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The Relationship between Smart Working and Workplace Social Capital: An Italian Case Study on Work Sustainability

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Abstract: The post-pandemic era is characterized by the diffusion of smart working. A review of the scientific literature reveals studies that deepen the understanding of how smart working is linked to people's well-being. Meanwhile, the literature refers to social capital within organizations as working social capital (WSC) and highlights its different dimensions, which have repercussions on both individual and organizational levels. The present study aims to investigate the relationship between these two constructs. The chosen methodology is a case study of an Italian company ("the Company"). The case study methodology does not aim to generalize results, but rather to provide a detailed and in-depth analysis of a specific context and process. The tool used is a semi-structured interview with all 13 members of the Company. The interviews were examined via thematic analysis. Data analysis was conducted using the software NVivo and both a top-down process from theoretical references and a bottom-up process following the IPA technique. Several themes emerged. The main benefits include flexible work schedules and locations, increased autonomy and comfort, work-life balance, well-being, higher productivity, and efficiency. On the other hand, the main difficulties include social isolation, lack of human contact, increased stress, overwork, the absence of fruitful informal relationships, and the uneasy inclusion of juniors. The impact of these changes on the workplace social capital of the Company is related, in both positive and negative ways, to the bonds between colleagues and clients, employees' sense of belonging to the Company, new employee engagement, and the need for casual informal relations. From the interviews also emerged how smart working is closely linked to environmental sustainability (reduced pollution) and governance (reduced costs of commuting and workspaces). Introducing the relationship between smart working and WSC broadens the perspective to include social sustainability (physical and mental health, well-being and quality of life) as well. The challenge awaiting companies around the world is to establish a balance between smart working and protecting the dimensions of social capital.

Keywords: smart working; workplace social capital; social sustainability

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1. Introduction

The labor market is continually changing. Recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point for all of humanity. Despite the pandemic's negative consequences, it also imposed variations that accelerated innovative progress in the working environment, aiding in the diffusion of new technologies and organizational methods. For millions of employees in the EU and worldwide, the biggest revolution is smart working. On the Italian page of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, smart working, or agile work, is defined as "a particular mode of employment performance introduced in order to increase competitiveness and to facilitate the reconciliation of life and working time". When we consider flexible work modalities such as remote and hybrid, it is important to understand the distinctions between the conditions before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Previously, few employees worked from home (around 5% in the USA), because, at that time, the social and economic context did not support smart working or even

consider it an option [1]. In the EU, before the pandemic, 3.2% of employees regularly worked from home, and most of these were people with high-paying jobs and high skills, especially in Northern Europe [2]. During the pandemic, more than a third of employees (39%) in the European Union [2], and around half of the employees in the USA, adopted smart working [1]. Other estimates suggest that, due to the pandemic, around 50% of Europeans switched to smart working, at least partially, compared to 12% prior to the emergency [3]. In 2023, in Italy, the number of remote workers stood at 3.585 million, as much as 541% more than before the pandemic. In 2024, the estimated number is 3.65 million [4]. Today, Italian companies have evolved into a work modality called hybrid work. This label represents an organizational paradigm characterized by the fusion of presence and remote work. The purpose of hybrid work is to maintain the firm goals, culture, and corporate social capital alongside the work–life balance dimension, reaffirming the importance of work relationships [5]. The continuous “virtualization” involved in this model requires an adaptation of the traditional work dynamics to make them more suitable for new challenges. Technologies change the nature of tasks in terms of communication and information exchange, allowing them to move away from strict, pre-built working standards and toward a more flexible and employee-oriented environment. In fact, after the restraining but also propulsive thrust of the pandemic, these processes have been innovated more and more, and employees have adapted to this modality by developing new skills. Sharing knowledge through a more complex network of relationships has made the work environment more focused on human value. The focus on well-being and the transition to flexible practices have also been fostered by the growing awareness of sustainability. This concept refers to the long-term economic considerations related to the use and consumption of available resources in support of the company, as well as to social sustainability aspects of this issue, such as overcoming barriers of diversity and increasing awareness about the centrality of human well-being.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Smart Working: Advantages and Disadvantages

In English, smart working refers to the strategic integration of individuals, advanced technologies, and streamlined workflow systems to enhance productivity, optimize time management, decrease expenses, and alleviate stress levels. In short, smart working means working effectively and, most of all, efficiently. In the Italian pandemic context, this term has most often been used to refer to the initially lockdown-imposed practice of working from home. Subsequently, with the improvement of the quality and speed of Internet connections, workers and freelancers started to operate in different locations other than offices, such as bars, libraries, hotel rooms, airports, and train stations, or in rented co-working offices. This flexibility in working spaces and times has generated a new work arrangement based on results rather than on working hours [6], with significant consequences for both individuals and companies. The scientific literature helps to summarize the advantages and disadvantages of smart working from both employees’ and managers’ points of view [7–14] (Figure 1).

