

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE: IMPLEMENTING SMART WORKING IN ITALIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS

Giuseppe Ceci, Michela Iannotta and Vincenzo Costa

ABSTRACT

This research explores the opportunities and challenges of smart working in Italian public administration. Using the UTAUT model by Venkatesh et al. (2003), we analyze technological barriers and the impact of regulations on decision-making. We present two case studies of Italian public administrations under different ministries, where smart working adoption varies. One represents a typical case where remote work is possible, while the other is a deviant case where it is not. From a theoretical point of view, our results extend the Venkatesh model by contextualizing it to the Italian reality, and provide important insights in the Human Resource Management area. Our findings reveal that the non-adoption of smart working is not solely a technological issue but is significantly influenced by cultural barriers, such as distrust between managers and employees, as well as a perceived loss of managerial control. While employees are generally eager to embrace smart working to enhance work-life balance and productivity, these cultural barriers create resistance within organizations, and increase employees' turnover intentions. The practical contribution of the research is to provide policy-makers with the necessary tools to establish a labor law framework that highlights the efficiencies and inefficiencies emphasized within the specific contingencies of public administrations.

Keywords - Human Resource Management; Public administrations; Resistance to change; Smart working; Unified theory of acceptance and use of technology model

INTRODUCTION

The concept of "*Domus*" was predominant in Roman philosophy. In some cases, the *Domus* was a place where patricians could meet personalities from different countries, engaging in discussions of invaluable importance. Over the centuries, the *Domus* slowly evolved into a new place for individuals to carry out their work tasks: the putting-out system paradigm allowed artisans to avoid physically going to factories and navigating the winding paths to reach them. The more recent metamorphosis of the *domus* construct took place during the pandemic period when millions of people were forced to work from home. In this vein, the spread of COVID-19 has been a challenging test not only for peo-

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Corresponding Author: giuseppe.ceci@uniroma1.it

ple but also for organizations that needed to accelerate the transition to new work approaches and practices. To this aim, the proliferation of novel digital technologies during the pandemic has facilitated the rise and the spread of innovative work approaches both generating opportunities and challenges. Among these new approaches, smart working (SW) has gained extensive acceptance, swiftly transforming conventional work methodologies. In Human Resource Management (HRM) research, different constructs emerge along with SW generating terminological ambiguities. In our analysis of the international panorama, comprehensive and interesting studies on these topics emerged even if they appear to be disconnected from a common logic that ties them together (Arduini et al., 2023). On one side, authors generally refer to work from home (Irawanto et al., 2021; Dubey, & Tripathi, 2020) while others address the agile nature of work (Jeyasingham, 2016) emphasizing a practice that can be easily moved from context to context. In the Italian scenario, SW is the construct that populates the main contributions in organizational studies (De Masi, 2020; Chiaro et al., 2015) and relates to the definition provided in the introduction by Ellerton (2015). Finally, in the Italian context - both examined under the normative, and the organizational lens - it is important to distinguish between telework (Bae et al., 2019; Den Dulk and Groenvelde, 2013) and SW. Telework primarily refers to work performed at a distance, where times and locations are predetermined according to a contractual arrangement that must adhere to specific constraints. SW, on the other hand, is a broader concept that encompasses various forms of work flexibility and the use of technologies to enhance efficiency, but it is not inherently a job contract in itself. Regarding our study, we rely on the definition of SW even if the aforementioned terms in the domain of organizational research are usually considered synonyms.

Nowadays, working “smart” means workers have no specific time or workplace constraints, while technologies play a key role to create and shape a resilient and flexible organizational model (Ellerton, 2015). In this vein, the flexible nature of work has contemporary increased autonomy, job satisfaction, and a better work-life balance (Charalampous et al., 2019). On the other side, the same research showed that the adverse effects include social and professional isolation, perceived threats to professional advancement, long working hours in an “always-on” culture, increased emotional exhaustion, limited supervision from line managers, greater cognitive stress/overload, and musculoskeletal health problems. In many cases, the limited supervision from line managers was overtaken by increased number of online meetings and use of technologies to monitor employees from a distance (Delfino & Van Der Kolk, 2021). Today, specific factors pertaining to role expectations and support from co-workers also pose challenges. Knardahl & Christensen (2022) found that availability expectations was associated with potentially negative work factors and health, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions.

Both sides of SW leaves room for different interpretations and poses opportunities and threats for HRM. Indeed, the debate on the two sides of SW affecting the organization at all levels has extensively engaged the HRM research both considering positive and negative aspects arising in the post-pandemic world. Considering both positive and negative aspects represents a critical step in assessing the quality of work, and how emerging work approaches affect performance. To this aim, several studies demonstrated that flexible working arrangements are positively and significantly correlated with work-life balance

and performance (Chatterjee, 2022; Aziz-Ur-Rehman & Siddiqui, 2019). On the other hand, Ozcelik & Barsade (2018) analyze how job loneliness has a negative impact on workers' performance and for these reasons, the decision to implement or not a SW approach within organizations needs to be carefully pondered.

Several authors started investigating the adoption of SW in the context of Public Administrations (PAs), where opportunities and challenges are investigated with a different lens compared to the private sector, where the majority of contributions in this domain are exerted. PAs encompass all governmental and public services, including services provided by federal, regional (e.g., states and provinces), municipalities, and local agencies (Datta et al., 2020). These organisms have consistently been marked by ongoing reforms throughout history (Vigoda-Gadot & Meiri, 2008) leading academics to adapt their work to the specific context in which they were conducting their studies to better freeze the normative framework they were immersed. In the domain of the Italian context, we have contributions that primarily assess the digital transformation of the PAs (Datta, 2020). However, the result of the analysis provided by Cellini et al. (2021) demonstrates that while public workers in Italy responded well to the sudden implementation of SW, there is need for adjustments and improvements that need to be made by the government, as well as by public bodies, to make SW more functional for workers in the future. It is clear that in the new digital era, modern forms of works as SW imply new way of collaborating and thus new way to use the current technology (e.g., having access to specific document from home, software usage) or using new tools in the everyday work routine to interact with different people within the working teams (e.g., via Microsoft teams). However, SW adoption should request that the worker has all the technological means to fully exert his activities with no technological barrier. To this aim, since there is a large consensus on the importance of implementing SW as an organizational change model for PAs (Todisco et al., 2022) and given the reluctance of some PAs to employ SW approaches, our research questions are as follows:

Rq1: What are the technological barriers to implementing smart working in Italian public administrations?

