

Transformed or Transferred? How Workers Perceive Managerial Control over Home Telework. Some Insights from an Italian Case

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article étudie les changements dans les relations de travail provoqués par la pandémie de Covid 19 par l'examen des perceptions de contrôle des télétravailleurs dans diverses professions en Italie. Le télétravail a longtemps été présenté comme ayant le pouvoir de déplacer les structures traditionnelles de contrôle managérial en faveur de formes de supervision moins hiérarchiques. Cependant, les chercheurs sont toujours divisés sur la question : le télétravail favorise-t-il une plus grande autonomie des employés ou, au contraire, s'il entraîne un plus grand contrôle de la part des managers? La faible prévalence du télétravail au cours des dernières décennies n'a pas favorisé les recherches approfondies et la capacité à comparer différentes structures organisationnelles. En outre, il existe une tendance de longue date à traiter les télétravailleurs comme un groupe homogène, en accordant peu d'attention aux différences internes. La recherche critique, quant à elle, a démontré comment les disparités entre les travailleurs et les organisations peuvent être liées à des résultats d'étude incohérents.

Cet article est basé sur les résultats empiriques d'une recherche qualitative menée principalement au cours des premières vagues de la pandémie en Italie, visant à comprendre si, comment, dans quelle mesure et sur quelle base le télétravail modifie les processus et les régimes de contrôle managérial. Nous avons étudié la manière dont le contrôle managérial était vécu par les travailleurs dans différentes professions, qui reflétaient différentes formes d'organisation et cultures managériales.

Dans la lignée théorique de la notion de "couches de contrôle" de Storey (1985) et, plus généralement, des études sur les transformations du contrôle managérial dans les processus de travail, l'article affirme que la restructuration d'urgence par le biais du télétravail à domicile implique un transfert des conditions organisationnelles par le biais d'une combinaison de méthodes, de normes et de formes de contrôle existantes. Les résultats empiriques illustrent la manière dont les employés ont géré l'hybridation, le chevauchement et la différenciation de diverses formes de contrôle dans le contexte du télétravail généralisé. Nous remettons ainsi en question l'association simpliste entre le télétravail et la réduction du contrôle, ainsi que le potentiel du télétravail à modifier fondamentalement les processus organisationnels.

Transformed or Transferred? How Workers Perceive Managerial Control over Home Telework. Some Insights from an Italian Case

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Abstract

We examined how home-based teleworkers perceived managerial control in an Italian context in order to gain insight into some of the organizational changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on studies of changes to managerial control over the past few decades, we show how workers have experienced the reconfiguration and hybridization of control practices and methods in home telework. Our results cast doubt on the widely held belief that telework is revolutionizing managerial control and work procedures. Organizational and power dynamics at work are key to determining how telework affects employee experiences.

Summary

We investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on labour relations, specifically by examining how teleworkers perceived control within various occupations in an Italian context. Telework has long been touted as having the power to displace traditional managerial control structures in favour of less hierarchical forms of supervision. However, scholars are still divided over whether it promotes greater employee autonomy or, on the contrary, results in greater managerial control. Research has frequently been influenced by specific circumstances. In earlier decades, the low prevalence of telework encouraged neither thorough research nor the ability to compare various organizational structures. Additionally, there has been a long-standing tendency to treat teleworkers as a homogeneous group, with little regard for within-group differences. Disparities among workers and among organizations can lead to inconsistent results.

Our study was conducted mainly during the first waves of the pandemic in Italy, with a view to understanding if, how, to what extent and on what basis telework modifies managerial control processes and systems. We looked at how workers experienced managerial control in various occupations that differ in organizational form and managerial culture.

In line with Storey's (1985) concept of "layers of control" and, more generally, with studies on transformations of managerial control in labour processes, we argue that the emergency restructuring due to home telework caused a transfer of organizational conditions, these being a combination of existing methods, standards and forms of control. Our findings show how employees dealt with the hybridization, overlapping and differentiation of various forms of control during a time of widespread telework. In this way, we cast doubt on the simplistic association between telework and reduction of control, as well as on the potential of telework to bring fundamental change to organizational processes.

Keywords: telework; managerial control; pandemic; worker's experiences

Résumé

Cet article étudie les changements dans les relations de travail provoqués par la pandémie de Covid 19 par l'examen des perceptions de contrôle des télétravailleurs dans diverses professions en Italie. Le télétravail a longtemps été présenté comme ayant le pouvoir de déplacer les structures traditionnelles de contrôle managérial en faveur de formes de supervision moins hiérarchiques. Cependant, les chercheurs sont toujours divisés sur la question : le télétravail favorise-t-il une plus grande autonomie des employés ou, au contraire, s'il entraîne un plus grand contrôle de la part des managers? La faible prévalence du télétravail au cours des dernières décennies n'a pas favorisé les recherches approfondies et la capacité à comparer différentes structures organisationnelles. En outre, il existe une tendance de longue date à traiter les télétravailleurs comme un groupe homogène, en accordant peu d'attention aux différences internes. La recherche critique, quant à elle, a démontré comment les disparités entre les travailleurs et les organisations peuvent être liées à des résultats d'étude incohérents.

