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THEME E.11 EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

THE SHIFT TO REMOTE WORKING IN EUROPE AND ITALY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORKERS TRAINING POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

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The purpose of this paper is to analyse the challenges and opportunities related to continuing professional education for workers in the context of digital innovation and the shift to remote work, amplified and accelerated by the pandemic. Remote work requires new skills, at every level, involving both the use of the tools and applications needed to perform remote activities and the ability to coordinate, organize, and evaluate work activities differently. Through an overview of European and national policies for recovery and resilience, in the field of lifelong learning and continuing training, the paper highlights the effort made to rapidly adapt strategies to the new framework imposed by the twin transitions and the increasing use of informal training with the adoption of new tools such as Individual Learning Accounts and Micro-credentials. The former aim to put into practice the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights for the right to training, while the latter respond to an already existing reality of smart and digital training certification (targeted at specific skills). The situation in Italian companies during the period of the health emergency is then analysed regarding the use of remote work, the skills required and the way continuing professional training is managed, through data from the Inapp Indaco Imprese (Companies) 2020 Survey.

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## 1. SUMMARY

## 2. Introduction

The challenges and opportunities related to continuing vocational training and workers' skills in the context of digital innovation and the shift to remote work, amplified and accelerated by the pandemic, play a key role in the broader green and digital transitions, as well as in the recovery and resilience of a post-COVID-19 Europe. The European Union places a human-centred approach to transition policies towards the necessary up-skilling and re-skilling, particularly for digital skills, as a priority in post-pandemic recovery and as a prerequisite for inclusive and sustainable growth. Already before the pandemic, 128 million adults in Europe needed up-skilling and re-skilling (46 per cent of adults), and subsequently three out of four companies experienced changing skills needs due to the pandemic (Van Loo et al 2021). A renewed paradigm of life-long learning that also finds a concrete application in the new models of work organisation and production, through policies for continuing education, defined at European level as CVET (Continuing vocational education and training) aimed at supporting the worker in the growth and adaptation of his or her skills (Cedefop 2019).

### 2.1. *EU lifelong learning Policies for recovery*

One of the first actions in the emergency period and in particular in the lockdown was the European Commission's SURE initiative, launched in April 2020 (a temporary support tool to mitigate the risks of unemployment in emergencies following the COVID-19 pandemic), with a focus on training, including training of workers at risk of losing their jobs, as a corporate and individual investment. Subsequently, the European Commission launched a new Action Plan for Digital Education and Training (European Commission a2020), calling on Member States to build on the experience of the emergency to develop better quality, more accessible and inclusive digital teaching, learning and assessment as a key element of Europe's transition, using the Recovery and Resilience Instrument with national NRPs. The plan foresees two strategic priorities: on the one hand, the promotion of a new digital education and training system (infrastructure, connectivity, digital devices, digital organizational capacity building, improvement of digital skills of staff involved in training and education, high quality learning content with accessible tools and secure platforms). On the other hand, the development of digital competences and skills necessary for digital transformation. After all, already with the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the Commission had already defined a number of concrete initiatives, among which the first one was dedicated to Education, Training and Lifelong Learning: 'Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and to manage labour market transitions successfully' (European Commission b2021).

Subsequently, two instruments provided for in the Skills Agenda were introduced: individual learning accounts (ILA) (European Commission c2021) and so-called micro-credentials. These instruments were envisaged by the European Commission, following the increasing use of informal digital training, in short modules and focused on specific, targeted and immediate skills objectives, accentuated by the pandemic and social restrictions. These are 'regulation' tools that already exist in Member States and are already widespread in countries such as Australia. In Europe they constitute a relatively recent learning pathway; their main characteristic is the flexibility in the pace of training that allows individuals to build their portfolio of skills by adding alternative 'credentials' (including digital badges, micro-credentials, nano-credentials, rewards, etc.). In the context of life-long and life-wide learning, micro-credentials would enable the certification of skills acquired through short learning experiences that are developing rapidly in Europe and worldwide, provided by a wide variety of public and private providers in response to the demand for more flexible and learner-centred forms of education and training (OECD a2021). The European Commission launched this proposal in the

European Agenda for Skills, in 2020, as one of its twelve flagship actions to support the quality, transparency and dissemination of microcredits across the EU, due to their massive uptake with the shift to online training and the adoption of remote working (European Commission d2021). The proposal does not aim to replace existing national processes in the organisation of education and training, employment, or labour markets, but only to consider complementing them with micro-credits, with national governance in terms of quality assurance and recognition processes, in formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts.