Rq2: How does the regulatory framework affect the adoption of smart working in Italian public administrations?

Since the decision to adopt SW in the Italian PAs is strongly connected to the regulatory context in which they operate, we want to provide the readers with the opportunity to place the choices of the Italian legislator in the themes of SW, elucidating the reasoning he pursued and the sequence of events that led to different declinations of this work approach. In this vein, the normative context in which Italian PAs are immersed has a dramatic impact on the adoption of new technologies and the next paragraph aims to shed light on this process bridging on one side, the technological barriers that emerge in the

Italian public sector, and on the other side, emphasizing how and to what extent the regulatory framework created inequalities and differences among similar organisms.

The Italian context seems to represent an insightful scenario to conduct our analysis given the lack of contributions that tackle the adoption of SW through this particular lens. Despite the strong acceleration towards SW driven by the emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, PAs still show a certain resistance to transitioning to a form of work that truly reflects the definition of SW. This resistance is especially evident regarding the deep-rooted orientation towards traditional methods of work organization. On one hand, the regulations, and on the other hand, the managers do not emphasize the need to change the traditional and restrictive practices of PA work management models (Cuel et al., 2021).

This work aims to highlight the advantages and threats of SW, proposing a model that also addresses the legal aspects of this issue, shedding light on the regulatory and normative ambiguities that led to the emergence of inequalities among different PAs. From a theoretical perspective, the results aim to contribute to extending the Venkatesh et al. (2003) model and contextualizing it to the Italian reality, where we hypothesize that the cultural component is a crucial factor in the non-adoption of certain types of technologies.

NORMATIVE CONTEXT

The first moment when SW got the attentions of the Italian legislator can be traced back to Law 124 of 2015, the so-called Madia reform¹. Together with this reform, the attempt was made to start the "experimentation of new space-time modalities of work performance" to reach, in the following three years, a quota of 10% of employees involved in the new modality. Subsequently, the "Jobs Act"² also intervened on the subject, defining its scope and implementation methods, with a discipline valid for both public and private sectors. The turning point for SW was during the pandemic, when, for the containment of COVID-19, the focus shifted to remote work. This became the ordinary mode for all tasks that allowed it, even in derogation and in the absence of individual agreements. At the end of the pandemic state of emergency, the reference discipline returned to that contained in articles 18-24 of the Jobs Act, although with noticeable derogations for workers in particular subjective situations. SW also entered collective agreements, as in the last renewal concerning the central functions sector of PA.

The regulatory path leads to some considerations that must necessarily be divided into two-time segments: before and after the pandemic. Before the pandemic, there was not the maximum attention of the legislator for this form of work execution. The Madia reform³ envisaged that this system had to necessarily go through an experimentation phase, with a modest quantitative goal, of 10% of employees within a three-year period, which was not achieved. It was only in 2019 that the double-digit figure was exceeded for administrations that had started an agile work program. The Jobs Act, trying to catch up with a private labor market that had already begun to apply the tool, sought to define the agile work modality and created agile work agreements that allowed the introduction of flexible elements in the employment relationship. Article 19 of Law 81 of 2017 detailed the content of the individual agreement for SW. It had to be drawn up in writing and had

to regulate aspects related to the exercise of the employer's directive power and the tools used by the worker. It also had to identify the rest times of the worker and the technical and organizational measures necessary to ensure the worker's disconnection from work-related technological tools. It could be for a fixed or indefinite period, with the latter allowing unilateral termination with a 30-day notice. The agreement also established which behaviors, even occurring outside the employer's premises, could lead to disciplinary sanctions. The regulation on the occupational protection of the worker was also adapted, expressly providing coverage against accidents at work and occupational diseases related to risks associated with work performed outside the company premises, as well as any accidents that occurred on the way between the worker's home and the chosen place for work performed outside the company premises. However, the new discipline had a minimal impact on PA. Certainly, the intervention just mentioned represented the first genuine attempt to regulate the phenomenon within the Italian labor market, drawing on some experiences already present in certain National Collective Labor Agreements (CCNL). The formula of the individual agreement is chosen, which undoubtedly has the advantage of being as adaptable as possible to the subjective situations of employees. However, it does not ensure, from the perspective of practical application and the dissemination of the tool, a homogeneous treatment for workers. This will have significant repercussions in the context of PA, as will be discussed later on.

During the pandemic, SW lost its primary function and became the only way to ensure service continuity while respecting health containment. Already with the Decree of February 23, 2020⁴, it was established that, in containment areas, SW could be applied for any type of subordinate work even without the individual agreements required by law. In 2021, with a DPCM⁵, the return to in-person work was established as the ordinary mode of service for public employees, and a few weeks later, guidelines for SW were signed, but the state of emergency was then extended until March 31, 2022. The renewal of the collective agreements for the central functions sector in 2022, referring to the previous three-year period, for the first time included SW in PA with the provision of a double mode: agile work and remote work, with some provisions also in derogation from the current discipline, such as the necessary prevalence of in-person activity. Today a very important tool is the POLA⁶. In this plan it is expected that by January 31 of each year, the Administrations will draft, after consulting with trade unions, the Operational Plan for Agile Work, as a specific section of the Plan for the performance. The plan must include the list of activities suitable for agile work, the technological and training requirements for personnel using this method, tools for periodic verification of results and attendance detection. The plan must ensure that at least 15% of workers have the opportunity to use SW.

The Ministry for Public Administration has issued guidelines for the completion of the POLA and on performance indicators that allow the evaluation of the benefits of agile work in public administration. The approach is based on a gradual three-year implementation of the new mode, which is programming-based. Specifically, the plan must differentiate between the initial phase, intermediate development, and advanced development, all to be completed within the three years. The guidelines place great emphasis on managers, who must act as promoters of innovation in organizational systems. In fact, they

are required to undergo "a significant change in managerial style and leadership, characterized by the ability to work and lead others towards goals, to base relationships on increasing mutual trust, and to shift focus from control to accountability for results.

