The outcome of 'smart working' policies on cultural workers in the Italian Public Sector

Arturo Mariano Iannace
IMT Scuola Alti Studi Lucca

Davide Emanuele Iannace
CNR-IRCrES - La Sapienza Università di Roma

Sara Pane
La Sapienza Università di Roma

This work focuses on the impact of smart working applied to cultural operators working in sites located in the South of Italy, and in rural and inner areas. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, work had been undergoing radical changes, in what we can call a 'smart' and digital turn. We decided to focus on how the Italian government and the literature have defined and addressed the terminology of 'smart working', observing its application – with an eye on the de-spatialisation of workplaces themselves.

Questo lavoro affronta il tema dello smart working applicato agli operatori culturali presenti nel Sud Italia e nelle aree classificate come interne e rurali. Sin da prima del Covid-19, le modalità di organizzazione del lavoro avevano iniziato concettualmente ad affrontare una profonda ristrutturazione legata alla de-spazializzazione dei lavoratori in ottica smart e digitale. Pertanto, qui si vogliono affrontare le più recenti definizioni dello smart working, come presenti in letteratura e in ambito legislativo nel contesto italiano, osservando la sua applicazione e le sue mancanze.

Introduction

Covid-19 has fundamentally changed how people work and how they move to and from their workplaces (de Lucas Ancillo *et al.* 2021; da Silva Corrêa and Perl 2022). However, it is arguably not possible to simply interpret remote working as a new tendency born out of the pandemic (Vlaar *et al.* 2008). Companies, with start-ups and other tech-driven ventures at the forefront, had already experimented with the idea of flexible work in the past, long before the pandemic. Nonetheless, limited research work has been undertaken to evaluate the benefits, drawbacks, and overall effects of the 'agile' model of work organisation within the Italian Public Administration (PA). Cultural workers have been severely affected by the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic and the measures taken to contain the contagion. In 2019, the tourism industry had made a significant contribution to the global GDP, accounting for 10% of it (Cresta 2021). The initial data following the emergence of the pandemic indicated a substantial decline in the tourism sector with the World Tourism Organisation projecting a staggering decrease of 440 million arrivals for the entirety of 2020 (UNWTO 2020). In Italy, attention to the issue has been present from the very beginning. The cultural sector in Italy not only employs a substantial portion of the workforce but also plays a crucial role in the economy, particularly in relation to the tourism industry. The cultural sector's ability

to attract visitors makes it a significant driver of changes that can have far-reaching impacts on various aspects of the Italian economy and society. In parallel to this, the digitisation of working processes within the Public Sector (PS) became a growing priority, identified even before the pandemic struck.

The focus on the cultural sector also finds its motivation in some of the specificities such a sector enjoys, and which make for an interesting benchmark, beyond the sheer contribution it gives to the Italian GDP, as mentioned above. In particular, the cultural sector is characterized by a strict intertwining between the competences of the cultural worker (in the case of museums or similar institutions, usually art historians or archaeologists, for example) and their ability to interact with, and address, a wide and diverse audience. This peculiarity of the cultural sector made it extremely vulnerable, for obvious reasons, to the consequences of Covid-19. It made it also (at least, potentially) a test-bed for technologies which could not find a role in other sectors of the PA, or at least not as widely, well before the pandemic (e.g. virtual reality). However, this reliance on cultural worker-audience interaction exposed the sector to the risk of being 'left behind' during the critical times of the pandemic. In other words, the cultural sector within the Italian PA, was, at the time of the pandemic, at a crossroads between the high potentialities for digitisation processes on one hand and the risk of being considered an unfeasible receiver of those same processes, to be simply kept 'in stasis' until the emergency was over, on the other.

An analysis of teleworkability by sectors indicates that most civil servants in Public Administrations perform tasks that can be executed remotely from their homes, even though the transitioning to digital work necessitates training for the acquisition of the requisite technical competencies (Barbieri *et al.* 2022; Sostero *et al.* 2020). Nonetheless, the digitisation of cultural operators has remained a partially uncovered issue and a limited number of studies have addressed the tele-workability of this sector.