In the proposal for a Recommendation to the Council on ILA (European Commission e2021), it is also stated that "the European Commission's impact assessment analysis reported two key issues: workers do not receive sufficient financial support for training. The proposal concerns all adults of working age, regardless of labour force or employment status, including the self-employed and others in atypical forms of work. The urgency of the Commission's action stems from its estimate that the Skills Agenda targets will not be met: 'unless decisive action is taken, adult learning participation is expected to reach only around 49% by 2030, falling well short of the 60% target'. To reach these targets, the draft Recommendation calls on Member States to establish ILAs, "as a means of enabling individuals to participate in labour market relevant training, within a framework that includes guidance and validation opportunities, to support the effective take-up of training

In the context of remote work and in the declinations of smart and digital learning, therefore, both ILAs and micro-credentials offer prospects for the recognition, validation and certification of skills acquired also through informal types of training. A new system that requires greater interaction with workers for a new role of continuous training, integrating individual and collective needs, with a view to continuous improvement and adaptation of skills.

### *3.1. Continuing training policies for recovery in Italy*

In Italy, the level of digital skills of citizens and workers still shows figures far below the European average. The data with which the European Commission has been monitoring the digital progress of the Member States since 2014 through the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) reports only recorded progress in 2021 in the integration of digital technologies and in digital public services, bringing Italy from 25th to 20th place. With regard to Human Capital data, Italy remains 25th with deficiencies in basic and advanced digital skills, which risk translating into the digital exclusion of a significant part of the population and limiting the innovation capacity of SMEs. Tenth place for digital technology integration translates into a good level of digital intensity at least at basic level (69%, well above the EU average of 60%), which must necessarily be accompanied by progress in bridging the digital skills gap, in order not to dissipate the benefits of investment in innovation. Low-skilled adults, lacking even the digital skills necessary to benefit from digital learning, risk exclusion from the labour market and this situation may affect their opportunities to improve their general and specific skill levels and retrain. Italy also has an overall public expenditure on education, training and research of 6.9 per cent of GDP, against an average of OECD countries of 10.8 per cent (2019 data) (OECD b2021). A central pillar of the recovery strategy is to maximize the effect of Next Generation EU funds on investment to stimulate long-term growth and employment. Actions aimed at overcoming Italy's digital divide and strengthening 'digital citizenship' by improving basic digital skills continue to be part of a broader National Digital Skills Strategy, within the PNRR (Italian Government 2021) component (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) Reskilling and Upskilling.

The impact of the COVID-19 emergency on lifelong learning was disruptive, suddenly revolutionizing work organisation systems and the way training was delivered with the sudden switch to distance training modalities (Fad). As in the world of education, many critical issues emerged, but one unexpected result was the push towards innovation, which made it even more urgent to develop new skills, especially digital ones, with the retraining of workers. The shift to remote forms of work and training, imposed by the pandemic, and then continued to a lesser extent, amplified the effects of a digital transformation that was already underway, with Industry 4.0 since 2011, to move us towards the new EU industrial approach Economy 5.0, which put human and society at the center and sees technology as a tool (European Commission 2022a).

The COVID-19 emergency, has highlighted some critical aspects of training systems, and above all has made evident the digital divide in our country, which has nonetheless been able to cope with the period of physical distancing imposed on almost all sectors of work and education, making possible a marked acceleration in the adoption of new measures for the innovation of infrastructures and skills in all sectors. The fact remains that the pandemic crisis has made the topic topical and put it on the agenda for new education.

#### *4. 1. Training activities in Italian companies and remote working*

The situation of Italy in the pre-pandemic period, as noted by the European Commission in the Country Report Italy of February 2020, pointed to the need to better integrate active labour policies and adult training, in the presence of a low participation rate in training (in 2018 only 8.1% had a recent learning experience against an EU average of 11.1%), especially of low-skilled adults (2%). Eurostat CVTS (Continuing Vocational Training Survey) data noted that in 2015 only 60.2% of companies with at least 10 employees had carried out training activities, compared to a European average of 72.6%. In 2017, Istat then estimated that 38.8% of 18–74-year-olds had carried out at least one formal or non-formal training activity in the 12 months prior to the interview, a share up by about 4 percentage points compared to the previous survey in 2012. After the negative data for the crisis years, however, increasing data had also started to be recorded for lifelong learning: the share of 25–64-year-olds following training activities in Italy was 41.5%, 3.6 points lower than the EU28 average (45.1%) in 2017.