Cet article est basé sur les résultats empiriques d'une recherche qualitative menée principalement au cours des premières vagues de la pandémie en Italie, visant à comprendre si, comment, dans quelle mesure et sur quelle base le télétravail modifie les processus et les régimes de contrôle managérial. Nous avons étudié la manière dont le contrôle managérial était vécu par les travailleurs dans différentes professions, qui reflétaient différentes formes d'organisation et cultures managériales.

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Mots-Clefs: télétravail; contrôle managérial; pandémie; expériences des travailleurs

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, there has been growing interest in the changes associated with telework (Boell et al., 2016; Olson, 1982), a form of work organization that enables employees to work in locations other than those of traditional workplaces, such as offices, through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Biron & van Veldhoven, 2016; Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Stanworth, 1998). Since its emergence, telework has been received with great enthusiasm (Albano et al., 2018), to the point that some have speculated that it would quickly become the dominant form of work in many contexts (Toffler, 1980). Underlying this enthusiasm is the belief that removing workers from the “manager’s gaze” would undermine traditional norms of managerial control and thus help develop organizational methods based on trust, engagement, participation and flat hierarchies (Albano et al., 2018; Sewell & Taskin, 2015; Ellison, 1999).

Over time, research has produced an incredible amount of data on various aspects of telework (Hodder, 2020). As with all major organizational innovations, the assumptions and implications of telework have led to different and often conflicting interpretations. Some studies have shown how telework has helped open up new spaces of autonomy for workers and has fostered trust-based management arrangements (Kurland & Cooper, 2002; Wicks, 2002). Other studies have cast a sceptical eye on its benefits, showing instead an intensification of control driven primarily by ICTs (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2022; Fana et al., 2022; Sewell & Taskin, 2015; Dimitrova, 2003; Olson, 1982).

Although telework has spread more readily into some industries and labour markets than into others (Samek Lodovici, 2021), it has, overall, been spreading much more slowly than often assumed. Its unexpected slowness usually has had organizational, cultural and social causes, as well as being due to the economic characteristics of firms (Gandini & Garavaglia, 2023). Researchers agree that managerial resistance and “fear of loss of control” (Gordon, 1988: 121) have been the greatest barriers to telework (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2022; Fana et al., 2020; Felstead et al., 2003).

In addition, as Felstead et al. (2003) and Stanworth (1998) noted, researchers have often ignored the high diversification of telework across occupations. In particular, they have focused more on workers with managerial and/or professional roles, while under-analyzing routine occupations (Fana et al., 2022; Dimitrova, 2003; Stanworth, 1998). With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and government-mandated physical distancing, telework went from its residual role of previous years to a large-scale one, thereby enabling many companies to continue their operations and spreading widely across industries, companies and corporate cultures (Gandini & Garavaglia, 2023). Thus, the pandemic was an opportunity for researchers to address certain implicit gaps in telework research.

We draw here on the results of qualitative research conducted during the first waves of the pandemic in Italy (May 2020 to July 2021), seeking to understand whether, how, to what extent and on what basis telework shapes labour processes and managerial control. Using empirical evidence from various Italian industries and firms, we have analyzed how individuals experienced managerial control over telework in different occupations that differ in management culture and organizational form. To analyze the emerging changes perceived by workers during the transition to home telework, we refer to the concept of “layers of control” developed by Storey (1985) and, more generally, to the literature on the hybridization and contingent overlap of different forms of managerial control in work contexts, a literature that has developed in the context of debate over the transformation of managerial control in organizations (Fana et al., 2022; Thompson & van den Broek, 2010; Barrett, 2004; Callaghan & Thompson, 2001). We argue that telework did not radically transform the organization of work during the pandemic; instead, there was a transfer of previous

organizational conditions. Managers drew upon a mix of existing methods, standards and forms of control to fill the “gap.”

The Italian context provides an opportunity first to examine the gap between discourse on telework and its concrete operation and workers' experiences, and second to examine how the coordination and control of teleworkers were shaped during the pandemic. Italy was the first Western country to be seriously affected by the spread of the coronavirus, and its companies were brutally confronted with the need to remove workers from the workplace. Many companies encountered several obstacles to restructuring of their production processes (Gandini & Garavaglia, 2023; Fana et al., 2022). Before the pandemic, it is estimated that only 1.6% of Italian employees had experience with telework (Istat, 2020), especially among highly skilled workers (Samek Lodovici, 2021). Telework programs were often part of corporate welfare concessions (Gandini & Garavaglia, 2023). A few weeks after the introduction of lockdown measures, work was being done from home by more than 4.4 million workers, i.e., 18.6% of the Italian workforce (Istat, 2020).

2. Contextualizing Debate about Telework and Managerial Control

Dimitrova (2003) describes the optimistic view: telework will lead not only to more democratic forms of control based on workers' trust, involvement and participation but also to new spatial and temporal structures of work. Since these structures have been traditionally used to discipline and control workers (Marglin, 1974; Thompson, 1967), "their elimination is seen as a prerequisite for greater worker autonomy" (Dimitrova, 2003:182).