Starting from this research gap, this paper aims to investigate the implications arising from the digitisation of operational procedures within the Italian Public Sector in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on cultural workers, here perceived as potential representatives of the Italian PA. By adopting an analytical approach, we will conduct a thorough analysis to examine the specific consequences and outcomes resulting from this specific kind of transition to digital. In order to accomplish this, the paper will first reconstruct the theoretical frame of reference that defines the institutional policy framework regulating the so called *smart working* practices in the Italian PA in response to the aforementioned health crisis. Then, it will shift its analysis towards the cultural sector, with a specific focus on southern Italy. The consideration arises to leverage the opportunities presented by *smart working* as an organisational practice that might facilitate the relocation of workers engaged in areas with low population or territories at risk of depopulation, a rising trend in southern Italian regions (Leon *et al.* 2023; ISTAT 2023a). This explains the transition from a national-level to a regional-level analysis. One last premise concerns the choice to frame the current research inside the specific concept of *smart working*. As argued by Pareschi (2021), English labels used for designing the act of working from home are different. Among them: 'telework', 'work at home', 'work from home', 'home-based work' and other labels that refer to different combinations of these primary terms (ILO 2020). Nonetheless, when communicating with the broader public, Ministries and other Governmental entities mainly refer to another label: that of *smart working* (Pareschi 2021).

The appropriation of this specific concept by the Italian public opinion and policy-making actors, especially following significant coverage in both traditional and non-traditional media, represents an important step in the operational decision to focus our documentary research on references primarily and explicitly dealing with *smart working* within the Italian PA.

The paper builds on this concept with the goal of analysing how such a working model was implemented in a specific national context, the Italian one, and in a peculiar and unique sector: culture. Italy boasts a relatively strong cultural sector, employing nearly 1.5 million individuals in the creative and cultural industries (Fondazione Symbola and Unioncamere 2023). Here the focus will be on two components of the cultural industry itself: museums and heritage sites. This emphasis primarily stems from the peculiarities of these typologies of cultural sites, previously mentioned,

and that could be summarised by the terms 'proximity' and 'physicality' (here meaning a more or less direct physical, unmediated contact with the public). Unlike many other realities impacted by Covid-19, in fact, both museums and cultural heritage sites could not transfer their main activities to a *smart working* environment.

The objective then is to observe how *smart working* policies were adopted by the Ministry of Culture and assess whether these same policies had an impact on the ongoing operations of museums and cultural sites. The hypothesis being brought forward here is that, despite their attempts to digitalise their collections, and to increase their quota of activities not directly related to their physical sites (and thus easily transferable to a digital domain), museums and cultural sites encountered serious challenges when confronted with new models such as *smart working*.

The first step will be to look at how *smart working*, in its broadest sense, was adopted by both private and public actors operating in Italy. It will thus be possible to see a change between the onset of Covid-19 (Bruni 2021) and how the general discourse around *smart working* was 'sold' as a possible solution to the work crisis the modern economy faces. From this overview, it will be possible to move on to look specifically at the Italian cultural sector (once again including both private and public actors), at how the pandemic initiated a radical change in the behaviour of both consumers and providers of cultural products, and at the kind of policies that were implemented on such a sensitive issue. Here the choice to focus on the specific concept of *smart working* instead of, for example, remote or *agile* working, (Crnogaj *et al.* 2022) has been due to the peculiarities of *smart working* itself. Indeed, it is this concept that introduces into the work environment a new idea of a-spatiality of work without touching the organisation of work itself, being potentially compatible, in this form, also with other characteristics of the Public Administration. It is different from other remote working practices, such as *agile* working, because it does not focus on procedural 'optimisation' and 'improvement' inside the organisation itself.

It will then be possible to proceed on to describe and analyse the individual application of policies, if and where it happened, in an attempt at understanding and, possibly, hypothesising potential future developments for the sites under scrutiny.

The comprehensive overview of limits and opportunities that *smart working* could offer to Civil servants in Italian PA aims to contribute to a relatively unexplored area of research. Out of the total studies on Pubmed using the key term *smart working* (which number less than 20), 14 were conducted in Italy and published in 2020. This noteworthy trend can be attributed to the emergence of remote work associated with the Covid-19 health crisis (Di Tecco *et al.* 2021).