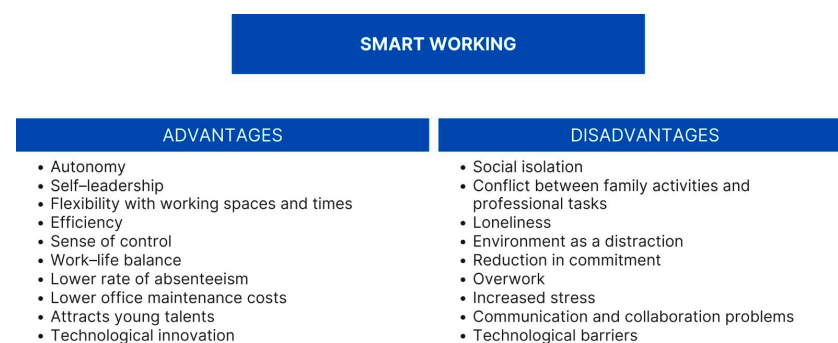


Figure 1. Advantages and disadvantages of smart working (authors’ elaboration).

The most common difficulty that emerged during the pandemic concerns the perception of social isolation [4], which emphasizes the importance of social relationships in human life to individuals' well-being. Nowadays, smart working has evolved into a “cleverer” way of working—that of hybrid work.

2.2. Workplace Social Capital and Smart Working: What Is the Relationship?

The concept of social capital first appeared in the field of sociology. Bourdieu [15] highlighted the value of social connections and networks contributing to individuals' and groups' social and economic success. Coleman [16] emphasized the multidimensional aspect of the construct, which is linked to individuals but also to social structures. Putnam [17] discussed how people tend to self-organize on a macro-level, based on elements such as trust, norms, rules, and shared practices within the network. Nahapiet and Ghoshal [18] added a cognitive dimension to the structural and relational ones. A straightforward and universal definition is provided by the Institute for Social Capital: “A simple way to describe social capital is the benefits derived from being social” [19]. In essence, it concerns how people work together based on shared values, attitudes, and norms of trust and reciprocity, as well as collective practices that influence actions and interactions to achieve a joint outcome. The concept of social capital also encompasses enduring and reliable social connections that over time form social networks of individuals with diverse backgrounds and positions—networks of positive ties that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.

In the organizational context, social capital is referred to as “workplace social capital” (WSC), defined as the set of shared values, attitudes, norms of trust and reciprocity, and collective practices in the workplace. Furthermore, it concerns the benefits derived from relationships among colleagues and between employees and leaders [20]. In fact, WSC, understood as the relational network created by respectful interactions among members of a workforce, can contribute to a healthy work environment [21].

WSC is an umbrella construct that can be broken down into different dimensions and sub-dimensions [22]. Building on the main theoretical contributions on this topic in the scientific literature [23], the second author deconstructed WSC to explore it through a collection of dimensions (Figure 2).

The different dimensions of WSC have repercussions on both the individual and organizational levels. For example, they affect the sense of belonging to the company, horizontal and vertical trust, social support, cooperation between colleagues, flexibility, and effective communication.

Social capital is becoming a fundamental lever to attract and retain new resources. For this reason, it is important to manage it consciously [24]. Four crucial areas for improvement in WSC are trust and enhancement of workers' skills, physical and mental well-being, taking care of work environments, and the difficulty of replacing offline interactions with online ones [25].

How do the effects of smart working impact organizational dynamics and processes? How can WSC develop in a virtual environment? In addressing these questions, the first point to consider is how the transition to smart working influences the construction and maintenance of social relationships in the workplace. It would be interesting to investigate the quality of professional relationships and networks in a 100% virtual environment, examining the role of digital tools and new technologies and identifying critical factors—such as trust, sense of belonging, cooperation, flexibility, and effective communication—that are essential in shaping WSC. Therefore, it is important to ask what potential risks and challenges are associated with building WSC in the absence of face-to-face interactions. Understanding the dynamics and processes that interact between smart working and WSC could provide valuable insights for organizations to navigate the evolving landscape of flexible and digital work models. As yet, there are no studies that precisely answer these questions, but the authors consider these open topics.