Managerial control strategies have long been predicated on the worker being physically present and visible in the workplace. For instance, the sharing of space between managers and employees is assumed in Richard Edwards' (1979) formulation of forms of control. But the degree of interaction between managers and employees varies. In his first form of control, “simple control” or “direct hierarchy,” the supervisor has direct control over the employees. Simple control depends on visibility, shared space and interaction between supervisors and workers. In the second form of control, “technical control,” the employees are coordinated and directed by a technological, mechanical and/or organizational infrastructure. Even though sharing of space is still necessary for monitoring, managers and employees have less need to interact and be in each other's line of sight. Interaction between managers and workers is minimized by incorporating monitoring into the technical infrastructure and thus diminishing the appearance of authority and power (Callaghan & Thompson, 2001; Edward, 1979). The third form of control, “bureaucratic control,” is embedded in the company's social and organizational structure (Edward, 1979). Power relationships and hierarchical differentiation are formalized in logical rules and impersonal procedures to reward discipline and punish resistance (Wicks, 2002). The idea is to standardize performance and enable evaluation based on quantifiable, impartial criteria that employees must consider neutral.

The optimistic view of telework thus relies on the oversimplified premise that removing employees from the managerial gaze will necessarily lead to a re-evaluation of worker control, thus decreasing the prevalence of traditional arrangements in favour of less hierarchical ones based on employee participation, employee empowerment and trusting relationships (Albano et al., 2018; Sewell & Taskin, 2015, Depickere, 1999). As a result, researchers have turned to the dilemma of how to manage workers who are invisible at work (Ellison, 1999). The dilemma is frequently resolved by referring to discourses on post-Fordist organization in an information society (Fana et al., 2020; Dimitrova, 2003; Bryant, 2000). Such discourse attaches importance to the new forms of

control, which are generally thought to be more discrete than the traditional ones, including so-called normative control. Common to the various concepts of normative control is the role of corporate culture and how it is shared and reproduced (Vieira da Cunha et al., 2015). As the mechanism by which shared meanings are constructed and reproduced among workers, corporate culture — a combination of beliefs, ideologies, language, rituals and myths (Pettigrew, 1979) — becomes management's explicit instrument of regulation (Vallas, 2006; Fealsted et al., 2003; Garrahan & Stewart, 1992). In this context, it has been argued that productivity is improved in corporate cultures that acknowledge and reward workers for aligning their interests with the organization's fundamental beliefs and principles. The reach and penetration of managerial control is thus broadened (Willmott, 1993; Alvesson, 1990). Control is therefore no longer restricted to getting the employees to follow procedures; instead, management is tasked with directing how they should think (Willmott, 1993). By conquering their "hearts and minds" (Kunda, 1992), normative control directs them toward the desired behaviour (Willmott, 1993) and induces them to internalize managerial dispositions (Vallas, 2006). Thus, corporate values become the main axis of a complex of rigid and morally binding norms (Mazmanian et al., 2013) that companies use to try to mould the subjectivity and identity of workers (Thompson and Van den Broek, 2010) in order to gain their participation and alignment with corporate goals.

The shift toward normative forms of control does not entirely resolve the dilemma of how to manage teleworkers. Normative control appears to be directly related to employees appearing and being present in the workplace, as is the case with "traditional" forms of control. According to Elliot and Long (2016), research on micro-level workplace interactions has typically emphasized the importance of formal and informal face-to-face interactions in developing corporate culture, and how such interactions create a sense of community and foster trusting relationships. With the rise of telework, researchers began to wonder how corporate culture can be developed and reproduced when telework limits typical workplace interactions, rituals and practices. Often, the intensity of interactions is restored through the use of ICTs and computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Elliot & Long, 2016; Fealsted et al., 2003).

Although it is well known that technology makes telework possible by enabling coordination and communication among members of a virtualized organization, many scholars have questioned the potential for control associated with these technologies (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2022; Albano et al., 2018; Depickere, 1999; Olson, 1982). The idea of computer control has received particular attention in this context. Computer control, as defined by Callaghan and Thompson (2001) and Elliot and Long (2016), occurs when ICTs automate specific control dimensions, such as sequencing of tasks, and management, monitoring and evaluation of workers. The program that generates the tasks and determines their execution order is also in charge of methodically collecting data about that specific task. The information is then used to evaluate compliance with bureaucratic norms and to measure performance. Computer control, thus defined, can be seen as a more technologically advanced reinterpretation of Edwards' "technical control" because the level of proceduralization and monitoring is higher. In contrast to Edwards (1979), Callaghan and Thompson (2001) consider computer control to be a hybrid form of supervision that combines technical, normative and bureaucratic controls (see also Fana et al., 2022; Gandini, 2019; Elliott & Long, 2016).

The alleged advantages of telework for workers vanish when technology is employed for such forms of control. First, the high level of proceduralization threatens the relative autonomy of workers, thus undermining the optimism of prevailing discourse on telework. Second, although computerized monitoring depersonalizes interactions between staff members, and may thus seem less oppressive than direct control, the reduction of formal and informal interactions still has a significant negative impact on corporate culture (Elliot & Long, 2016).