1. 'Smart working' in the Italian Public Administration: an overview of the institutional framework in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic
'Smart working' in the Italian Public Sector

The institutional intent to streamline and rationalise work processes while increasing the flexibility in the use of human resources within Public Administration, so as to achieve higher management efficiency and a better balance between employees' work and personal time (Ferzetti 2016) has prompted the introduction of regulations specifically governing teleworking within the Italian PA since the early 1990s. Regulated through the legislative framework defined by Law No. 191 of June 16th 1998 and D.L.P.R No.70 of March 8th 1999, teleworking is a practice that differs from *smart working* (also known as 'smart work') to which this contribution specifically refers. The legislation allows Public Administration to implement remote working inside residential premises, typically an employee's home, during standard office hours while maintaining connectivity to the company through information and communication technology. It prioritises privacy and security, establishes the right to disconnect, and ensures remote workers have equal rights as office-based workers. The legislation promotes work-life balance and protects the rights of workers and company information (Lodovici *et al.* 2021). Unlike *smart working*, teleworking is subject to strict regulations concerning the employee's working environment, connectivity methods, and authentication processes for operating systems (Lodovici *et al.* 2021).

It is therefore imperative to provide a clear technical definition of smart working at the outset, ensuring a mutual understanding of the concept and its practical applications. The process of gradually introducing *smart working* in the Public Sector, under the framework of current legislation and without im-

posing new financial constraints, commenced with the enactment of Law No. 124 of August 7th 2015 (the Madia Reform) on the reorganisation of the PA (Martini and Polverari 2022). This legislation aimed at facilitating the adoption of organisational measures promoting the experimentation of innovative spatial-temporal work arrangements, which could enhance the balance between personal and working time of civil servants while simultaneously fostering productivity growth (e.g. teleworking alternatives) while advancing the trajectory of digitisation within the Italian PA (Calafà 2018; Lupo 2021). The vision delineated by the reform has been confirmed by Law No. 81 of May 22nd 2017 (artt. 18-22) which provided additional provisions on *smart working* as outlined by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, extending such a practice to civil servants in the PA. Specifically, smart working is explicitly conceived as:

[...] *a mode of employment performance characterised by the absence of hourly or spatial constraints and a structured approach based on stages, cycles, and objectives, established by mutual agreement between the employee and employer. This method helps workers to balance their work and personal time while also fostering growth in their productivity*. (Art. 18, Law No. 81 of May 22nd 2017, Republic of Italy)

This definition is consistent with the one put forth by the *Osservatorio Smart Working*, located within the School of Management of the Polytechnic University of Milan in 2015, the same year the aforementioned Madia Reform was approved. As stated by the research institute focused on the analysis of modern work practices, *smart working* highlights the potential benefits it could grant employees while at the same time increasing their responsibility for ensuring quality outcomes: greater flexibility and autonomy in selecting work locations, schedules, and equipment (Osservatorio Smart Working 2015).

These guidelines also align with the resolution adopted by the European Parliament on September 13th 2016, which aims at creating more favourable labour market conditions to harmonise both personal and professional spheres of life. The resolution highlights the support from the Parliament for smart work, which involves arranging work in a manner that combines flexibility, independence,

and collaboration. With Directive No. 3 of 2017 on smart work, the "Smart Work Season" in PA officially started. A pivotal moment in the adoption of *smart working* among civil servants within the Italian PS was precipitated by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. The health emergency prompted the introduction of *smart working* as the exclusive mode of work within the PS through Law No. 18 of March 17th 2020 (Article 87) then transposed into Law No. 27 of April 24th 2020. Evidence of this is provided by other crucial institutional initiatives. On the one hand, the National Observatory of Smart Working in the PA, provided for by Law No. 34 of May 19th 2020 and established by the Ministerial Decree of November 4th 2020 with the specific function of formulating legislative proposals, concerning both the organisational and technological sides, to promote and improve *smart working* in the PA. On the other hand, the Smart Work Monitoring initiative, launched by the Department of the Public Service in 2020, specifically aims to create legislative proposals, organisational and technological, to promote and improve *smart working* in the PA. Furthermore, the Pact for Public Work and Social Cohesion of March 10th 2021 specifies that:

*With regard to distance work (*agile *work), the aim must be to surpass emergency-driven management by establishing, in future national collective agreements, rules ensuring transparent working conditions, that promote productivity and results orientation, reconcile the needs of both workers and public administration, concurrently improving public services and work-life balance*. (Translation from the *Patto per l'Innovazione del lavoro pubblico e la coesione sociale* 2021, p. 6)

Under the legal framework regulating *smart working* in the Italian PA, the following terms apply. All civil servants, regardless of their employment status or contract type, have the option to choose the smart work system. The main aim is to provide equal working opportunities for all individuals (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2021). Additionally, the system ensures fair rotation among those opting for a 'smart work' environment, giving priority to those with special needs who may not have access to other support measures (Osservatorio Smart Working 2023). To ensure proper implementation

of *smart working* within the PA, individual agreements including important components – such as the duration of the agreement, remote work performance techniques, withdrawal procedures, and arrangements for management supervision – are necessary (Osservatorio Smart Working 2023). It is worth noting that the employee's right to rest remains intact even while working remotely, including a consecutive rest period of no less than 11 hours known as the inoperability band or disconnection period (Osservatorio Smart Working 2023). The adoption of 'smart work' also necessitates adequate technological resources and targeted training initiatives.

Civil servants have been trained on the use of communication platforms and software for *smart working* as well as on tools that enhance autonomy, empowerment, decision-making delegation, collaboration, and information sharing (Osservatorio Smart Working 2023). Nonetheless, towards the end of 2021, there was a setback in the rationalisation of work organisation within the Italian PA. Since October 15th 2021 in-person work has been reconfirmed as the standard mode, although some exceptions regarding *smart working* for vulnerable employees, as well as for parents and caregivers, have been maintained. Then, with the cessation of the State of Emergency as of April 1st 2022, among measures that could change were those for 'smart work' in the PA. A return to pre-pandemic working modes, as well as remote emergency working modes that have characterised the first months of the pandemic appears unikely. In 2022, the adoption of *smart working* practices within the PA declined, dropping from 67% to 57% among participating entities (Osservatorio Smart Working 2023). On average, employees engage in *smart working* for 8 days per month (Osservatorio Smart Working 2023). The presence of such a 'paradox', which encompasses both positive and negative aspects of *smart working* in the Italian PA, underscores the need to shift the focus towards a comparative analysis of the associated risks and opportunities, as explored in the next section of the paper.

The status quo of 'smart working' in the Italian Public Sector: a comparative analysis of risks and opportunities

Overall, the widespread adoption of *smart working* among civil servants calls for a significant cultural shift, a fundamental overhaul of the organisational framework of the PS, and a reconsideration of working methods, both within and outside the traditional working *milieux*, according to the criteria of autonomy (Boccoli *et al.* 2022), innovation (Gastaldi *et al.* 2015, Birkinshaw *et al.* 2008), flexibility (Ter Hoeven and Van Zoonen 2015), responsibility, and interpersonal collaboration (Vlaar *et al.* 2008). Far from being a 'brand-new' issue, *smart working* remains a contentious subject in the ongoing debate among policymakers, businesses, and civil society, particularly in the post-pandemic scenario. The Covid-19 epidemic outbreak in February 2020 forced most organisations to engage in a rapid transition towards more flexible working practices often resulting in abrupt implementation without sufficient forethought or preparatory efforts (Di Tecco *et al.* 2021).