In the Def (Economic and Financial Document) approved on April 13, 2023, the government established a new cycle of spending review that will lead Ministries to cuts of up to 2 billion euros. Savings that do not affect citizen services undoubtedly involve the use of SW for activities allowing it, as it clearly translates into lower expenses for the involved public offices.

It is not only economic savings that drive policymakers to modernize the methods of work performance. Moreover, EU Regulation 2023/857 (Effort Sharing or ESR) has identified some carbon dioxide emission reduction targets in various economic and productive sectors, including a 43.7% reduction in transport sector emissions compared to 2005. Following this, the Government, in its proposal to revise the PNIEC⁷ produced in June 2023, identified SW as one of the measures to be promoted and implemented to achieve climate goals.

This makes it clear how urgent it is to encourage the use of this practice by removing some of the obstacles to this method that have emerged in this first year since the end of the state of emergency.

THE ROLE OF THE REGULATORY FRAMEWORK AS A DISABLER IN IMPLEMENTING SMART WORKING IN PAs: BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND CONTROL

The focus of this work lies on both the administrative and labor regulations framework. In this vein, the focus is at a national level because then (at the “micro-level” PAs autonomously decide to what extent to guarantee the adoption of SW. The legislator's decision to embrace the method of individual agreements has a series of consequences about the peculiarities of public employment compared to the private sector. While this choice undeniably allows for more tailored SW arrangements to suit the specific circumstances of the worker and the workplace, it also potentially leads to discrimination, particularly in the public sector.

The designated figure within the Administration to act as the employer in the agreement with the worker is the Manager of the PA's unit. However, the practical application of SW in PAs has revealed numerous inconsistencies. During the pandemic period, almost all public offices adopted emergency SW to ensure the continuation of administrative activities. However, following the end of the state of emergency, not all structures maintained this practice, despite having the opportunity to acquire the necessary technologies—something that was impossible at the onset of the sudden pandemic.

The current result is a complete lack of uniformity. Employees performing the same tasks face different treatments regarding the possibility of adopting SW; some are entirely denied this option, while others are permitted only during specific times of the year, with the inexplicable exclusion of the summer months. This is due to the discretionary power, which sometimes borders on arbitrariness, of the figure of the public Managers in granting or denying remote work. A widespread and unjustified skepticism towards SW has been

observed, significantly more pronounced than in the private sector, where the potential cost savings from SW heavily influence business decisions. In contrast, these economic considerations are less prominent and more blurred in the public sector. The possible causes of this lack of confidence in SW will be explored further, but as it stands, it is clear that the discretionary choices of each Manager of the PA's unit primarily affect the process of adopting SW.

From a regulatory perspective, the POLA emerges as a rather unambitious instrument, evidenced by the minimal objective it sets for Administrations, namely the implementation of SW for only 15 percent of employees whose functions are perfectly adaptable to SW. To reduce inequalities in this area, it would be advisable to establish criteria that the Manager, as the person responsible for deciding on the granting of SW, must adhere to. This would protect not only the employees but also, and more importantly, the PA and its efficiency.

In truth, such criteria already exist in the form of Law 241 of 1990, which stipulates that administrative activity must adhere to principles, including economic efficiency and effectiveness. These principles cannot be ignored when deciding on the presence of SW in an office. The economic savings for the administration are undeniable, and if applied on a large scale, could significantly contribute to the ambitious spending review plans of the coming years. Regarding the efficiency of the PA, objectives should be identified to evaluate the work of employees and the quality of services offered to citizens, independent of the outdated notion that only visual supervision, which presupposes the physical presence of the worker, can monitor productivity.

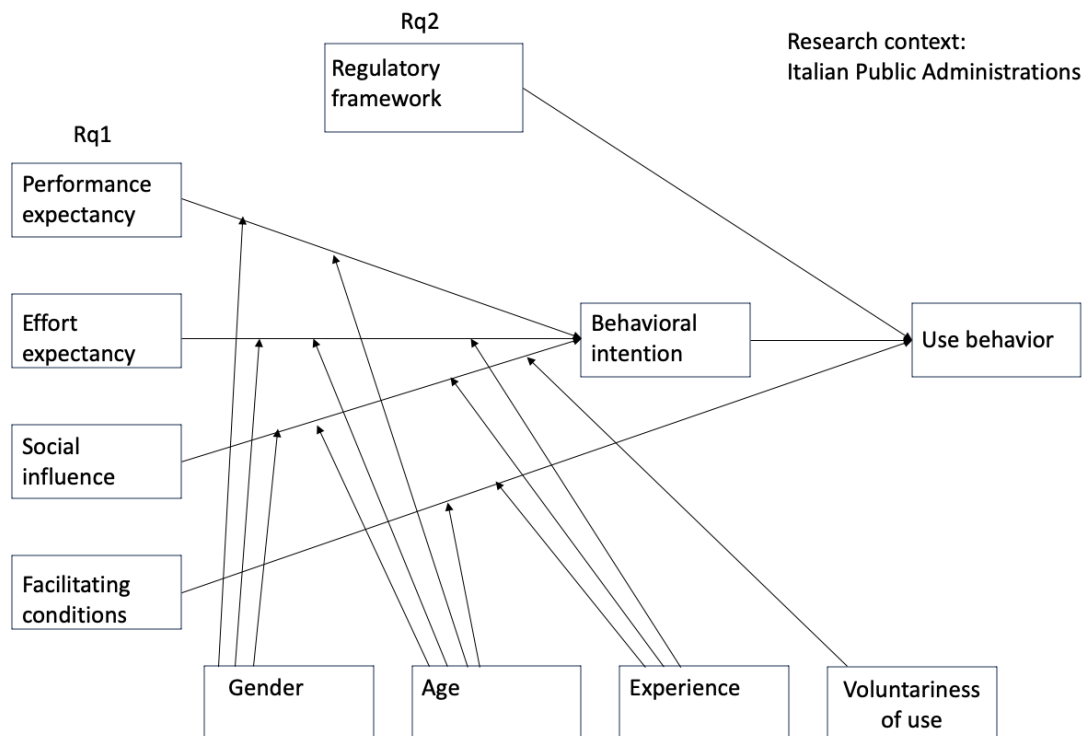
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a theoretical framework, our work relies on the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) model developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003) which is based on an elaboration of Davis's (1989) technology acceptance model that was based on the concepts that the intention perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Venkatesh et al. (2003) rebuild a new framework positing new elements (performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions) affecting the dependent variables, the behavioral intention and usage of a certain technology. Also, the frameworks combine four different key moderating variables (gender, age, experience, voluntariness of use). In organizational research, several authors used this framework for their works. Sahut & Lissillour (2023) conducted a study on the adoption of remote work platforms post-COVID-19 lockdown, utilizing an enhanced version of the technology acceptance model. Their findings highlighted the significance of behavioral intention, expectation, and facilitating conditions in explaining remote work adoption. From another perspective, Shamsi et al. (2021) examined the impact of the technology acceptance model on employees' work engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic emphasizing the importance of perceived ease of use and usefulness in enhancing work-related well-being. Similarly, in the Italian context, Massa et al. (2023) used the UTAUT model to propose and test a model of remote working acceptance. The widespread usage and re-elaboration of the