In addition to using technology, one may use practices and techniques to compensate for teleworkers' decreased visibility. Depending on the company's area of activity and the extent of telework, such practices and techniques can vary in intensity and combination. For instance, Sewell and Taskin (2015), in a longitudinal study of telework in a Belgian pharmaceutical company, discovered that the shift to telework resulted in an expansion of managerial control, as oversight now tended to be extended to areas of work that had previously been left up to workers' discretion. Dimitrova (2003), in her study of a Canadian telecommunications company, found that formal and informal practices, ranging from formalized supervision to informal co-worker communication, were used in tandem to achieve teleworker control. More significantly, the form and degree of managerial control can vary for some crucial factors. The intensity and form of managerial control can vary for such factors as the nature of the job, the tasks and the degree of discretion necessary. This variability led Dimitrova (2003) to question the propensity to see teleworkers as an undifferentiated, homogeneous group. Similar conclusions were reached by research into the dynamics of control and autonomy in home telework during the pandemic. In one of the first comparative reports in European countries, Fana et al. (2020) showed that the impact of telework greatly depended on the position of workers in the occupational hierarchy and the vertical division of labour.

Those results are in line with ongoing debate about managerial control in capitalism. Contrary to a view that managerial control is evolving in a linear, unitary manner,—a view that immediately posits the emergence of a new form of supervision as the "last possible frontier of control"—scholars have cautioned that various forms of control show continuity and fusion even within individual organizations (Thompson & van den Broek, 2010; Barrett, 2004; Callaghan & Thompson, 2001). In fact, many have argued how "traditional" forms of managerial supervision, such as direct, bureaucratic and technical controls, can converge with normative control (Gandini, 2019; Callaghan & Thompson, 2001). Forms of supervision are therefore points along a continuum, and the boundary between one form and another is continually shifting. Thus, adjacent forms are not mutually incompatible. Hybridization of forms of control is clearly shown by some studies of telework during the pandemic (Fana et al., 2022; Campolongo & Iannuzzi, 2021). In particular, direct and bureaucratic control has dissolved and amalgamated with technical control and electronic surveillance. In this context, it has been noted how the abrupt shift to home telework has required a different configuration of control, which is leading to increased remote supervision through communication tools (often for personal use, such as mobile phones), to new bureaucratic and standardized procedures and to use of diversified forms of remote surveillance (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2022; Fana et al., 2022; Campolongo & Iannuzzi, 2021).

The above findings paint a more complex and nuanced picture of changes to telework and control. Indeed, rather than there being a single deterministic link between telework and a particular form of managerial supervision, telework is compatible with a number of ways to ensure worker monitoring, collaboration and coordination.

To capture how workers perceived the reconfiguration of managerial control over home telework during the pandemic, in terms of a contingent combination of different forms of control, we relied on the concept of "layers of control" developed by Storey (1985). Criticizing the exaggerated structuralism inherent in some control concepts, Storey conceptualizes control as a field of constant experimentation created by the dialectical relationship between structure and action (Barrett, 2004; Hyman, 1987; Storey, 1985). Managerial control is never perfect or absolute (Elliott & Long, 2016; Hyman, 1987). Thus, workers resist and challenge management's arrangements differently. According to Storey (1985:196), their response to the demands of control creates a dialectical relationship between control and resistance. That relationship encompasses many "layers of control," which are shaped by management interacting at multiple levels with worker action (p. 199). The dialectical relationship is thus based on a dynamic of contestation, and the various "layers of control" strengthen each other or replace each other as they deteriorate or

become unsustainable (Storey, 1985: 198). When a control system becomes outdated and fails to ensure the necessary and adequate integrity of contingent or structural features of labour processes, “there is no need to rely on a panacea emerging to replace it [since] multiple control devices oscillate, are activated, deactivated, merge, and are constituted anew” (Storey, 1985: 207). Storey’s concept of layers of control was used by Rowena Barrett (2004) in her study of managerial control in a software development firm. After showing how management controlled the labour process through strategies that differed according to the stage of product development and the people involved in production, she concluded that it “is unnecessary to counterpose one specific form of control against another” (p. 790).

Storey’s work helps us interpret the shift in workers’ perceptions and experiences of control that came with the shift toward widespread home telework. First, it shows how organizations continuously reinforce forms of control when one form is no longer viable or too weak, and how this experimental dialectical process evolves through trial and error on the contentious terrain of power relationships. Second, it shows how companies rely on a diverse array of forms of control, which are frequently a blend of the different forms, to re-establish managerial control. Finally, it shows that variety and hybridization of control methods are not unintentional but rather short-term outcomes of dialectical processes.

3. Method

We studied how Italian workers experienced and perceived the widespread adoption of telework following the coronavirus pandemic. Our study, which lasted 18 months (July 2020 - December 2021), used a qualitative methodology: 144 semi-structured interviews with trade unionists, middle managers and workers who performed various activities in businesses across several industries. We interviewed 119 workers (including some middle managers and supervisors) employed in banking, insurance, metalworking, IT, eyewear, agri-food, call centres, pharmaceuticals and public administration, as well as 27 trade unionists from the three major Italian trade unions (CGIL, CISL and UIL).