Critical factors for workers in training during the shutdown period included the digital divide and the immediate availability of devices and fiber-optic connections; and low-skilled adults without the necessary basic skills to benefit from digital learning had the most difficulty. Istat recorded a 0.9 percentage point drop in the rate of participation in a recent learning experience in 2020 as a result of the pandemic and containment measures. However, this decline was relatively small compared to what was recorded in the EU (-1.6 points) and in some countries, including France (-6.5 points) (Eurostat). For companies and trainers (especially for SMEs and micro enterprises), who were forced to suddenly review their operating methods and training priorities in 2020, the critical issues were identified by the OECD and the European Commission as difficulties in finding and using new distance learning tools, in building a new relationship with learners, in coping with an enormous amount of work; with in many cases a shortage of digital, communication and basic transversal skills (resilience, creativity); the very systems used to assess competences and to award qualifications were impacted by the emergency. But all these difficulties have allowed those companies that have been able to seize the race for digital innovation, a remarkable progress in the integration of new digital technologies, and the only positive data that the European DESI index recorded in 2021, was precisely this.

The impetus for training in companies is also clearly visible in the recent Protocol adopted by the Ministry of Labour in agreement with the social partners: National Protocol with guidelines for collective bargaining on agile work in the private sector (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies 2021). This is the second measure in Europe to regulate smart working and includes a specific section on training to ensure "equal opportunities in the use of work tools and the enrichment of one's professional skills, as well as to spread a corporate culture oriented towards the empowerment and participation of workers". Continuous training could also be promoted through incentives and is also recognized as having a role of interaction and exchange to prevent situations of isolation.

#### *5. 1. INDACO Imprese (Companies): data on CVET, skills and remote working.*

INAPP has carried out three editions of the Survey on Knowledge in Enterprises (INDACO-Imprese), through a statistical survey on the training activities carried out by enterprises for their employees. INDACO-Imprese allows the elaboration of some key indicators on the diffusion of training activities in Italian enterprises with at least 6 employees. To this end, the survey collects information on the training activities provided by the enterprise, on the levels of training participation of employees, on the organisation of work

and company training. It also highlights company training strategies with a focus, in this edition, on the policies and intervention models adopted by companies in terms of skills development and the impact of COVID-19-19 on company activities. INDACO-Imprese is a rigorous and methodologically accurate survey, carried out by INAPP on the basis of scientific cooperation with ISTAT.

Included among the surveys of public interest, its implementation is foreseen by the National Statistical Plan of SISTAN (IAP-00006) and by the National Operational Programme - Active Employment Policy Systems (PON SPAO) co-financed by the European Social Fund. The survey uses methodologies, classifications and definitions used in the Eurostat CVTS (Continuing Vocational Training Survey) and therefore also takes the name "INDACO-CVTS" as it allows comparisons to be made with the corresponding five-yearly surveys carried out in 30 European countries. The Survey involves a sample of 20,000 Italian companies' representative by territory, size and sector of economic activity.

The edition with data for 2020 included a focus on the health emergency due to the Coronavirus and, specifically, on the changed ways of carrying out work activities in the country's manufacturing realities, investigating the use and enhancement of smart working by companies and the skills they consider essential for the effective use of this tool. The provisions put in place by companies in terms of the suspension, delivery and management of training courses, during the health emergency, were analysed, delving into the training methods used by companies that implement distance learning courses and, finally, the criticalities they encountered in the implementation of distance learning.

The health emergency due to the Coronavirus and the consequent measures adopted to contain the pandemic influenced the way work was conducted in the country's production realities; among these, the need to resort to remote work for their employees played a significant role. Consequently, it is of the utmost importance to understand the behaviour adopted by companies in response to the containment measures, both in terms of the use and expansion of smart working and the adaptation of company training to the changed context conditions.

Table 1 shows how 30.8% of companies with 6 employees and more adopted or enhanced smart working for their employees following the COVID-19-19 health emergency. As the size class of the enterprises increases, a progressive increase in percentage values is observed: from 22% of micro enterprises to 87% of large enterprises. At the level of territorial breakdown, there is a greater proportion of companies with operational headquarters in the North and central Italy that have opted for smart working (34.4% in the North-West, 30.7% in the North-East and 29.1% in central Italy) compared with 23.2% in the South and the islands.