Organisations previously familiar with *smart working* demonstrated substantial organisational and competitive edge over those with no prior exposure to it. Nevertheless, and in a wider sense, the use of remote working at home facilitated the continuity of work activities, maintaining productivity, and avoiding the stoppage of several public services through the employment of over 70% of public personnel working from home in the course of the lockdown (Di Tecco *et al.* 2021). During the emergency, *smart working* demonstrated its potential to mitigate the consequences of dangerous situations such as earthquakes, floods, and epidemics or human-caused incidents like fires, explosions, and terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider both risks and opportunities characterising 'smart work' among civil servants. Risks are mainly due to structural problems that might not be addressed in the short period. Firstly, both digitisation and digitalisation of the Italian PS show more evident delays in the Southern regions of the Country (ISTAT 2023b). Italy ranks 18th out of 27 EU Member States in the 2022 edition of the Digital Economy and Society Index (European Commission 2022). Although Italy is making significant strides in the realm of digital transformation, there remain deficiencies that must be rectified in order to achieve complete integration (European Commission 2022). Secondly, the organisational culture embedded within Italian public bodies is still anchored to a process-oriented approach instead of a goal-driven culture that would better fit the practice of *smart working*. Specific tasks are not suitable for remote working.

According to several authors and experts, the capability to work remotely can present difficulties in achieving tasks that require collective efforts. Remote working has the potential to lead to isolation, hinder the development of relationships, and restrict opportunities for collaboration (Eurofound and ILO 2017; Spinuzzi 2012). Institutional environments are also concerned with performance issues, namely the risk of lower work performance while working remotely. Another critical point involves flexibility. Several research studies have indicated that individuals who work from home may not necessarily achieve an improved work-life balance compared to those who work on-site at a traditional workplace (Di Tecco *et al.* 2021). Furthermore, an additional aspect to be taken into account in analysing work-life balance within the framework of remote working pertains to the issue of socio-demographic inequalities, and in particular the gender issue (Alfano *et al.* 2023). While, on one hand, the increase in remote working has enhanced conditions of work-life balance, on the other hand, it has exacerbated gender disparities in the labour market. In Italy, according to Alfano *et al.* (2023), the profile that benefits the most from the revolution in the organisation of work is a male, married, Public Sector worker, working remotely, and not living in the southern part of Italy (Alfano *et al.* 2023). Strictly related to this, another critical element to be considered is family interference that might arise when working from home (Di Tecco *et al.* 2021). An additional point that is interesting to evoke when reflecting on the risks characterising *smart working* for civil servants is that of overworking (Di Tecco *et al.* 2021), i.e. the continuous availability potentially enabled by a state of constant connection. This is a "perverse effect" (Boudon 1981) that, in addition to the aforementioned protracted state of connectivity, recalls the prolonged conditions of social detachment of the remote worker that might affect his psycho-physical well-being. Given the progressive resumption of on-site employment subsequent to the conclusion of the public health crisis, this tendency has experienced partial alleviation (Ahrendt *et al.* 2022). Eurofound reports that in 2022, work-life balance conditions in Europe showed improvement compared to the pandemic period, with a decline in the number of individuals engaging in work during their leisure time (Ahrendt *et al.* 2022).

On the other side of the coin, there are the advantages presented by *smart working*. It has a positive impact on sustainability concerns. It enables cost savings in electrical consumption as well as the reduction of carbon footprint. This is obtained also through the reduction of commuting traffic (Mariotti and Rossi 2023). Moreover, it promotes the optimisation of real estate assets of PA as it facilitates the reimagining of spaces, for instance through the implementation of coworking spaces (CSs) that have the potential to assume an essential role in fostering the development of resilient communities (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982), particularly by promoting economic and adaptive resilience, an aspect that has proven to be of utmost importance amid the Covid-19 pandemic (Mariotti *et al.* 2023; Penna *et al.* 2020). Mariotti and Lo Russo (2023) define CSs as rooted in communal support and collaborative effort, serving as fundamental catalysts for the genesis of ground-breaking innovations (Mariotti and Lo Russo 2023). CSs, in particular, represent an interesting opportunity for the development and renovation of rural areas (Mariotti *et al.* 2023). In Italy, the geographical composition of rural areas, commonly referred to as 'Internal Areas' – in Italian, 'Aree Interne' – presents a notably intricate and layered scenario, with a distinct prevalence observed in the Southern regions and Islands (ISTAT 2023b). To date, rural areas in Southern Italy are 1,718 and constitute 44.8% of the total national proportion with a remarkable prevalence in Basilicata, Sicily, Molise, and Sardinia (ISTAT 2023b). This positions them as a prominent interlocutor and an opportune testing ground for novel and cutting-edge practices, particularly in the realm of digital work reorganisation. A case in point is the implementation of *smart working* among cultural operators, a subject of interest in this paper to which further attention will be devoted in the following section. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to observe how the migration of 'south-workers' in the peripheral regions of Southern Italy has engendered the formation of what is commonly referred to as "community garrisons" (Mariotti and Lo Russo 2023). These establishments, predominantly public, are primed to accommodate remote workers and endeavour to retain the youth by offering training programs. From this standpoint, the possibility of embracing remote working from different locations arises as a captivating opportunity that the South and, to a wider extent, all Italian rural areas, could strive to seize in order to attract expertise and maintain the