The study sample included some workers whose telework experience preceded the pandemic, especially in IT companies. This was not the case, however, with most of the interviewed workers. For many research participants, this new configuration was full-time, at least through the summer of 2020, before switching to a mixed mode (a few days per week) in the following autumn. They worked as engineers, programmers, designers, account managers, support service providers, data analysts, supervisors, phone operators, accountants, market analysts, project managers and supervisors. There were 59 men and 60 women. Men predominated in the metal, IT and chemical industries, and women in banking, insurance, eyewear, government and call centres.

We used snowball sampling and a variety of methods to recruit participants: informal contacts with some workers, trade unionists, and other stakeholders; institutional approaches (we contacted some trade unions and businesses and explained the project goals to them); and connections made through prior research collaborations. The interviews were all conducted via videoconference, using tools like Zoom and Skype due to the pandemic.

We used interviews because they are believed to be the most suitable way to examine employees’ perceptions, representations and reflections about organizational relationships and control. We operationalized the idea of layers of control by identifying three analytical dimensions and associating with each of them a series of themes explored in-depth during the interviews. This approach enabled us to reconstruct the dynamics of the forms of control before and after the spread of telework, as perceived by the workers. The first section of the interview looked into how employees felt about changing organizational procedures as well as their level of autonomy,

interpersonal relationships and forms of cooperation and conflict. The second section looked into how employees perceived their interactions with management during telework. The third dimension concentrated on how workers perceived the use of new technologies and their role in control. Additionally, the interviews covered topics like the interviewee's background, employment history and telecommuting preferences, as well as the organizational structure and corporate culture.

The collected data were analyzed in three stages (Della Porta, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). First, after reading the interviews, we coded the data and divided the text's main body into themes that were developed from the three analytical dimensions we found. Second, we identified the most frequent codes and aggregated them into macro categories to reconstruct the employees' experiences in descriptive form, within the three theme areas. Third, we pursued the explanatory analysis by examining how the findings related to each other. At the centre of the analysis, we put the narrative of respondents' experiences as well as the general processes that influenced how the workers perceived organizational conditions and social relationships for productive purposes in telework.

4. Empirical Findings

The methods and formats of telework contributed considerably to the diversity of the employees' experiences. We can identify at least two distinct stages in this diversification, as shown also by the work of Fana and colleagues (2022). Initially, across a variety of occupational groups, the pandemic led to an emergency labour-process restructuring that suffered from a severe lack of organizational and technical preparedness. Only in a small number of businesses, mostly in IT, did workers not report substantial dysfunction, there being instead organizational continuity between workplace and home. Some workers emphasized that the change in organizational dynamics gave them more freedom and less control by supervisors, particularly bureaucratic control, thus causing them to solve unforeseen problems by personally coordinating themselves (among peers). This was true across all industries, but it was especially true for employees working in fields with a lot of bureaucratic regulations and intricate employee networks. This approach was sparked by fears of organizational issues (scheduling and day-to-day operations) due to the disappearance of the bureaucratic infrastructure that formerly existed. That initial stage – which length depending on the company's technological prowess (Fana et al., 2022; Campolongo & Iannuzzi, 2021; Samek Lodovici, 2021) – ended with the restoration of some organizational norms and procedures. According to the employees, management was able to reinstate its prerogatives by adopting specific "pragmatic responses" (Felstead et al., 2003) to help organize and monitor the work. We found significant evidence of numerous tactics to ensure continuity in organizational processes, in coordination of work activity and in worker control.

4.1 Technology-Mediated Direct Control

Organization of work was reconstructed differently among the various occupational groups. Despite the numerous ways to make up for the absence of worker visibility, there was one stage that all the workers appear to have gone through. All of them had to rely more on ICT instruments to maintain horizontal communication (worker/worker) and vertical coordination (manager/worker). They used a variety of instruments: phone, email, instant messaging, video conferencing and collaborative software (such as teams).

Since the beginning, the number of calls via computer devices has exploded. We used to work in groups, on big tables of eight people, and when someone needed something, asked them; now we do a lot of team meetings in addition to our main work.

Software developer, IT company

Most of the interviewees agreed that the communication tools and some related reporting capabilities were the most effective way for managers to make up for lack of employee visibility. Managers used them to keep an eye on employee behaviour and to make sure their employees were working. Indeed, some of the tools could remotely alert managers about worker activity or inactivity.

We have a tool called Skype Business, and it has a feature that indicates whether you are online, don't want to be disturbed or are offline by changing the colour of a traffic light. There were checks using this mechanism even before the pandemic. However, the manager did not approach you in the office when you were offline because he could see and tell that you were engaged in another activity. Now, at home, they are unable to observe what you are doing. They instantly email or contact you to ask: "What are you doing?" "Where have you been?"

Administrative officer, banking company

From this perspective, direct simple control is not entirely eradicated, but technology-mediated. The new form of control makes use of technical assistance but still necessitates direct control, i.e., a supervisor watching the employee's behaviour in person while using computerized systems. Although all the employees believed that this sort of supervision was growing, it was ironically those who thought they had more autonomy who felt it more strongly.