UTAUT model considering its flexibility in adapting to different contexts and contingencies led us to choose it as a model. To this aim, we believe that the UTAUT model fits the comprehensive methodology of the paper considering the two presented research questions.

In our case, the technology is SW while the independent variables proposed need to be adapted to the context of PAs (Fig.1) and are moderated by gender, age, experience and voluntariness of use.

Figure 1: Unified theory of acceptance and use of technology model in the context of Italian PAs



Source: Venkatesh et al., (2003)

1. *Performance expectancy* is defined as the degree to which an individual believes that using the system will help him or her attain gains in job performance. In the context of PA, performance expectancy concerns the extent to which an individual within a government entity believes that the implementation of SW will contribute to the improvement of their work activities, such as the efficiency in the delivery of public services. Employees' expectations about SW can significantly impact their satisfaction with SW and intention to continue working remotely and their productivity (Carraher-Wolverton, 2022).
2. *Effort expectancy* is defined as the degree of ease associated with the use of the system. Effort expectancy can be interpreted as the perception of how easy or challenging it is for a public employee to use the SW system. This may reflect the ease of access to resources and documents needed for specific tasks, as well as familiarity with the adopted digital platforms.
3. *Social influence* is defined as the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe he or she should use the new system. In the realm of PAs,

social influence can indicate the degree to which an individual perceives that influential figures within the organization, such as executives or senior officials, consider the adoption of SW desirable. Organizational culture and company policies can play a key role in influencing this perception. According to the literature, social influence has been further analyzed to understand how workplace colleagues (and friends, neighbors) affect the decision of working remotely (Scott et al., 2012).

4. *Facilitating conditions* are defined as the degree to which an individual believes that an organizational and technical infrastructure exists to support the system. Facilitating conditions could be understood as the level of conviction of a public employee regarding the existence of an organizational and technological infrastructure suitable for supporting the SW system. This may include the availability of secure devices, the presence of clear organizational guidelines, and adequate technical support.

The key moderating variable affecting the adoption of SW in PAs:

1. *Age* can significantly impact the adoption of smart working in public administrations. Younger employees are generally more open to new technologies, which can lead to quicker acceptance of smart working tools. In contrast, older employees may be more resistant due to a lack of familiarity with technology, requiring additional training and support. Indeed, age has been widely used and operationalized in different studies to assess employees' remote work productivity, engagement and stress (Galanti et al., 2021).
2. *Gender* also plays a role, as studies suggest that male employees may feel more comfortable with technology, potentially resulting in higher adoption rates. On the other hand, female employees might face different challenges, such as balancing work and family responsibilities, which could influence their acceptance and effective use of smart working. In the Italian context it was shown how mothers are keener on considering job requests as negotiable and perceive a pervasive interference of work on family life, while their husbands often claim that childcare activities may reduce their productivity (Cannito & Scavarda, 2020).
3. *Experience* is another critical factor. Employees with prior experience using similar technologies are likely to adopt smart working more readily, as they can transfer their skills. Conversely, those with less experience may struggle with the transition and need extra support to overcome barriers to adoption. Also, analyzed from a different but complementary lens, professionals who have gained specific knowledge and experience on different technologies may be reluctant to lose their expertise status.
4. *Voluntariness of use* affects acceptance. If smart working is mandated by the PA, employees might resist it, viewing it as a loss of control. However, if it is presented as an optional choice, employees may feel more empowered and motivated to adopt it, leading to more positive outcomes. In this context, since it is the specific manager of each PA that enables or disables the adoption of SW, the voluntariness of use itself can significantly shape the decision of implementing it or not.

The theoretical contributions of this study will be understanding how and to what extent each variable plays a role in shaping the behavioral intention and usage of SW in the context of PAs. This model will serve to understand if and to what extent, in both the case

studies that will be presented, the SW adoption is a “matter of technology” or a “matter of reluctance of the manager of each PA”. These two aspects are strongly interrelated and strongly impact the final decision of adopting SW practices within PAs.

METHODOLOGY

The case studies

The study aims to analyze the barriers to implementing SW in the context of Italian PAs. Specifically, after presenting the current regulatory framework in which PAs are contextualized regarding SW practices, our paper adopts a qualitative approach to examine a rich and continuously developing topic of SW in PAs (Arduini & Beck, 2023). Our work presents two case studies referring to two distinct PAs located in the Lazio region, which are associated with two different ministries where the frequency and possibility of working in SW differ. In this sense, we will have a typical case where the worker has the possibility of working remotely and a deviant case where the worker cannot. Following this structure, the case study follows the logic used by Yin (2014), choosing to examine two distinct cases because they offer contrasting situations and are subject to fewer vulnerabilities than a single case study. In analyzing the two different PAs, our findings can be considered dense in significance because they aim to emphasize which barriers exist in the adoption of SW. The decision to adopt a qualitative approach, and more specifically a data collection primarily based on semi-structured interviews, was made to gather insights on the everyday working life of both PAs, to better freeze which are the potential challenges of the adoption or non-adoption of SW. To this aim, the construction of two case studies seems to be consistent with freezing emerging differences in the two approaches, their challenges, and obstacles in an everyday routine.