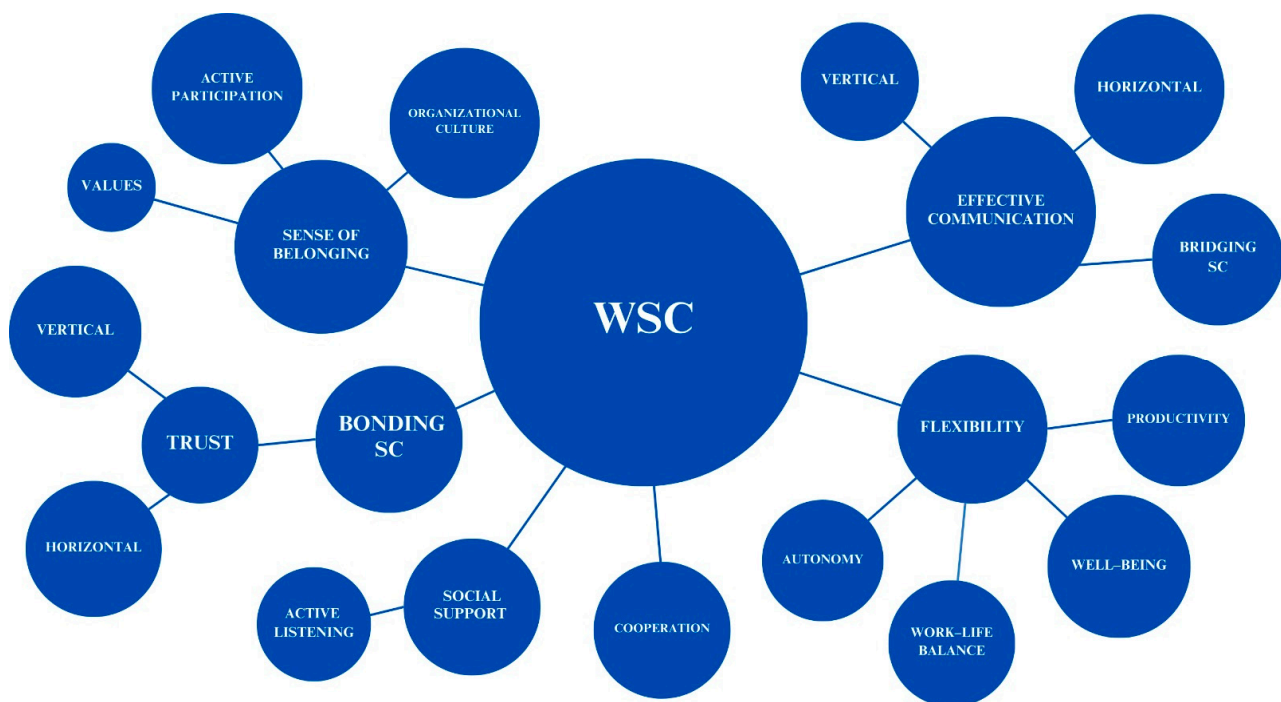


Figure 2. Workplace social capital dimensions (second author’s elaboration).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Method

To answer the questions highlighted by the literature analysis, we chose the qualitative methodology of the case study approach, which provides an idiographic view that captures the specificity of a context. This approach is defined as the study of the complexities of unique circumstances [26], and it enables researchers to gain a thorough understanding of the dynamics, processes, and impacts of a particular phenomenon or event. A case study involves a detailed examination of a single instance to provide insights into a broader class of cases [27]. This methodology is typically used to observe a phenomenon within its real-world context, particularly when the boundaries between the context and the phenomenon are not clearly defined [28].

Among the advantages of the case study approach, the main one is the limited number of individuals in the sample, which allows for simpler and more in-depth data collection. Furthermore, unlike laboratory research, this type of study enables the examination of real events in natural contexts [29].

In our case study, we selected an Italian company (“the Company”) to examine the impact of remote work on organizational dynamics. The Company is dedicated to Open Innovation projects and stands as the most comprehensive platform for corporate innovation services in Italy. Founded in 2010 by a group of industry experts, it aims to assist organizations in overcoming the challenges of the global market and achieving their growth goals. The Company’s methodology focuses on creating value for companies, startups, and investors through the implementation of innovative methodologies of analysis and increased capacity to govern emerging technologies in the ecosystem. Even after the pandemic, all members continued to work fully remotely. According to the CEO, this change had significant consequences on the organization and its internal dynamics; for example, due to this choice, the Company was able to partially revise the employee selection policies regardless of the place of residence. This is a paradigmatic factor of a strategic choice during a phase of organizational expansion.