I had a Skype conversation with my colleague, and the division manager tried to call me on Skype. It seemed odd to him that I did not answer. When I am in the office and using the landline, they see it, trust it and know I am working. From home, it sounded like I was using Skype for personal stuff. There was nothing like that in the past. The trust was there. And when I explained this to my supervisor, he said, "Well, find a way to keep yourself free." It does not make sense. That's a constant theme in the conversation about trust: "When you trust someone, you trust them wherever they are, but sometimes there's a little bit of mistrust when they're far away."

Business analyst, insurance company

The interviewee perceived the use of remote supervision as a violation of a trusting relationship. This point becomes even clearer in the forms of bureaucratic control over telework.

4.2 From Communication to Bureaucratization

ICT-mediated communication did not bring a dramatic change to the technological landscape of work organization. For quite some time, communication technologies had been used extensively to arrange and coordinate activities. Such coordination, however, also required informal face-to-face interactions and non-formal actions between employees and their managers. The interviewees claimed that telework frequently involved technological mediation of activities that had formerly required informal interaction. The new form of mediation significantly affected their opinions on the degree of communication and control:

There used to be weekly meetings in the office. Meetings now take up much of the day. I informed my division manager that things have reached an impasse. He said to me, “You don’t just measure the time spent in meetings; you measure all the time spent in front of the coffee maker or in the office itself talking or planning.” The difference is that Internet meetings now require you to perform what you used to do in front of the coffee maker. However, planning is necessary for online meetings.

Process developer, metalworking company

With the shift from face-to-face meetings to technology-mediated ones, there have been at least four changes to how employees perceive their work. First, as noted above in the interviewee’s last sentence, ICTs were increasing the formalization of communication. Second, even when several tools and channels were being used simultaneously, there was a synchronous overlapping of various communication events. Workers were now handling various encounters in an atmosphere of communicative ubiquity, thus saturating their working time.

If a colleague needed you while you were in a meeting, he would wait until the meeting was done before coming to your office. Now, the reverse is accurate. They are emailing you, chatting with you or calling you while you are in a video conference.

IT technician, IT company

The first two changes were seen by many employees as together intensifying control and regimenting coordination. Interactions with managers, supervisors and co-workers were perceived as more intense when mediated by remote technology than when done face-to-face. This unfavourable impression was made worse by the difficulty to transfer a number of informal rituals that were specific to one’s work environment to new spatial configuration. According to some managers, the disruption of informal and formal interactions also made surveillance more visible and more documented:

People got up, went to the working group’s desk, and under the guise of a joke took stock of the project to learn its status. To find out, all you had to do was watch what others were doing and on what they were working. You have eight meetings scheduled today.

Division Manager, IT company

Finally, by making it impossible to repeat a number of formal and informal activities and interactions in the new work environment, the shift toward remote surveillance had an impact on the degree to which corporate culture was shared and transmitted, thus leading managers to strengthen integration mechanisms with more coordination and control activities. As this IT company team leader explained:

[...] In my group, there has always been a strong sense of loyalty and belonging built on the empowerment and sharing of individuals, in which I, but also the organization as a whole, have always invested. A close-knit group exists. We did not initially raise the issue. They believed that the situation was only temporary and that things would be back to normal in a few weeks. After noticing that it was difficult to arrange work when 10 people were working remotely and that seemingly well-oiled processes were actually no longer effective, we began to raise the issue. Conflicts arose as a result, again due to the way the work was organized, and it was necessary to step in to restore coordination, particularly through online calls but also through rigorous scheduling. We observed that many businesses were considering how to maintain group togetherness through activities like online aperitifs and card games, and, to be quite honest, we too were considering how to do the same.

Team leader, IT company

Not all occupational groups were equally affected by the process of increasing formalization. Where work organization was based on teamwork, with a high degree of functional interdependence among members, there was a greater perception that communication was being increased with a view to organizational control and coordination. Nonetheless, in organizational environments with low levels of interconnectedness and increased proceduralization of activities (notably through task-supporting software), workers did not observe appreciably higher levels of technology-mediated communication. According to a call centre employee:

We still hold the same number of meetings as we did in the past—roughly three or four each month. New files are sent to us by headquarters about once per month, and the team leader distributes them to us. Except in rare circumstances, we notice them in our program and start working without needing to speak with supervisors. They use the program to immediately monitor productivity and everything else.

Call centre employee, phone credit collection

Bureaucratic control was also strengthened by the increase in requirements that employees report on the actions they have taken and the outcomes they have obtained. Reporting was designed to measure the job completed while making it visible. In some circumstances, such as the call centre, management did not require such reporting tasks, since they could easily measure the work being done through software and computer control. Employees, however, sometimes had to record actions that previously did not need to be reported.

The absurd part is that you have to fill out a table each day detailing what you did and how long it took, since, of course, they are worried that people won't work from home. It is therefore OK if you work as an assistant and must prepare, say, forty invoices. What happens, though, when you are working on more difficult projects?