The cases are conducted in two Italian Ministries. We decided to choose the case of two different Italian Ministries for three main reasons. First, the activities that are performed within these PAs frequently require intensive cooperation between different units. In this vein, we aim to uncover how the possibility of working remotely affects these interactions. Second, since the possibility of adopting SW in both PAs is different, we assumed that each manager of every specific unit within PAs could have a different vision of this work practice. In this vein, we could verify if and to what extent the non-adoption of SW was a consequence of an ambiguous regulatory framework (e.g., reluctance to adopt SW because of a perceived lack of control from the manager’s perspective) or rather because the new technologies could disable the performance of the PA. Indeed, as we mentioned before, the decision is usually made by the head of the individual organizational unit, who decides whether certain activities are suitable for remote work or not, and how many days are given from time to time. Third, it is usually mentioned that the Italian PAs suffer financial constraints, and lack of technological infrastructures compared to the private sector, so we aim to analyze this phenomenon in its entirety, examining its effect on both personal and working life. The case study methodology aligns with the theoretical framework by systematically exploring the key constructs of performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions. This alignment is achieved by using thematic analysis to investigate these constructs across the two PAs. This approach

aims to provide a comprehensive examination of how these theoretical constructs manifest in real-world settings, providing valuable insights into the factors influencing SW adoption in the public sector.

Data collection and analysis

The units of analysis, for the first research question, are the barriers that exist while adopting SW within Italian PAs. For the second research question, the unit of analysis is the regulatory framework's impact on the adoption of SW.

Data has been collected through documents, business records, and direct observations on the ministry's website. For secondary data, we conducted desk research on both ministries' websites and public records that can be easily accessed online. However, the main source for our study is 80 in-depth semi-structured interviews with the employees of the two ministries, 40 each. Moreover, a focus group interview was conducted with eight people working in the same unit, to better understand the internal dynamics both considering isolation and work-life balance. Usually, the participants in this type of research are selected on the criteria that they would have something to say on the topic, are within the age range, have similar socio-characteristics, and would be comfortable talking to the interviewer and each other (Rabiee, 2004). In this context, the two groups of individuals are classified as "non-front line workers". Their primary responsibilities involve handling administrative and legal paperwork through the institutional digital portal. They do not engage in direct interactions with customers or the public; instead, their role is predominantly focused on supporting managers in these internal processes. This lack of direct customer engagement distinguishes them from front line workers that are defined as public sector staff with some responsibility for delivering policy and services together with engaging with communities (Durose, 2009).

To reach a multitude of interviews, the participants were sampled through snowball sampling. This technique was also employed because there was a widespread conviction among the employees of the ministries that opening up on these topics could have generated repercussions at work. To this aim, through personal connections and friendships, the interviewees felt more comfortable opening up and telling us their impressions. However, together with them, we decided to guarantee anonymity both in terms of the case study (e.g., name of the ministry, PA's unit, number of employees, location) and of personal characteristics of the interviewee (e.g., name, role in the PA, background). The interviews lasted approximately thirty - sixty minutes and they were carried out by one of the authors. They were divided into three main sections.

The interview protocol was built to freeze three main aspects that were mainly divided into 1) the advantages of SW 2) the disadvantages of SW 3) the impact of SW on work-life balance. For the second case, following the same logic: 1) the potential advantage of implementing SW 2) the potential disadvantage 3) the impact of the non-adoption of SW on work-life balance.

The interviews were conducted in Italian, the interviewees' native language, recorded and later fully transcribed. Afterward, they were translated into English. Data triangulation

has been employed: this technique involves the use of different sources of data to examine phenomena across settings and at different points in time (Denzin, 2012).

Finally, a content analysis was realized: this technique makes replicable and valid inferences from data to their context (Krippendorff, 1989). Both descriptive and interpretive encoding was performed using the software for qualitative analysis MAXQDA 11. This approach was employed to explore emerging factors and to collect our textual data along the 4 dimensions of performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions. Also, the authors systematically employed thematic analysis by immersing themselves in the data, generating initial codes (to be assigned within the UTAUT framework) organizing these into broader themes, and refining and defining them to ensure a comprehensive and reliable interpretation of the qualitative data. (Terry, 2017). The analysis was first performed separately and then jointly by the authors to compare the results and guarantee intercoder reliability. In this vein, our research group tried to minimize the effect of subjectivity derived from the analysis of the textual matrix. In a qualitative study, intercoder reliability is particularly significant since words may have multiple meanings, may be open to interpretation, and may only be understood in the context of other words, making them harder to work with than numbers (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

The analysis was then shared and discussed with the other authors to identify new emerging patterns and to identify to what extent the four variables impacted the behavioral intention and usage.

The textual analysis will now be presented (Tab. 1; Tab. 2).

The results of the case study are briefly summarized in the next section.

Table 1: Case study 1 (Workers that adopt smart working within PAs)

Case study 1	Gender – Age	Textual data
Performance expectancy	Female – 32	In person, I definitely work better when there are tasks that require collaboration among colleagues. However, a significant portion of the work I do is independent. Therefore, the fact of being at home, focusing, avoiding interruptions, adhering to my schedule, and maintaining my productivity to achieve goals is something to consider. Even at home, I have all the technological means to work well because I have a laptop at my disposal, in addition to a new monitor that would otherwise be unused.
	Male - 33	Being a commuter, if I did not have the option of smart working, around 3 pm o'clock, I would have to leave the office to catch the train. The fact that I am in smart working allows me to finish my work from home, avoiding delays in project submissions.
Effort expectancy	Female – 28	From a software perspective, we are well-equipped both in the courtroom and at home. They have provided us with plenty of tools for smart working, including portable Wi-Fi, PCs, and monitors. The ministry's systems for document consultation work well even from home; there is no difficulty or difference in the effort expended to work from home, in my opinion.
	Female – 30	I feel that I am way more productive at home, I have everything I need, it is easier to complete some tasks. On the other hand, if I need to have interactions in my team I prefer to go on site.
Social influence	Male – 32	I had requested to accumulate more days of smart working, but I was told by the HR department that they were not so keen on doing this. In my opinion, working today is a tool that, if used properly, has nothing negative about it. I believe that those who don't want to work won't work, whether they are in the office or at home, and those who want to work will do so in both places. It's not the location that changes, but the perception is that despite having smart working, some managers think that people work less
	Female – 34	Even if I have the chance to work remotely, I feel like it is something that managers are reluctant to easily promote.
Facilitating conditions	Male – 36	Working from home is excellent; assistance in case of any issues is immediate. Moreover, in emergency situations, it is still possible to work from the company, so the support from the perspective of tool maintenance is optimal.