3.2. Objectives

This case study has the following specific objectives:

- Understanding the types of changes perceived by the members of the Company regarding their working methods.
- Exploring the perception of the members of the Company about the advantages and disadvantages of smart working.
- Investigating the Company members' perceptions of the changes caused by smart working on the WSC.

3.3. Tools

The case study approach is a qualitative methodology. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. A qualitative approach was chosen because it makes it possible to explore individual perspectives and to understand the social and organizational context wherein the changes occurred. Moreover, the use of semi-structured interviews makes it possible to investigate the perceptions of the participants and to understand the key aspects of their experience. Finally, the transcribed interviews were interpreted through thematic analysis to identify the main themes and to compare the results with prior studies. The interview transcriptions were carried out using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which aims at describing phenomena as they are experienced by individuals. The words of the interviewees are taken at face value, with a complete suspension of judgment. Furthermore, the meanings and interpretations of the participants are co-constructed by the researcher and the subjects through the self-correcting interview technique [28]. In this technique, the interviewer prompts a meta-reflection in response to the interviewee's reaction: is the researcher's interpretation excessive or consistent with the expressed words?

The fundamental principles of IPA are based on the idea that reality is complex, contextual, constructed, and subjective. During the research process, the interviewer and the subject mutually influence each other, and the findings must necessarily be anchored in the data that emerge from the interviews conducted. From this perspective, the analysis followed a data-driven categorization process: starting from the quotations, labels were assigned, grouped into codes, and then aggregated under three categories. The categories address the three research questions, which are theory-driven.

In this study, the semi-structured interviews focused on examining the evolving work dynamics in the Company according to the case study objectives. The interview outline (Appendix A) is the result of the work of synthesizing the scientific literature on the topics under investigation.

The participants' perspectives on the pros and cons of the hybrid work model were sought. Furthermore, the interview questions investigated the impact of these changes on WSC, both individually and across the organization, aiming to uncover how relationships within the team and the broader organizational context were affected. As the interviews unfolded, the participants shared their thoughts on the future, providing insights into their expectations and anticipations regarding the ongoing transformation of work practices in the Company.

3.4. Procedures

Following ethical approval of the research, the 13 members of the Company were contacted by the second author via e-mail. Before the interview, they signed an informed consent form agreeing to be interviewed and audio-recorded. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online via video call. The language of the interviews was Italian, and the average duration of an interview was one hour.

3.5. Sample

The sample is purposive, according to the specific attribute of membership in the Company. All of the Company members participated in the research: 13 in total, including

5 women and 8 men; age range: 6 people 25–30 years old, 2 people 30–50 years old, and 5 people 50–60 years old. Of the members, 8 were already employees before the pandemic (7 in Turin and 1 working remotely), while the other 5 joined during or after the pandemic and have been working remotely since then. The members of the Company live in different Italian cities (Figure 3), which contributed to the decision to maintain the fully remote modality.

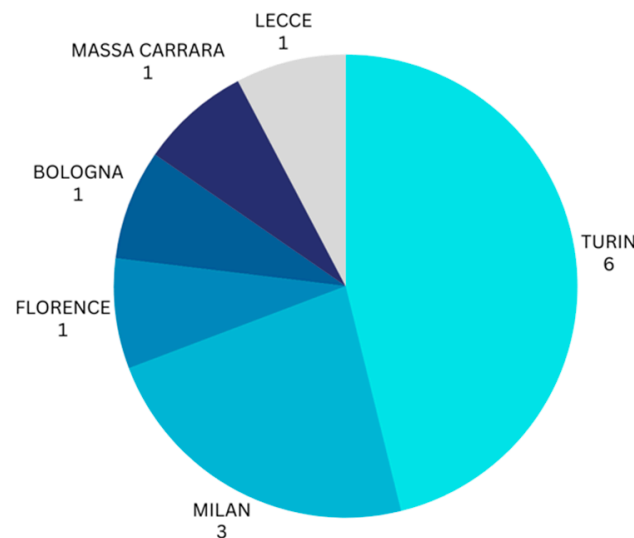


Figure 3. Distribution of the Company members.

3.6. Data Analysis Method

Thematic analysis was conducted on the 13 interviews using a software for qualitative analysis, NVivo (version 14.23.0). A top-down content review from the literature on the topic was conducted, along with a bottom-up analysis according to the standard IPA technique [30]. The analysis was then checked and reviewed several times by all authors until consensus was reached.