*Table 1 – Enterprises with 6 employees and more that have adopted or enhanced remote working (smart working) in Italy for their employees as a result of the COVID-19 emergency, by employee class and territorial distribution. Year 2020 (in % of companies).*

	<i>Companies that have adopted or enhanced smart working</i>
<b>Employee class</b>	
6-9	22.0
10-49	35.0
50-249	64.5
Over 250	87.0
<b>Territorial distribution</b>	
North-West	37.4
North-East	30.7
Centre	29.1
South and Islands	23.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30.8</b>

Source: INAPP – National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies

Table 2 shows how the skills necessary for web browsing, effective information search methodology, online communication and use of email is similar for all size classes and territories (around 65%) and they are considered more relevant than the others. Skills necessary for web browsing, effective information search methodology, online communication and use of email range around 30% and is maximum (34%) for large enterprises, and more important for companies based in the South of Italy (37.8%), probably due to the larger digital skills gap at territorial level. Skills to use digital technology safely in the work environment are more relevant in larger companies (57.5%) located in the North-East (46.5%) and Centre (44.6%) of Italy with an average of 43.8% at the national level. Skills for setting up and using tools for online production and collaboration and cloud computing are considered essential by an average of 30.9% companies at the national level and are much more important to larger enterprises (46.6%).

Table 2 – Enterprises with 6 employees and more that have adopted or enhanced remote working (smart working) in Italy for their employees as a result of the COVID-19 emergency, and the skills considered essential for its effective use, by employee class and territorial breakdown. Year 2020 (in % of companies).

	<i>Skills related to the use of computers and connected devices, file creation and management, networks and data security</i>	<i>Skills necessary for web browsing, effective information search methodology, online communication and use of email</i>	<i>Skills to use digital technology safely in the work environment</i>	<i>Skills for setting up and using tools for online production and collaboration and cloud computing</i>
	<b>Skills considered essential for effective use of the remote working</b>			
<b>Employee class</b>				
6-9	66.2	32.5	39.4	29.3
10-49	65.6	30.0	44.6	30.3
50-249	64.9	29.6	49.9	34.2
Over 250	66.5	34.0	57.5	46.6
<b>Territorial distribution</b>				
North-West	67.2	27.8	41.9	30.2
North-East	66.1	30.5	46.5	28.4
Centre	64.0	31.7	44.6	34.0
South and Islands	64.0	37.8	43.0	32.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>65.8</b>	<b>30.9</b>	<b>43.8</b>	<b>30.9</b>

Source: INAPP – National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies

### 6.1. Regional measures to support training for remote work in companies

In Italy, the repercussions of the increased use of remote work on continuing vocational training and training profiles have consisted in favouring distance learning, while on the content side, digital skills have been enhanced, with the aim of also bridging the country's serious digital divide and the mismatch between labour supply and demand that characterises the Italian labour market. These issues are bound to have an impact on the Italian framework in the future as well, also driven by the investments and measures of the PNRR.

In the period between 2020 and 2021, in which the use of remote working services was greatest, regional and local administrations also played a primary role in conducting information campaigns and training courses on remote working modes and facilitated access to continuing vocational training for companies, helping to ensure that workers could easily switch to remote working with the opportunity to retrain, improve and expand their skills (OECD 2020). Below are some of the measures of the Italian regions to support remote working.

Latium, with a public notice called Smart Working Company Plans, has promoted a new measure to support businesses and workers within the framework of the more general initiatives activated in the current phase of epidemiological emergency by COVID-19, in order to allow the continuation of the company's productive

activity with maximum efficiency and effectiveness, by financing measures to support the adoption of innovative models of work organisation, through the development of company plans and the adoption of appropriate IT tools, to adopt agile or smart working tools.