Source: *Authors' own elaboration*

Table 2: Case study 2 (Workers that do not adopt smart working within PAs)

Case study 2	Gender – Age	Textual data
Performance expectancy	Female – 30	Often at work, there are obstacles created by colleagues in the office. Several times, I found myself needing to focus on studying regulatory documents and judgments and bringing them home because I couldn't find the right concentration at the office. Therefore, not only it could be possible to do this type of work from home, but it would also be preferable for my specific role.
	Female – 32	Having the chance to work remotely is something that for me is strongly related with my future decision of staying in the ministry. Not only for my work-life balance but because I only feel controlled and an environment of distrust.
Effort expectancy	Female – 28	We are equipped with plenty of tools for smart working, including portable Wi-Fi, PCs, and monitors. But they are almost non-used, they are just used for watching Netflix on tv which is insane because the investment was huge.
	Female – 29	It would be much easier to work; furthermore, it improves the work-life balance. We could truly perform better, spending less money on transportation and being more focused on our tasks. I'm not suggesting completely replacing office work with remote work, but it could be useful, for example, during menstrual cycles for women.
Social influence	Male – 36	Our manager is against remote work because he has the perception that we are not working or that during idle times, we study for other exams. However, I believe that if someone is working remotely, they should have clear objectives to achieve, regardless of the methods used, and the quality of work should not be determined by the time spent.
	Male – 28	On one hand, excessive remote work could be detrimental as it might lead to constant isolation and a lack of in-depth knowledge about colleagues. However, for a few days, I don't understand why the perception persists that those who would like it means they don't want to work.
Facilitating conditions	Female – 33	Sometimes it happens to request an excerpt from a court ruling; these procedures must be carried out through the official channels of the office. Currently, there is no online procedure for certain specific requests.
	Male – 34	We have a kind of box through which we could connect to the ministry network even from home and access the portals with legal documents, ensuring security for the ministry by guaranteeing cybersecurity.

Source: *Authors' own elaboration*

DISCUSSION

Performance expectancy

In considering the performance expectancy in two distinct work scenarios, we find fascinating insights.

In the first case, where workers have the option of SW, the individual reflects on the dynamics of their tasks. They highlight the advantages of working independently at home, citing the ability to maintain focus, avoid interruptions, and adhere to a structured schedule. The presence of all necessary technological tools, including a laptop and a new monitor, contributes to an optimal work environment. Also, for commuters who usually rely on public transportation services, SW can represent a great solution in two aspects: first, it diminishes the cost (monetary and non-monetary) for the employer to join the offices and second, it allows being more reactive on uncompleted tasks. However, a nuanced perspective emerges, as the worker acknowledges that tasks requiring collaboration among colleagues are better suited for in-person interaction. Conversely, in the second case where SW is not an option, the worker reveals challenges faced in the office environment. Distractions from colleagues impede concentration, leading them to bring certain tasks home for a more conducive setting. Interestingly, the worker expresses a preference for working from home, suggesting not only the feasibility but also the desirability of such an arrangement for their specific role.

In both cases, the consideration of performance expectancy relies on the advantages offered by the respective working environments. The flexibility of SW appears beneficial for independent tasks, while the limitations of the office setting prompt a desire for a remote work option. These insights emphasize the nuanced nature of performance expectancy, shaped by the intricate interplay between individual preferences, task requirements, and the available work context. In this regard, the impact of the possibility to work remotely on behavioral intention, in both scenarios, is positive only if can be assessed as contextual. From this perspective, if remote work were to become an option to be practiced at specific times within PAs, the effect would manifest as an expectation of improvement in work performance.

Effort expectancy

In examining the two case studies through the lens of effort expectancy, distinctive patterns emerge that reflect the ease or challenges associated with SW.

In the first scenario, where workers have the option of SW, the individual expresses a high level of satisfaction with the software and tools provided for remote work. The seamless transition between the courtroom and home is attributed to well-equipped systems, including portable Wi-Fi, PCs, and monitors. The effort required to work from home is perceived as comparable to that of working on-site, with the added convenience of increased productivity and having all necessary resources readily available. Conversely, in the second case where SW is not feasible, there is an evident discrepancy between the availability of tools and their utilization. Despite being well-equipped with the same tools, these resources are underutilized, primarily serving non-professional purposes like “watching Netflix”. The sentiment here is one of missed opportunities, with the potential

for enhanced work performance and improved work-life balance through the adoption of SW. The worker advocates for strategic integration of SW, suggesting specific scenarios, such as during menstrual cycles for women, where it could prove beneficial.

In both cases, the degree of ease associated with the use of the system gets higher with the implementation of SW, because it provides an important option to fulfill specific tasks.

Social influence

In the first scenario, where workers have the option of SW, the influence of social factors, particularly managerial attitudes, becomes evident. The employee expresses a desire for more SW days but encounters resistance from the HR department. The belief is articulated that the efficacy of work is not inherently tied to the physical location, emphasizing that individuals who are inclined to work will do so regardless of being in the office or at home. However, a prevailing perception is noted that some managers harbor reservations about SW, perceiving it as a potential catalyst for decreased productivity. Despite having the opportunity for SW, there is a common sense of reluctance among managers to readily embrace and promote this mode of work. In the second case, where SW is not feasible, the influence of the manager's perception takes center stage. The manager's skepticism about SW stems from the belief that employees might not be fully engaged in their tasks or may misuse the time for personal activities. The employee counters this perception by advocating for clear objectives, asserting that the quality of work should be the primary measure, irrespective of the work location. In both instances, social influence, particularly from managerial perspectives, plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes toward SW. Resistance and skepticism, rooted in concerns about productivity and commitment, contribute to a complex dynamic where the adoption of SW is influenced not only by individual preferences but also by organizational and managerial attitudes, and organizational culture as a whole. In this vein, the social influence negatively shapes the behavioral intention of adopting SW in PAs where it is not an option and represents a constraint in those units where it is possible to adopt it.