4. Results

Three main theory-driven categories emerged from the thematic analysis: “Changes”, referring to the differences in working methods perceived before and after the pandemic; “Smart Working”, regarding advantages and disadvantages of fully remote working; and “Workplace Social Capital”, referring to the impact of the changes, perceived from an individual and organizational point of view, on WSC. Additional data-driven codes were identified and grouped under the three main categories (Figure 4).

Presented below, in the order of frequency with which they were mentioned, are the codes that emerged from the thematic analysis, supported by the participants’ words during the interviews.

The “Changes” category includes nine codes: “working methods”, referring to digital environments, multitasking, and greater efficiency due to digital tools; “business strategies”, referring to strategies adopted by the organization to cope with the negative consequences of working remotely, such as a platform in the metaverse (“*The best way to simulate live interaction with colleagues is when avatars approach each other and pass by, enabling conversation by activating the microphone in the room, thus reasonably simulating physical interaction among people*”), scheduled informal meetings, and retreats (“*These days involve a bit of work and a bit of team building*”); despite the initial enthusiasm for this platform, upon deeper investigation, the realization is that it is not a satisfactory substitute for offline relationships (“*If 10 would mean finding a way that absolutely doesn’t make you miss being physically present, then I would say 2... because there are indeed these small dynamics that might help... but they are not sufficient*”). “Tools” refers to changes in both communication and delivery channels of the services, as they have become predominantly digitized: one interviewee appreciated the ability to

“always stay aligned with colleagues, because the communication methods are there”. “Training” refers to debate between senior members, who believe that training has become more efficient and effective as a result of its digitization, and junior members, who perceive a sense of abandonment; furthermore, it emerged that training should encompass both technical aspects and “those less technical, softer skills that are learned through socializing with people and also through imprinting with colleagues who have more experience”. Juniors particularly emphasized that these non-technical skills are essential for those who have recently entered the workforce: “I don’t feel in a position to advance my career at the moment, precisely because of the issue of remote work. I feel like I’m missing a lot”, “We lack many ways and opportunities to learn how to deal with clients and manage the team, on interactions, that is, on how to manage a group of people in person, on how to relate to clients. . .”, “The more implicit aspects are not being learned, those unwritten rules that are learned by living in the environment are being lost by the young ones”. According to the CEO, the main strategy being adopted is even more efficient: “learning on the job, that is, through projects. “Working spaces” refers to the ability to work from anywhere; “time” refers to the shift in mindset from time-based to goal-oriented; “individual strategies” refers to the creation of one’s own routine; “business organization” refers to the shift from a small to a medium group and the corresponding role assignment; and, finally, “workload” refers to the increase in work due to the growth of the Company. One interviewee reflected, “There is a greater intensity of work, it starts earlier in the morning and ends later in the evening; therefore, there is an increased workload, also because the activities to be performed have increased”.

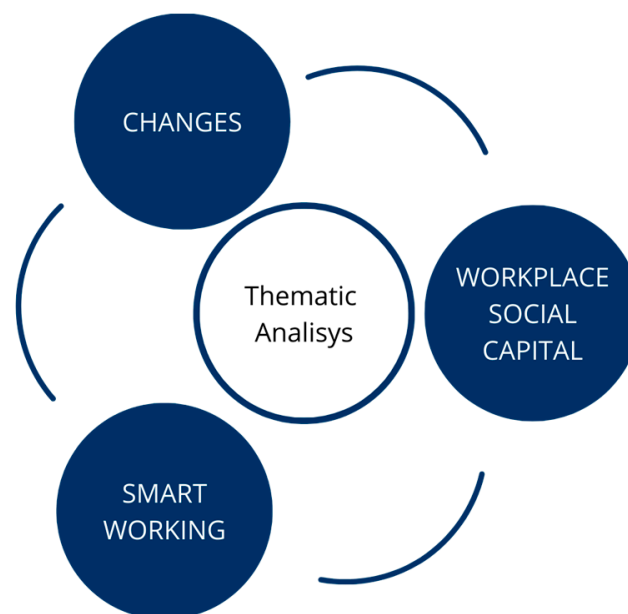


Figure 4. Categories: thematic analysis of the 13 interviews.