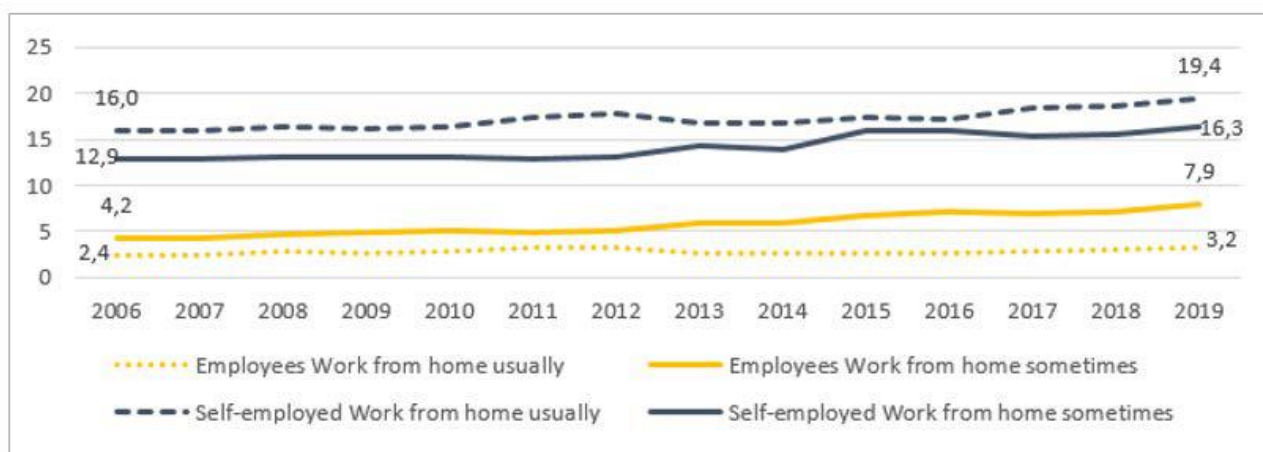
Basilicate has set up a scheme to support businesses that adopt teleworking plans: SMEs, self-employed workers, and freelancers can receive aid of up to 70% of the expenditure incurred in setting up teleworking plans for their employees. Friuli Venezia Giulia has launched a call for contributions to self-employed workers, cooperatives, and small businesses with up to 50 employees to support the adoption of teleworking plans, with contributions covering all expenses incurred during the entire lifecycle of the adoption of teleworking. Liguria has set up a voucher system for SMEs adopting teleworking plans: subsidies cover 60 per cent of the investment in training and digital technology. Lombardy has set up a public system to support the adoption of teleworking plans, with contributions covering the costs incurred for digital training and the purchase of information technology. Molise published the public call 'To lavoro agile' for the promotion of teleworking among SMEs. Finally, Piedmont expanded a pre-existing teleworking programme by increasing its budget.

All the measures adopted by the Italian Regions were implemented thanks to the prompt reprogramming of the Regional Operational Programmes linked to the European Social Fund (ESF) or the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

### 7.1. Remote working in the European Union before and after the COVID-19.

Eurostat European Labour Force Survey collects information on those working from home usually, sometimes or never. As shown in Figure 1, between 2006 and 2019 the incidence of workers working from home grew slowly in the EU27, from 10% in 2006 to 14.3% in 2019. The share of employees working from home increased especially for those working from home sometimes, reaching 7.9% in 2019. This increase was mainly due to the increase in the share of those working from home only sometimes (from 5.5% in 2006 to 9% in 2019), while the share of those usually working from home increased only very little (from 4.6% in 2006 to 5.4% in 2019). (European Parliament 2021).

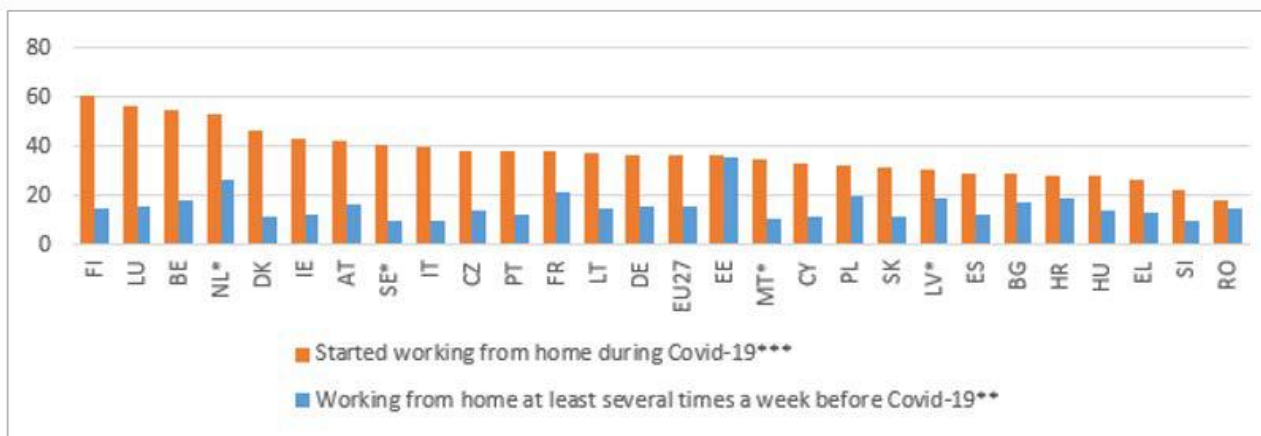
Figure 1 – Share of workers aged 15-64 working from home by status and frequency (%), EU-27, 2006-2019



Source: Eurostat (LFSA\_EHOMP).

