages of telework for the various workers involved. From a social point of view, the interviewees understand that if telework was extended and involved a great number of workers also in different companies, this could have a positive impact on the environment, contributing to the reduction of traffic and consequently of pollution. With reference to the companies, telework can answer in a functional way to various organisational necessities: from cost reduction, to the lessening of absenteeism, to the improvement of work productivity standards. Finally, from a personal point of view, the advantages that teleworkers can obtain working at home, are evident. The main advantage is certainly the possibility to balance better company and private live demands. Especially for people who make a long and exhausting journey to go to their working place.

IV. Conclusion

Considering that starting from the ’90s of the past century, the spreading of telework has followed a wavering iter, alternating moments of high level of interest by the companies and the Italian legislation, and moments of little attention, is it possible to assert that at present telework has become central within company strategies? At the same time, are the motivations and the aims that the companies want to obtain using telework the same which characterised the previous projects or is it possible to identify new options for the introduction of telework in the strategies and action lines of companies?

As already pointed out in this paper, at present Italian companies are showing a new interest for telework and for the opportunities given by a work practice that, with reference to its level of penetration, can still not be considered innovative. The explanation of this trend is related to the development of two phenomena. On one side, it is possible to consider the presence of a clearer normative and contractual framework which, after the adoption of the European Framework Agreement on telework in Italy in 2002, gives the general indications in which to insert and regulate telework, nevertheless leaving much freedom to company dealing. Within this framework, it is possible to define the conditions and the regulatory principles set according to specific organisational demands. On the other side, the attention given by companies to Corporate Social Responsibility policies allows us to show telework under a new light, where human resources management strategies aim at improving the wellness of the personnel also

with reference to their work-life balance. In this perspective, the minimalist conception typical of the telework experiences developed in the last century, which were characterized by an experimental nature, is abandoned in favour of a new approach that inserts telework within wider human resources management policies. In this sense, telework has become a management tool where human resources management is not considered as an adaptive process, but as an operative system able to create a real balance between business strategies, organisational structures and the cultural, technological, environmental and social specificities predominant in the context where the organisation operates and is inserted. The present transformation of the work force, characterised by new values (autonomy, personal growth, satisfaction etc.), culture, expectations and demands (flexibility, work time and life balance) (Huws, 2006), needs to develop innovative procedures of personnel management capable of improving the quality of life and the conditions of the workers, contributing to the wellness of the entire organization. And this wellness can be reached only through shared decisional processes capable of considering the requests of the workers. On one side this favours worker engagement and sense of responsibility; on the other side, it produces positive effects on the productivity and the competitiveness of the organisation.

The telework project of Poste Italiane, presented in this paper, represents a concrete example of the trends here described. In fact, the company will is to consider telework as an extensive tool of human resources management and not just as a practice to introduce in a restricted way in order to satisfy specific necessities of sectors and/or persons with specific and marginal problems. Since the first company agreement, which regulates telework within the Contact Center sector, studies and discussions have followed to develop other company agreements regulating telework in sectors and with reference to professional profiles different from those of the Contact Center employees. Consequently, if Poste Italiane tries to extend telework to a higher number of employees, it will be able to connect its human resources management culture and policies to the principle of organisational wellness, obtaining important results in terms of efficiency, efficacy and productivity. It is known that company performance depends on different intangible aspects such as the improvement of knowledge, the capacity to innovate and create, the consent and the confidence of the various categories of stakeholders, the reputation and the capacity to contribute to the wellness of workers and to that of the people as a whole (Di Nicola, 2005). In conclusion, the success of a telework project, measurable in terms of the advantages for the workers, the company and society, creates a virtuous cycle between the competitiveness of a company and the improvement of its image and reputation.

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