Administrative officer, local government

The reporting requirements were seen by employees as the most obvious demonstration of manager mistrust. Conversely, workers felt more strongly that they were under increased bureaucratic control in those work environments where they believed that interactions should be horizontal and based on trust:

They didn't even verify attendance at work in the office. They informed us that they would no longer be conducting attendance checks and said, "We trust you, we are all responsible people." No issues ever arose. Now, they want to know how many minutes you didn't work, though [you are] at home. They desire report after report. They keep checking in to see how your work is doing. I'm still perplexed as to why there is a difference. Perhaps they believe we are indifferently disciplined at the workplace...while at home."

IT technician, IT company

The employees' frustration with this issue was clearly evident, and they had observed a noticeable decline in managerial trust:

But it still relies on trust, which is always somewhat forced. I can control what you do when you are sitting at your desk, but if I cannot see you, you are not there; therefore, I cannot know what you are doing.

Administrative officer, metalworking company

4.3 Electronic Monitoring and Computer Control

Although the interviewed employees were aware of the significant potential for control that some technologies possessed, their experiences with such control were wide and varied. They thus had ambiguous and conflicting views on the subject. The current Italian legal system, which forbids remote monitoring of workers, is one reason for the workers' varied experiences with electronic monitoring. Many employees thought that the current legal framework was sufficient to prevent managerial abuse:

They are unable to conduct remote electronic monitoring because it is illegal. The results couldn't be used because it's against the law, even if they did [it], which they do not.

Commercial employee, pharmaceutical company

Some employees thought that the legal system was quite ineffective in preventing remote control. However, it did not seem certain that electronic monitoring was actually being carried out:

Not only do we have to be present at meetings and trackable on the phone, but we also have to connect to a VPN for privacy reasons [...] I do not know how they can monitor us through that connection. They (the managers) say no, but I honestly do not believe that.

Administrative official, insurance company

I mean, it's typical for me to be connected to the company's Internet connection when I work in the office. However, when working from home and connecting to corporate software, a VPN, possibly through my own PC or smartphone, there is objectively always a little bit of fear.

ITC technician, IT company

Such technologies have two significant consequences in practice. First, as the last quote makes clear, electronic monitoring, whether actual or merely hypothetical, directly fulfils a disciplinary purpose by pressuring employees to act in a particular way that is considered to be acceptable. Second, the validity of monitoring is viewed differently for work at home than for work in a traditional workplace, where intrusiveness is to be avoided.

In addition to tools and features like the business VPN, there are business-specific software and applications that can not only “guide” the workflow but also keep an eye on employee activities. They are exclusively utilized in select firms for particular business activities, like accounting, order management, sales and so forth. In some cases, computer applications serve as the primary tool for organizing the entire series of work tasks, with varying degrees of proceduralization. For instance, call centres delegate the management of specific “practices” to an IT infrastructure that is also connected to protocols for data gathering and performance monitoring.

The system sends us the calls. A screen for the client’s phone practice automatically opens on the PC. The software is used to process both the file and the call-backs. The system manages the various tasks that we can complete... Everything is, of course, documented. Our performance is visible to the managers in real time.

Call centre employee, phone company

In such circumstances, workers, regardless of location, perceive that they are subject to computerized performance and behavioural control. They point to the seamless integration of work control methods and procedures, including control methods, between traditional and remote workplaces.

Frankly, nothing has changed. Supervisors used a decimal scale to gauge the height of the files we processed when I was hired in 1989. You just click that software on your computer right now. Because you can view the entire office and compare it to other offices or everyone else doing the same job in Italy or around the world, it is much simpler today. And today they work from home the same manner as they did in the office.

Administrative officer, insurance company

From this point of view, it is clear how information technology and other technologies may swiftly mimic existing organizational structures, practices and regulations, even outside the traditional workplace.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Our study was undertaken in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic with the goal of examining the effects of telework on the management structures and personal experiences of teleworkers. Overall, the data provide a complete picture of how workers dealt with the widespread use of home telework at that time.

The “frontier of control” shifted contingently within organizations to the most suitable control configuration for specific situations, in line with Storey’s (1985) concept of “layers of control” and Thompson and Van der Broek’s (1985) findings on fusion and continuity during the transition between different forms of control. Traditional forms of supervision were brought together,

hybridized and, occasionally, replaced by other forms when they appeared insufficient or too weak, making control itself a field of ongoing experimentation produced by the dialectical relationship between structure and agency (Hyman, 1987; Storey, 1985).

First, in line with Fana et al. (2020; 2022), we show how pandemic-related telework created organizational uncertainty, at least during the initial emergency phase, when the turbulence of the transformation in many businesses prevented adequate planning. The organizational anomie was gradually overcome with the re-establishment of coordination functions, which for nearly all the interviewees meant an increase in technology-mediated communication, albeit to varying degrees. The change caused the interviewed workers to perceive communications as becoming more intense, “unstoppable” and greater in number, as part of an apparent effort to increase managerial control (see also Gandini and Garavaglia, 2023), although there was no evidence that organizational communications had actually increased overall (for any of the tools in use).