Next, 16 codes emerged in the “Smart Working” category related to the advantages of adopting the fully remote working mode: the “flexibility” to change settings and customize one’s environment and schedule, allowing the “freedom to choose where to work”, and the ability to “change the fixed setting” and “personalize the environment and the hours”; the “freedom/autonomy” to better manage one’s personal and professional time; improvements to employee “comfort” such as eliminating “commuting time” (“When I turn off the computer, I know I don’t have to spend an hour and a half to get home, but if I want to go to the gym or take a walk, after two minutes, I’m out of the house”); the augmentation of “productivity/efficiency” (“Work efficiency is higher”); the increase in “work–life balance” due to the proximity of spaces dedicated to daily and work life (an aspect considered very important is the relationship with loved ones; the quality of family relationships is described as “decidedly higher”: “I have more time for my family”

and “Thanks to smart working, I was able to be close to my aunt in her final moments of life”); the “economic savings” for the individual and the Company; better health due to increased “individual well-being” and “physical activity”; “new opportunities” to hire or collaborate with distant people; “less conflict” with others; more time and opportunity to cultivate “personal interests” and “travel”; a favorable “environmental impact” from fewer displacements; and more “control” and “synchronous communication” thanks to digital tools.

Several disadvantages of fully remote work also arose in the “Smart Working” category. The codes from the thematic analysis related to disadvantages are as follows: “social isolation”, as the absence of face-to-face relationships, weighs heavily on individual well-being despite numerous online contacts; furthermore, another significant variable regarding feelings of alienation is living alone versus living with family or a partner: *“You have no one to talk to, you no longer have that human connection, and that is sorely missed. I think living alone makes you feel it much more”*. For those in more vulnerable situations, it is important to consider the need for *“psychological support, as making this type of work non-alienating both personally and professionally requires much deeper effort”*. “Lack of human contact” occurs because *“you don’t talk to anyone”* and you feel *“isolated from colleagues, the company, and the world in general”*. One participant mentioned, *“On a personal and psychological level, it feels very bad to stay at home. I get to a point in the day where I feel trapped, I want to go out, I want to do. . .”*; online relationships are functional and efficient but lack the human elements of social interaction. Other codes include “overwork”, which is perceived even when time is theoretically saved; higher “stress” due to the perceived increased workload; loss of “serendipity”, referring to fortuitous opportunities and creative insights; loss of “colleague relationships” as an outlet to share stress and receive support; “negative mood” for some who are struggling to manage change; “mental strain” due to the continuous use of new technologies; loss of the “social capital” that formerly was central to organizational life and propelled corporate growth; high risk of turnover due to “integration of juniors”, which is linked to the theme of “training”; and, lastly, “burnout”, “monotony”, “performance anxiety”, and “prolonged use of screens” all refer to the disproportionate use of technology and the mental strain of working from home.

Finally, the “Workplace Social Capital” category represents the repercussions of the changes on a firm level. The emerged codes are as follows: “relationships with colleagues”, which are more solid between those who previously worked together in the Company and more difficult to establish and maintain between those who joined during or after the pandemic; “informal relationships”, which are lacking with remote working despite the many new communication modalities (*“It’s not like you make a call to talk about nothing or to chit-chat. Then we start our calls and in the title of the invitation, there is a project identification code: so when you meet, you talk about that”*); diminished “sense of belonging” to the Company (*“The fact of being many distinct atoms, each at home, greatly affects the sense of belonging to the company”*), despite many employees’ gratitude for the potential to move and work remotely; diminished “relationships with clients”, as customers also now tend to prefer quick and agile video calling to in-person contact (*“When you go to clients, you create this sense of belonging, because when you go to clients, you go as a team, you who worked on the project as a team. So, it’s an opportunity for strengthening”*); decreased “teamwork”, as misunderstandings are more common (*“With calls, as at this moment, the contacts are exclusively a series of scheduled meetings, so your time is extremely planned; while when you have a live relationship there are interactions that are not planned, so I find this thing terrifying”*); and “organizational unit” and “management of juniors”, referring to the difficulties involved in engaging resources, making turnover easier and weakening WSC (*“We still have a whole relational capital from the past that, over time, risks being lost with the turnover of people”, “I think it was positive in the short term, but I have concerns about the long term”*). On-site leadership would facilitate continuous discussion and greater involvement regarding project advancements and clarification of doubts. Considering the displacement of the organization’s members, this situation is very complex; nevertheless, it is essential to consider alternative ways to increase satisfaction

with and the well-being of the organization. A participant emphasized: *“In my opinion, we will work in full remote in the future for a very simple reason: this Company has become structurally full remote and paradoxically constitutes part of its, I wouldn’t say fortune, but it allows for the acquisition of skills, of people regardless of where they live, and it’s a great opportunity. On the other hand, people who lived in one place, after full remote, have spread across Italy and so how do you get them back, then it wouldn’t be right, it would be just an anachronistic thing now, especially for us. So, I don’t see a different solution than full remote, precisely due to physical limitations”*.