As shown in figure 2, the share of those who started working from home as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, is higher in those countries where teleworking was already well developed before the pandemic (e.g. BE, FI, LU, NL, SE), and in those that were most affected by the outbreak of the pandemic, such as, for example, Italy.

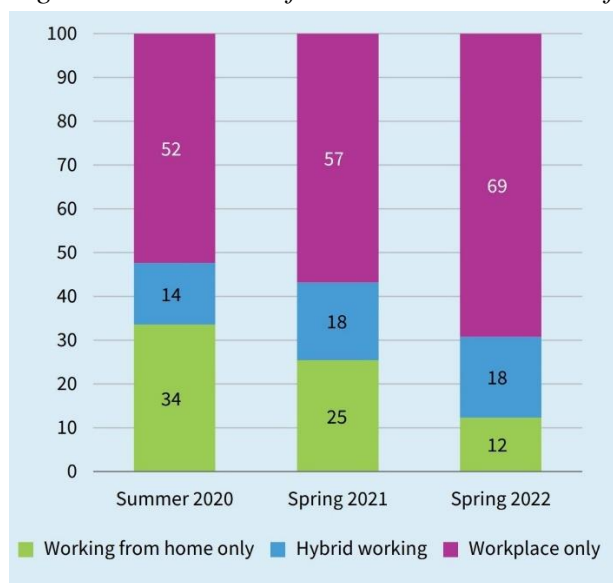
Figure 2 – Share of population (18+) working from home before the COVID-19 pandemic and share of those who started working from home as a result of COVID-19 pandemic (%), (April 2020 wave)



Source: Eurofound.

The evolution of the use of remote working (from home) has been measured by the Eurofound Survey *Living, working and COVID-19*. As shown in figure 3, in the summer of 2020, just over 33% of EU workers surveyed worked exclusively from home, which decreased to 25% by 2021, as restrictions were lifted. In spring 2022, only 12% were working exclusively from home. Hybrid work (working partly from home, partly from the workplace) gained ground in 2021, and has stayed at the same level in 2022 (Eurofound 2022).

Figure 3 – Location of work across three Eurofound e-surveys round (%)



Source: Eurofound

## CONCLUSION

The impact of remote working on the skills requirements of employers and on training of the workforce should be investigated more deeply into different levels and types of occupations. In particular, more attention should be paid to the analysis of managerial training, which plays a major role as it is crucial for organizing and managing remote work and smart working for all workers involved. Even the impact on working organization with the adoption of remote working or hybrid working, which have driven many individuals into more frequent and intensive online activities, should be examined more closely to study the effects on digital skills.



Remote working is closely linked to the issues related to continuing training of workers, considering that at the COVID-19 outbreak, many people still didn't have the digital skills needed to work remotely (European Commission 2020b), as one third of the EU labour force had very limited digital skills in 2019 (European Commission 2022).

A recent study (European Parliament 2021) emphasizes this crucial role of skills and training, especially for managers and supervisors, to reap the full benefits of remote working: "For workers, telework may entail greater time and place flexibility, enhanced job autonomy, improved work-life balance and reduced commuting time. Telework may also improve employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, older workers, women with care responsibilities, people living in rural or peripheral areas. However, to be fully grasped, these opportunities require a number of enabling conditions, e.g., child-care facilities and services, digital skills training, access to adequate and affordable broadband and ICT equipment."

The implications for digital divides should be also placed at the center of the analysis on remote working, considering that: "The massive expansion of teleworking across the EU following the COVID-19 pandemic and related confinement measures, have therefore exacerbated the digital skills gap that already existed, and the uneven access to digital technologies, giving rise to new inequalities and leaving behind those who are already at a disadvantage, not only for working and learning, but also for personal life" "In addition, the pandemic has made digital skills' training even more difficult as online learning is not available for those who are digitally excluded, aggravating the training challenges associated with the upskilling of those with low digital skills" (European Parliament 2021).

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