Nonetheless, some of the commonly used communication tools, which have evolved into a new norm in the workplace (Hodder, 2020), have features that, albeit in a limited capacity, can report on an employee’s activity from a distance. This is one of the most common practices, particularly in environments where work procedures are not well standardized. Managers attempt to make up for the absence of face-to-face supervision, which is impossible for remote work, by introducing technology-mediated surveillance. Therefore, direct supervision has not been eliminated. It has instead been absorbed by technological tools, thus giving rise to hybrid forms that combine in-person control with remote monitoring (Fana et al., 2022; Campolongo & Iannuzzi, 2021).

We should point out that ITC tools were already widely used before the pandemic in organizations and daily life and were not, in themselves, responsible for businesses introducing a new system of technology-mediated surveillance. Use of them, however, appears to have changed, according to the interviewed employees. During the pandemic, the ITC tools shifted from being supplemental within organizations, particularly small and medium-sized ones, toward becoming the primary means to organize and regulate work. In this context, technology does not provide an additional degree of management supervision; rather, it is a tool that coexists with other tools of control. The shift is strategic, and not technological *per se* (Storey, 1985).

Second, far from reducing ingrained bureaucratic practices, telework appears to have encouraged their intensification and, in some cases, led to the introduction of new bureaucratic norms. This has been noted in prior research (Taskin & Edwards, 2007; Fealsted et al., 2003), and the implications are important for organizational rigidity. The introduction of (new) bureaucratic norms, according to the interviewees, led to management intervention in areas and topics formerly left to worker discretion, and to an increase in reports that provide “visibility” of the worker’s activity. Redrawing the line between informal and formal organizational activities was resulting in a new combination where informal activities were becoming more formalized. Although this procedure could not be applied universally to all the workers in our sample, the ones who experienced the greatest amount of bureaucratic pressure had been accustomed to a minimal level of formalization. On the other hand, it was less experienced by workers who had already been under intense bureaucratic and technological control and for whom there was nothing more than a transfer of control mechanisms.

Third, the decline of normative oversight appears to have contributed to a heightened sense of control. Our findings are in line with some research (Fealsted et al., 2003), which claims that telework weakens corporate culture and slows down its spread and reproduction. This has important implications for the employees’ sense of belonging, for group cohesion and for the development of trusting relationships (Elliot & Long, 2016,). Again, with the weakening of some forms of control, managers have become concerned about the effectiveness of the mechanisms that shape less hierarchical relationships at work. As a result, they have strengthened the mechanisms with more rigid and bureaucratized supervision and coordination activities (frequent meetings,

stricter scheduling, stricter controls, etc.). Therefore, bureaucratization as a way to “bridge the gap” between managers and employees has shown the latter how the ability of managers to exercise personal control takes precedence over the trusting relationships that appear to work well in traditional work contexts.

Our results do not show a clear relationship between the adoption of telework and horizontal organizational forms based on mutual trust. Telework does not help mechanically create a culture of trust and can even undermine that system of normative control. Experience with telework has revealed to workers the brittleness of trusting relationships, causing them to turn against managerial control methods. Such methods are viewed not only as unpleasant but also as unnecessary because they seem to interfere with organizational practices that call for some discretion.

Additionally, workers perceive the extent, legitimacy and acceptability of managerial surveillance in ways that depend on the “workplace” in which it is carried out. Surveillance is perceived as more intrusive when it is suspected of being exercised in non-legitimate spaces, such as the private and domestic sphere, even though the same monitoring is already ingrained in the technologies used in the traditional workplace. This is similar to the ambiguous case of electronic surveillance via VPNs, which may include features for normative control and self-discipline. Workers thus view such initiatives to increase communication and direct bureaucratic and regulatory control as “intrusive, unnecessary and harmful.” This is illustrative of the serious contradictions that can arise when traditional surveillance strategies are applied to a fragmented and reorganized spatial environment.

In conclusion, rather than witnessing new forms of control being developed and tried out, we are instead seeing existing forms of control breaking down and recombining in heterogeneous and variable ways (direct, bureaucratic, technical and technological), as well as their contingent adaptation to the new organizational structure (Storey, 1985). Our overall findings imply that telework during the pandemic did not significantly alter managerial and organizational structures but rather enabled them to expand from traditional to new workplaces through contingent modifications. Thus, without major innovations, existing forms and systems of control were transferred to telework, thereby leading to new tensions due to the contradictions between, on the one hand, a discourse that emphasizes autonomy and trust and, on the other, a surveillance that forces workers to prove they are at work and always behaving appropriately.

Our findings have several theoretical implications. First and foremost, they cast doubt on the deterministic relationship between spatial isolation and diminished control, thus denying that telework has the power to alter and change organizational conditions. Second, they show that telework is still based on a subordinate social relationship that requires worker supervision and control (Taskin & Edwards, 2007).

Both findings are subject to certain limitations on their generality. The widespread use of telework during the pandemic created a new opportunity for research into its effects beyond the select areas to which it had previously been restricted. That emergency environment, however, justifies some care in generalizing our findings. Another limitation is the lack of a systematized approach to how employees asserted, opposed and altered management’s control-related rights. Upcoming studies will seek to overcome the above limitations.

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