5. Discussion

The interview findings highlighted the relationships between different aspects of the Italian company’s WSC at various levels following the shift to fully remote smart working. According to the sociologist Butera [31], smart working, a method defined by flexibility and increasingly advanced technological tools, makes it possible to maximize the potential of a company and to improve employees’ well-being. In fact, as emphasized in the scientific literature, the interviews identified positive aspects such as increased efficiency, productivity [10], and flexibility of space and time, allowing a new organization of work based on goals [6]. However, many challenging elements emerged as well. For example, when working from home, all interactions are planned and the naturalness of in-person exchanges disappears. Sociality is important for well-being; as Aristotle wrote in the 4th century BCE, “man is a social animal” who “can’t survive in isolation”. Some employees’ social networks are grounded within the physical working environment, and the lack of such contacts can be harmful to them psychologically. The sense of social isolation, identified in the interviews as the main disadvantage of smart working, is closely linked to the absence of informal interactions, especially for those who live alone. According to the literature, the technological devices used to work from home do not replace the quality of offline exchanges, thus increasing workers’ sense of alienation [32]. In fact, online contacts are more sterile and impersonal, omitting nonverbal communication and emotional exchange. A sense of isolation can also arise due to the blurred boundaries between personal and working life [33]: with remote working, working hours are no longer defined precisely, increasing the risk of overwork, stress, and social isolation. Since all meetings are scheduled, remote workers lack the experience of unplanned interactions. Serendipity refers to the occasions that arise from causal encounters, allowing for creative ideas and unique opportunities to appear. These spontaneous moments are crucial for organizational growth. Informal networks, in fact, represent a dimension of social capital [34], characterized by trust and mutual support; such networks include colleagues at work but also friends and relatives. Research has shown that there is a statistically significant relationship between workplace social capital and new information from informal interactions [35], emphasizing the importance of cooperation and exchanges in the workplace. Moreover, the flexibility afforded by smart working is an aspect that makes a company more attractive to young talents [36], and the Company has acquired new recruits from different cities. Difficulties with engagement following such recruitment emerged from the interviews. The onboarding process has been digitized in many companies, causing a sense of abandonment and an increase in turnover. In the case study, juniors indicated that they felt they received slower training, whereas the CEO felt that learning had never been so effective and rapid. It can be assumed that this contradiction arises from junior members’ need, in addition to technical training, for social skill development through direct interaction with experienced colleagues and customers. In this vein, some research has shown that blended learning, which integrates online training with coaching, is more effective than either mode alone [37,38].

During the pandemic, many companies found that remote working does not compromise productivity [39], which is why many of them subsequently decided to maintain this mode of working. In the Company, there has been a significant increase in the number of projects and the amount of revenue. We can assume that this new way of working has provided the tools to maintain good coordination strategies for group projects, increasing the moments of flow at work. With the inclusion of new resources, productivity has increased.

To maintain employee engagement and strengthen the organizational culture, the Company is implementing strategies that are highly appreciated from within, including corporate retreats and daily plenary meetings called “hello days”. One study [40] highlighted the importance of creating meaningful moments for groups to build a strong corporate network characterized by trust, collaboration, and open communication. In-person meetings and corporate events are important to encourage the exchange of ideas between employees and foster a strong sense of belonging [41]. This element is a vital part of social capital, particularly its cognitive dimension [42], and there is an enormous risk of disengagement if it decreases.

6. Conclusions

Based on the scientific literature, workplace social capital (WSC) encompasses various dimensions essential for understanding the quality of relational networks within companies and predicting performance [36]. This deeper understanding of WSC is pivotal for comprehending job satisfaction and internal cohesion among employees, influenced by collaboration, idea exchange, and trust [43]. These factors are crucial for individual and organizational growth, as echoed by insights from interviews with employees at the Company in this study. Employees value physical relationships while acknowledging the functionality of online connections. Developing WSC remotely necessitates significant moments of sharing and informal contact to bridge gaps created by reduced daily interaction.

This study aimed to explore the relationship between smart working and WSC in the context of an Italian company. The motivation behind this research stemmed from the need to understand how new work modalities, accelerated by the pandemic, impact both individual and organizational well-being. The existing literature has extensively covered the benefits and challenges of remote work, but there is a noticeable gap regarding its effects on WSC within organizations. Specifically, based on the outcomes, the Company could focus on several areas to strengthen the organization itself: youth engagement, social isolation, and informal relationships.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings contribute significantly to understanding new work modalities and WSC, shedding light on organizational post-pandemic dynamics and collective well-being. Social sustainability emerges as a crucial consideration in this context. Our findings contribute significantly to this underexplored area by highlighting how smart working, while offering flexibility and improved work–life balance, can also lead to increased feelings of isolation and stress among employees. Specifically, the research highlights the profound relationships between remote work, mental health, well-being, and quality of life, which are integral components of social sustainability. The “Smart Working” category reveals that increased flexibility in working times and spaces is linked to positive effects on individuals by enabling a better work–life balance and promoting physical activities. For example, the freedom to customize one’s environment and schedule allows employees to integrate exercise into their daily routines more easily and to manage their personal and professional lives more effectively.