presence of young, highly qualified human resources (Mariotti and Lo Russo 2023). Some scholars contend that this could enhance the attractiveness of rural regions (Akhavan and Mariotti 2023; Mariotti *et al.* 2022a; Akhavan *et al.* 2021) especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, which drew the public attention to the advantages of living in such areas (Mariotti *et al*. 2022a; Giambruno *et al.* 2021).

Regarding the well-being of employees, Di Tecco *et al.* (2021) state that workplace flexibility might be associated with advantageous health and well-being outcomes, suggesting that organisations can reap the benefits of creating a flexible work culture. The Italian *Osservatorio Smart Working* confirms this trend too in its report released in 2019 (Osservatorio Smart Working 2019). The concept of well-being is intertwined with the perception and perspective of the quality of one's professional life (Toto and Limone 2020). This is shaped by motivators, emotional triggers, and cognitive restructuring, thereby transforming employees into active contributors to their own professional growth as part of the organisation, making them effective 'smart' workers (Toto and Limone 2020). Beyond physical and psychological well-being, financial well-being also comes into play (Toto and Limone 2020). An individual who attains a balance between psychological and physical well-being in the workplace can enhance their cognitive and emotional capabilities, resulting in newfound stability in both professional and personal domains (Toto and Limone 2020). Furthermore, *smart working* offers numerous benefits such as reducing instances of 'physiological absenteeism', attracting talented employees, improving trust between employees and administration, and serving as a catalyst for broader digital transformation within the PS. (Network Digital 360 2021; Senatori and Carla 2021).

2. Smart working and Cultural Operators in Italy
Defining the cultural operators in the Italian legislative framework

Defining cultural operators is no easy task, as activities involving culture in some way or another may indeed cover an extremely wide array of possibilities. For the purposes of this study, the definition of Cultural Operators is given as concerning all those people directly involved in Cultural Occupations, in turn defined as:

Occupations that involve creative and artistic production, and heritage collection and preservation.

They involve tasks and duties that are carried out:
  i. *Generate, develop, preserve or reflect cultural or symbolic and spiritual meaning;*
  ii. *Create, produce and disseminate cultural goods and services, which generally contain intellectual property rights, and*
  iii. *For the purpose of artistic expression (e.g. visual, music, writing, dance or dramatic arts).* (UNESCO 2009, 40)

Taking the first statement of this definition as a starting point, for the purposes of this study, only those Cultural Operators falling inside the second of the two categories proposed (that is, those involved in "heritage collection and preservation") will be taken into account. In the Italian legislative framework, this typology of Cultural Operators is classified as belonging to the 'III Area', labelled 'Funzionari', and specifically those falling into the categories F1-F18.

Cultural Operators for the Ministry of Culture in Southern Italy

Traditionally, the label 'Southern Italy' has been applied to the peninsular area comprising the Regions of Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, and Calabria, sometimes also including the southernmost provinces of Lazio (Frosinone), Sicily being considered, due to its administrative and geographical peculiarities, as a separate area, sometimes paired with Sardinia ('the Islands'). These are the geographical boundaries also used by the Italian Institute for Statistics (ISTAT). In this paper, both the peninsular Regions and Sicily will be taken into account as a single unity (what is commonly called the 'Mezzogiorno'), while keeping the generic label of 'Southern Italy'.