Facilitating conditions

In analyzing the two case studies in terms of facilitating conditions for the adoption of SW, distinct factors related to support and infrastructure come to the forefront.

In the first scenario, where workers have the option of SW, facilitating conditions are notably conducive to a positive SW experience. The individual highlights the immediacy of assistance in case of any issues encountered while working from home. Additionally, flexibility is noted, as in emergencies, the option to work from the ministry's offices remains available.

Conversely, in the second case where SW is not possible, challenges arise due to the absence of certain facilitating conditions. The worker points out that specific procedures, such as requesting an excerpt from a court ruling, must be carried out through the official channels of the office. The absence of online procedures for such requests introduces a constraint in the workflow. However, a notable effort is made to establish a workaround, as the office has a secure box allowing connections to the justice network from home.

This setup facilitates remote access to legal documents and portals, ensuring cybersecurity and partially mitigating the limitations posed by the lack of a comprehensive online procedure.

In essence, the facilitating conditions in the first case contribute to a favorable environment for SW, with immediate support and emergency contingencies, and are positively related to the behavioral intentions of adopting SW. In the second case, while facing limitations due to specific procedural requirements, efforts are made to establish secure connections for remote access, demonstrating adaptability within existing constraints and an acknowledgment of the importance of cybersecurity. In this last case, the effect on behavioral intentions is almost positive since some constraints emerge.

Between technological and cultural barriers

The two case studies illustrate distinct cultural dynamics between workers who adopt SW and those who do not, shedding light on how managerial perceptions and resistance shape the work environment within PAs. In the first case, where SW is available, employees benefit from enhanced focus, fewer distractions, and a more flexible work-life balance. However, despite having all the necessary technological tools and support, a key cultural barrier persists—managers feel a loss of control over their teams. This fear of losing direct supervision leads to reluctance in fully promoting SW, even if it is still permitted. Employees report that requests for additional SW days are often denied, even when their productivity remains high (or higher) at home. This sense of distrust from the management, based on a perception that SW results in decreased oversight and lower performance still creates some sort of tension. As a result, even those who thrive under SW feel constrained by managerial resistance, which fuels their frustration and potentially increases their turnover intentions. However, there are no evident technological barriers: the infrastructure is well-equipped, with tools like portable Wi-Fi, PCs, and monitors functioning seamlessly both in the office and remotely. The efficiency of the system allows employees to work from home just as effectively as in the office, further boosting productivity and in some cases work-life balance. This is why behind the technological barrier lies a deeply rooted and more profound cultural barrier.

In the second case, where SW is not adopted, this cultural resistance is even more pronounced. Employees express significant dissatisfaction for the lack of flexibility that SW could provide. Managers, concerned with losing control over employees' daily activities, refuse to allow remote work, often suspecting that workers will misuse their time when unsupervised. This pervasive sense of distrust fosters an environment where employees feel micromanaged and undervalued. The absence of SW not only limits employees' ability to manage their work-life balance but also significantly increases their intention to leave the organization. Workers directly link the lack of SW to their future decisions regarding staying with or leaving the ministry, emphasizing how critical SW is for retention, especially for those who already struggle with daily commuting or for those who aim to look for a better work-life balance. In both cases, managerial fear of losing control acts as a primary barrier to adopting SW. This fear, deeply rooted in the organizational culture, (and more precisely in managerial culture) leads to a climate of mistrust that adversely affects employees who are afraid of repercussions that might be taken if they

asked for more flexibility with SW. While employees are eager to embrace SW for its flexibility and efficiency, the cultural dynamics within PAs, particularly the resistance from management, causing employees to reconsider their long-term commitment to the organization and lowering their productivity and their motivations.

Moreover, the regulatory framework plays a key role in fostering these cultural differences across similar PAs. While some PAs have embraced SW, offering it to employees who benefit from increased flexibility, others—due to the managerial reluctance mentioned above—refuse to adopt it. This inconsistency creates a fragmented landscape across PAs with similar functions. The regulatory environment, instead of standardizing SW practices across these institutions, allows for managerial discretion, which exacerbates cultural resistance and fails to create public value.

CONCLUSIONS

The study makes an important theoretical and practical contribution. From a theoretical perspective, this study gives a better comprehension of the adoption of the model developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003) in the context of Italian PAs by emphasizing which components play a crucial role in the Italian context.

First, our paper shows how performance expectancy, effort expectancy, and facilitating conditions positively shape the intention of implementing SW, but only at the employer's level. Conversely and secondly, our work emphasizes how social influence negatively shapes the implementation of SW, in both cases. The technological barriers represent a minimal factor negatively influencing the intention to adopt SW. In fact, despite the clear need for on-site work for certain activities that require specific interactions among colleagues, as well as access to specific documentation, within the technological barrier lies a cultural barrier. This barrier perceives SW as an opportunity to work less, with less control and, as a consequence, a reduced productivity from the perspective of the manager. These considerations raise strong implications in the human resource management area. Working remotely is associated in both cases with an increased distrust between managers and employees that can lead to amplify the turnover intentions. This seems to be consistent with Stavrova et al. (2023) who showed that on one side working remotely creates more trust in the organization at large but not in the supervisors/managers and co-workers and on the other side, the organization experiences lower turnover intentions. Moreover, in our study and especially for commuters, SW represents a crucial mean to fully commit to the organization itself. It was shown how it gave the employees the chance to complete their tasks without being forced to leave because of a frequent inefficient public transportation ecosystem. Those implications leave room for urgent developments and refinement of the regulatory framework that fails to provide equality among

Giuseppe Ceci is Industrial PhD Candidate in Management at Sapienza University of Rome & Eni, Italy. E-mail: giuseppe.ceci@uniroma1.it

Michela Iannotta is Associate Professor of Organization and Human Resource Management at Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. A. E-mail: michela.iannotta@uniroma1.it

Vincenzo Costa is Officer at the Italian Ministry of Infrastructures and Transport, Rome, Italy. E-mail: vincenzo.costa@alumni.luiss.it

PAs. Third, our study sheds light on the importance of building the UTAUT model based on the specific contingencies of the scenario where the PAs play, even considering the influence of the regulatory framework, the governments, and emerging policies on their performances and organizations. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first contribution that employs this model as a means to assess the regulatory framework in the domain of PAs. Moreover, from a practical side, our study will serve as a tool for policy-makers to freeze the bottleneck within Italian PAs. Our wish is that through these findings people working in the PAs will have the chance to be treated equally, and to pursue work-life balance.