However, the research also uncovers significant challenges. Individuals living alone during remote work experienced heightened feelings of isolation, overwork, stress, and anxiety. These adverse conditions are linked to a diminished sense of belonging to the Company. This sense of isolation can undermine employees’ mental health and impede their connection to the organization, negatively affecting overall workplace social capital.

Moreover, the use of new methodologies such as Teams, shared calendars, and multiple calls throughout the day has changed the nature of workplace interactions. The highly structured and planned nature of digital communication reduces opportunities for informal moments and serendipity, which are often sources of new ideas and opportunities. This structured approach can stifle creativity and the spontaneous exchange of ideas, critical elements for innovation and organizational growth.

The integration of new generations into the workplace emerges as another important theme addressed by the research. Junior members, who joined the Company during

or after the pandemic, face difficulties establishing and maintaining relationships with colleagues and fitting into the company culture. This challenge is compounded by the lack of informal interactions and the remote nature of work, which can hinder their professional development and sense of belonging. These findings underscore the importance of social sustainability in the context of new work modalities. While increased flexibility and autonomy in remote work offer significant benefits for individual well-being and work–life balance, there are also critical challenges related to isolation, mental health, and the erosion of WSC.

From a practical point of view, organizations should integrate key WSC elements when implementing smart working practices permanently. Strategies identified in interviews offer practical guidance for organizations embracing remote work. Innovative approaches like establishing metaverse offices for enhanced interactions and organizing diverse-location business retreats for team-building activities and strategic discussions illustrate how operational efficiency and social sustainability can be maintained and enhanced.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the evidence presented in this case study can provide a valuable contribution to guiding strategic decisions and promoting a work environment characterized by well-being and job satisfaction, both within the Company and other organizations facing similar circumstances. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that remote work offers the opportunity to contribute to achieving the significant sustainability goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda promoted by the United Nations in 2015 [44]. Through smart working and the resulting flexibility, innovation and more sustainable economic development are fostered. Additionally, this approach can reduce inequalities by allowing individuals from distant geographical areas or with specific needs to participate equitably and inclusively in the labor market.

7. Future Implications

A valuable future research avenue would be to operationalize WSC (e.g., items on a scale with smart working advantages and disadvantages with self-report responses and indicators). In addition, extensive exploration with cross-sectional designs could allow for further understanding of the relationship between WSC and smart working. Exploring these findings across multiple companies would provide a comprehensive understanding of how smart working is related to organizational dynamics and social sustainability. Furthermore, it would be interesting to deepen the use of innovative technological tools and artificial intelligence to improve internal communication and reduce the physical distances created by remote working. Considering the wide spread of smart working, exploring the potential of digital devices, such as virtual communication and collaboration platforms, could help to overcome the challenges of social isolation and the absence of human contact, thus promoting a greater sense of closeness and belonging among members.

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Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Outline

Questions:

- a. How long have you been working at the Company?
- b. What does your role within the Company entail?
- c. The pandemic has brought significant changes to everyone's lives. . . Did you relocate because of the pandemic? Why did you make this decision?
- d. Can you describe a typical day of remote work? (Please elaborate on schedules, location, team working methods, and tools used)
- e. From what you have told me, your habits have changed. . . How has your role within the Company changed?
- f. How did you personally perceive this change?
- g. According to your experience, what are the main advantages and disadvantages of remote/smart working?
- h. Can you provide an example of how information exchange takes place within the Company?
- i. From your account, I sense there have been profound changes (or not). I wonder if this has had an impact on the Company as an organisation. . . in particular, on which aspects according to you?
- j. Based on scientific literature, besides what you have said, crucial elements include trust, sense of belonging, autonomy, flexibility, work-family balance. . . What do you think about this?
- k. Are there moments during the day where you are in contact with your colleagues not to talk about work?
- l. Tell me about how you believe your relationship has changed.
- m. How does this influence the work in the company according to you?
- n. Finally, I would like to ask for an imaginative effort. . . in 5 years, how do you see yourself and hope to be working?
- o. Do you want to add something we did not have the opportunity to talk about? Or a particular aspect you would like to explore further?

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