According to ISTAT, there are currently 1,007 cultural sites in Southern Italy and Sicily, categorised as museums, no-profit galleries, monuments, and archaeological areas/parks. Of these, only 305 are classified as not belonging to the public system, leaving a striking majority of cultural sites in Southern Italy in the hands of the public (both under the Ministry of Culture and other jurisdictions, such as provincial or regional administrations, often under the aegis of the *Poli Regionali*) (Ministero della Cultura 2016).

It is harder to quantify the people directly involved in cultural work in these sites and institu-

tions. This is due to an opaque system of employment, which often sees activities in cultural sites being allocated to cooperatives or other typologies of private actors/associations, not to mention the wide use of other forms of supplementary work (e.g. *Servizio Civile*, voluntaries, etc…). This constitutes a first, substantial limitation for any attempt at analysing the occupational and economic impact of these kinds of cultural institutions (compared to the cultural sector as a whole), including the link between employment opportunities in museums and heritage sites, on one hand, and specific career/study paths on other (e.g. the opportunity for historians, art historians, archivists, etc. to actually be employed in these institutions). Consequently, it also makes it hard to gain an overall picture of the impact the pandemic had on the occupational level of cultural operators working in those institutions. As a general measure, though, it is possible to look at the data provided by the Ministry of Culture, concerning those workers ('Funzionari') directly employed by it. On July 31st 2020 (last data available), the Direzione Regionale Musei Basilicata employed 31 people belonging to this Area, nine units fewer than what was provided for by the D.M. 168/2016, over a total of 139 units employed. The Direzione Regionale Musei Calabria employed 25 units as Funzionari III Area as of August 2023. Aggregated data are not available for Campania, Puglia, Abruzzo and Molise.

How smart working was implemented (or not implemented) for cultural operators in Southern Italy

The absence of precise data already highlighted in the previous section is compounded by a lack of data concerning the closures caused by the pandemic and their immediate effects on the cultural sites' workforce.

According to a 2021 survey by the *Osservatorio sull'Innovazione Digitale* on Cultural Heritage and Activities, located at the Polytechnical University of Milan, 80% of the Italian museums released at least one digital content during the first year of the pandemic, including online learning activities (47% of museums), virtual guided tours (45%), workshops (27%), podcasts (13%), advanced training courses (95), and videogames (2%), with 78% of the content delivered for free (Osservatori.net 2021). These activities were of course made necessary by the first series of emergency decrees (DPCM) issued by the Italian government, which closed museums and other cultural institutions to the public.

However, how the introduction of these digital contents impacted *smart working* opportunities for the onsite employees, and specifically for cultural operators as defined above, is hard to tell. According to a report delivered by Federculture on the status of Italian cultural institutions in 2022, one of the most serious consequences of the pandemic was a drastic reduction of the workforce, with a loss of fifty-five thousand jobs in the cultural sector from 2020 to 2022, a significant impact compared to the overall unemployment caused by the same event. While these data refer to the cultural sector as a whole, they give us a picture of the overall lack of adaptation of cultural institutions to the new contexts the pandemic created (or contributed to create). Museums and heritage sites suffered from an obvious lack of physical visitors during the pandemic. While the Ministry of Culture could not have possibly proceeded with a personnel reduction due to legal constraints, the consequence of the closures of museums and sites on all those "indirect" employees (e.g. members of cooperatives or other private enterprises involved in their management) are currently impossible to determine.

The same could be said for the actual implementation of *smart working* for cultural operators working inside the framework of the Ministry of Culture. The *Piano Integrato di Attività e Organizzazione* for the years 2023-2025 explicitly addresses *smart working* as one of the transformations required for an effective administration, also in the wake of the pandemic, but the same document does not mention any application of that working model specifically for employees framed inside the III Area (Ministero della Cultura 2023).

From our observation of the reality of *smart working* in the Italian Public Administration environment, we can notice a general lack of explicit directives and guidelines. The responsibility of managing the *smart working* practices falls into the hands of each single organisation. Moreover, *smart working* itself can be interpreted as just one component of a wider concept of work that is rooted in neoliberal ideology. From this perspective, it would be possible to interpret the application of *smart working* to the cultural sector as an attempt to push for increased operativity and efficiency, however without truly connecting this new working practice to the op-

portunities it offers for a renewal of the approach the PA keeps implementing when dealing with the cultural sector. In the next section the chance *smart working* offers to the cultural sector – with a specific eye for southern Italy, will be addressed.