In this sense, the interviews revealed the wide discretion granted to public managers in deciding whether to grant SW and in what ways, a discretion so extensive that in some cases it borders on total arbitrariness. In this perspective, a wide range of situations has been observed, from absolute denial to a limited concession during certain periods of the year (such as the exclusion of SW in the months of June-September and December-January without any apparent reason). This has created the paradox of employees who, despite performing the same tasks, do not receive the same treatment regarding the adoption of SW. Some managers of the interviewed employees have shown ideological opposition to SW, even ignoring some technological investments made by the PAs, thereby betraying the principles that guide their activity, as specified by Law 241/1990, namely the criteria of economy, effectiveness, impartiality, publicity, and transparency. Despite the role and expectations assigned to them by the guidelines of the Ministry of Public Administration in the POLA guidelines, it would be desirable, from a labor law perspective, to identify uniform rules that, in certain cases, bind managers and provide legal certainty to workers on the subject.

Some limitations exist in this study. Firstly, given the qualitative nature of the research, data interpretation could be subjective and therefore subject to criticism. Secondly, interviews were conducted at a micro-level, trying to identify workers' preferences that often do not coincide with company goals. Interviews should be integrated with different roles within the organization itself, considering a broader range of managers and employers (e.g., different ages, and work experience) to better freeze the technological and non-technological barriers in adopting SW. Finally, the two presented cases may not thoroughly capture the differences between different ministries: the results would be difficult to extend to other regional realities where institutional support and the regulation of individual territorial entities could be different.

However, these limitations leave room for future research that could 1) conduct quantitative studies using a broader set of data, 2) perform multi-level analyses by interviewing subjects in top positions in these ministries, 3) conduct analyses in different Italian regions to extend the results to diverse realities 4) testing the Venkatesh model in different countries to better freeze the differences between scenarios.

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APPENDIX

Interview protocol Case study 1 (Workers that adopt smart working within PAs)

Topic	Interview protocol
Advantages of Smart Working	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the key benefits you have experienced with smart working? 2. How has technology enhanced your productivity or efficiency while working remotely? 3. How has the flexibility of SW affected your work performance?
Disadvantages of Smart Working	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the main challenges you have encountered with smart working? 2. Have you experienced any technological issues while working remotely? If so, how have they impacted your productivity? 3. Do you feel that smart working has made it difficult to collaborate effectively with your team? Why or why not?
Impact of SW on Work-Life Balance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How has working remotely impacted your ability to separate work from personal life? 2. Have you found it easier or harder to maintain a healthy work-life balance since adopting smart working? 3. What technological tools or practices help you manage your work-life balance while working remotely?

Interview protocol Case study 2 (Workers that do not adopt smart working within PAs)

Topic	Interview protocol
Potential Advantages of Implementing Smart Working	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What potential benefits do you foresee with the adoption of smart working in your organization? 2. How could smart working improve overall productivity using technological tools? 3. What specific tasks or functions do you think would be enhanced by the flexibility of smart working? Or what would not work?
Potential Disadvantages of Implementing Smart Working	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What challenges or concerns do you anticipate with the potential adoption of smart working? 2. How might technological limitations impact the effectiveness of smart working in your team? 3. Are there any risks associated with reduced in-person interaction if smart working is implemented?
Impact of Non-Adoption of SW on Work-Life Balance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does the current office-based work arrangement affect your work-life balance? 2. Do you think the absence of smart working is limiting your ability to manage personal and professional life effectively? 3. If smart working were introduced, how do you think it would impact your work-life balance?

NOTES

- ¹ The Madia reform was a comprehensive modification of the “Testo Unico sul pubblico impiego” (Consolidated Act on public employment) originally dating back to 2001. The political and regulatory intent was to align the public administration with market economy principles, in line with the neoliberal vision and New Public Management. This concept of public administration, which emerged in the United Kingdom in the late 1980s during Margaret Thatcher's

government, did not yield the expected results, showing an increase in costs and a decrease in administrative efficiency. Nevertheless, the New Public Management vision also captivated the Italian legislator, becoming the core of the Madia Reform.

The "Madia reform" of Public Administration: political context, theoretical analysis, and implementation by D. Pommier Vincelli in *Rivista trimestrale di scienza dell'amministrazione* n.3/2017.

- ² The Jobs Act was enacted through two different legislative acts: Decree-Law no. 34/2014 and Law 183/2014. It represents a broad reform of the labor market in the private sector, aligned with the principles of labor market flexibility. The most significant change concerns the introduction of the "contract with increasing protections," which, for employees hired after the entry into force of the Decree, modified the key Article 18 of the Workers' Statute (Law 300/1970). This article previously allowed employees unjustly dismissed to be reinstated in their job by a judge. The new system, however, replaced the protection of reinstatement with a merely compensatory remedy, calculated based on the employee's length of service. Reinstatement in the workplace was maintained only in cases of discrimination.
- ³ L. 124/2015.
- ⁴ The Decree-Law no. 6 of February 23, 2020, was issued by the Government in an attempt to stop the spread of the Covid-19 virus after the first cases appeared on Italian territory. It contained a series of prescriptions and prohibitions reserved for the areas where the first cases were recorded, including the ban on performing non-essential work activities in person, allowing for remote work in exception.
- ⁵ Decree of Prime Minister 21 September 2021.
- ⁶ Piano operativo per il lavoro agile that stands for "Operational Plan for Agile Work" and it represents a part of the "Plan for the Performance".
- ⁷ Piano nazionale integrato per l'energia e il clima that stands for "Energy and climate national plan".