**Smart Working and Freedom**

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**ABSTRACT**

The protective measures of the emergency situation accelerated changes whose introduction had already begun, but their methods were not yet developed and their social debate had not yet taken place. Among the issues that have arised is the problem of the connection between smart working and freedom. In Europe, Italy was among the first to take restrictive measures in connection with the global pandemic. After the emergency ended in 2023, Rubbettino came to the public with an exciting book titled *Lo smart working tra la libertà degli antichi e quella dei moderni (Smart working: Between the freedom of the ancients and that of the moderns)*. The essays in it include the downsides of working smart, but overall they view the new work style as the opening of a new era that also provides a greater scope for experiencing freedom.

**Keywords:** ICT tools, opportunities, doubts, work organization.

The Covid-19 virus, which emerged in 2019 presented the greatest challenge of the 21st century so far. The protective measures of the emergency situation accelerated changes whose introduction had already begun, but their methods were not yet developed and their social debate had not yet taken place. The practices used during the pandemic raised numerous doubts and opportunities, the evaluation of which has continued ever since, and have brought to the surface remarkable conclusions. Among the issues that have arised is the problem of the connection between smart working and freedom.

Restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the disease have completely disrupted everyday life. The radical steps overrode the previous regulations and their cultural frameworks. New regulations and other additional solutions regarding the emergency situation were primarily determined by the organizational cultural characteristics identified by Geert Hofstede. “The main finding is that organizations are culture-bound. This applies not only to the behavior of people within organizations and to the functioning organizations as a whole; even the theories developed to explain to behavior in organizations reflect the national culture of their author, and so do the methods and techniques that are suggested for the management of organizations” (Hofstede, 1980: 252).

This statement was made back in the 20th century. Since then, ICT tools have permeated all areas of life, and teleworking and home office have emerged as a form of employment, but have not yet taken on a mass scale. The development of information technology and the increased degree of industrialization have offered new opportunities for development for both the people and the economy. “Collaborative systems will enable human individuals to realise their full creative potential in delivering personalised goods and services to consumers, with whom they can engage in a co-creative partnership through value networks. Collaboration with intelligent agents, cobotics and use of augmented reality systems can assist staff to find greater meaning in their work roles by removing dull and monotonous tasks and automating control systems. However, greatcare is needed in (co-)creating the organization of the future.” (Bednar and Welch, 2018: 293–294). In addition, problems have emerged (such as work-life balance, overtime, flexibility) that overshadow the new work organization. “Due to the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) human interactions in both work and private life are changing. […] The use of ICT can therefore be linked to changes in work and private life, the blurring of boundaries between the two spheres, which affects quality of life and general satisfaction.” (Dén-Nagy, 2013: 1).

However, during the pandemic, ICT solutions came to the fore, and even though they accelerated the process, difficulties and cultural differences still remained noticeable. “As parts of the world tentatively transition out of the Covid-19 pandemic, discussions about the future of work – in particular, how and where we will work in the future – continue. The pandemic propelled those segments of the workforce who could do so to work-from-home” (Islam, 2022: 33.) In a European context, Northern European countries appear to be more innovative than Southern and Eastern European states, and countries that show a willingness to innovate are characterized by small populations (under 10 million) and Protestant traditions (Ruzzeddu, 2023: 83).

Due to the temporary measures, many people lost their income, but those whose work was related to ICT tools were able to keep their jobs. The phenomenon was not unexpected, as the importance of knowledge has increased in recent decades, mainly so that economic actors and political decision-makers can develop appropriate strategies for the benefit of society. The analyses suggested that general technological development is more important than high-tech achievements, and that the service sector easily overcomes geographical borders. (Lawton Smith and Leydersdorff, 2012). However, the overturned social order raised many questions. Among other things, fears that were primarily formulated in Michel Foucault’s theory of power in biopolitics have been revived in Hungary. Uncertainty has prompted social scientists to exchange ideas,[[1]](#footnote-1) and gather their experiences (Fokasz et al, 2020).

In Europe, Italy was among the first to take restrictive measures in connection with the global pandemic. After the emergency ended in 2023, Rubbettino came to the public with an exciting book titled *Lo smart working tra la libertà degli antichi e quella dei moderni (Smart working: Between the freedom of the ancients and that of the moderns).* Francesco Maria Spanò, labor lawyer and HR Manager at Free University LUISS of Rome, has collected a dozen essays from various leading intellectuals and opinion leaders in order to help solve the problems and questions that arise in each area. The scientist considers the introduced measures to be a revolutionary step towards freedom in the field of work organization. “This epochal phenomenon, between new and old ways, which represents a newfound freedom, must be encouraged and requires rapid and appropriate responses” (Spanò, 2023: 6). Spanò outlined the connections between smart work and freedom in ancient and modern society through the opinions of ancient and Enlightenment thinkers. Human work is increasingly being replaced by computers, so employees “should, if possible, start moving towards social roles that have not been replaced by artificial intelligence” (Spanò, 2023: 15). According to the authors, smart work is a revolutionary social change that represents a new beginning: it entails a different lifestyle, a new work culture, and defines human relationships. The new work style is affecting women’s work and at the same time, it is opening up new opportunities for women. The essays analyze the health implications of smart working, the culture of safety, the art market becoming digital, digital nomads, the rethinking of work organization between home and office, the world of the metropolis, and environmental sustainability. Finally, Spanò discusses flexible work organization in small villages.

The essays include the downsides of working smart, but overall they view the new work style as the opening of a new era that also provides a greater scope for experiencing freedom. The book enriches the public, the scientific communities, and the world of opinion leaders with inspiring findings.

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1. See: Biopolitics and an Exceptional Situation. Annual Conference on the History of Ideas and Political Theory, HUN–REN Hungarian Research Network, Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Political Science, Budapest, 4th December 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)