The possible role for new forms of working formats for cultural operators

Two main points have been highlighted thus far. On one hand, it was possible to quickly summarise the status of *smart working* policies in Italy. On the other hand, we were able to at least partially describe the status of cultural operators in Italy in the aftermath of the pandemic, a period most critical for the transition towards *smart working* in vast segments of the job market. Cultural operators' jobs occupy a relevant position inside the Italian job market, deeply connected as they are with tourism-related activities which are often considered to be one of the pillars of the Italian economy (Ilie *et al.* 2016).

From the previous overview, it is possible to state that the impact of flexible working policies on operators in the cultural sector has been risible. It is possible to highlight some of the reasons behind this situation. First, this sector of the Italian market never really adopted viable alternatives to the mainstream forms of working in presence. The public actors operating in this market segment, as described above, opted for a more traditional approach to work formats and agencies.

The second reason is the fundamental structure inherent to the category of the heritage site, at least as it is nowadays. It is hard to imagine at this moment a museum functionally adopting some sort of *smart working* outside the strict boundaries of its administrative personnel. The term *smart working* is effectively employed when there is the possibility to detach the material reality of the workplace from the reality of the job itself. Presently, many historical, cultural, and heritage sites are not typically considered as settings suitable for a form of work different from the traditional ones. Museums themselves are perceived as deeply ingrained into a physical reality (Zhang *et al.* 2018), where there is a constant interaction between the visitor, the work of art/historical piece offered to the same visitor (the audience), and the personnel working there. This statement still holds true despite a growing concern with the digital aspects of museology, both in Italy and abroad. Pro-

jects such as *Digital Twins*, promoted by the Museo Archeologico nazionale Massimo Pallottino in Melfi, may be considered as evidence of such concern (Zhang *et al.* 2022; Ren *et al.* 2022). The project aims to create a complete virtual reconstruction of the museum collection and museological context (in this case, the castle of Melfi located in the province of Potenza in Southern Italy). Collections are becoming increasingly digitised, thus effectively expanding the audience's possibilities of experiencing them. However, while there's an increasing array of possibilities for the audience, a corresponding advancement of *smart working* opportunities for cultural operators – not to mention a stabilisation and regularisation of their job market – appear lacking.

Thus, it would look like an almost obvious consequence of this fact that museums, and heritage sites more in general, provide limited opportunities for a radical reform of their main working formats. Still, some timid tendencies towards such changes may be detected, and it is still possible to take them into proper account. On one hand, heritage sites are spread over a vast number of territories, with each territory, in turn, sporting its own set of particular issues (Dipartimento per le Politiche di coesione 2022). From this point of view, it would be possible to speak of what we can define as inner and rural areas. Their definition, for the purposes of this work, is that of territories which, as stated in the Italian *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne* (2013), are at a certain distance – around 40 minutes by car – from a service centre. The service centre is an urban area which includes a silver-level railway station, a hospital with a DEA II level, and with a complementary higher education offer (Agenzia per la Coesione nazionale 2013).

Museums and cultural institutions placed in these areas are not only seriously understaffed (Il Post 2023), but suffer the distance from the main infrastructures and tourist venues – i.e., airports, railroad stations. As anticipated in the last paragraph, museums in Italy embraced different tools of the wider movement of 'digitisation'. These tools were seen as a sort of parallel line to use while the museums were closed due to the restrictions imposed by the series of DPCM during the Covid emergency (Meng *et al.* 2023; Belenioti 2022; Markopoulos *et al.* 2021). Delving into the comprehensive concept of digitisation is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, more and more museums are facing the

challenge of entering a reality where social media, networks, and instruments – such as cellphones – are playing an ever-expanding role.

Nevertheless, digitisation and *smart working* are not processes that necessarily stimulate each other. The underlying logic differs significantly and requires distinct expertise and tools that are not directly comparable. While digitisation is a process which is currently experiencing an increased degree of support among directors and operators alike, *smart working* constitutes a more radical change in the structure of institutions like museums and heritage sites, a step more advanced than the one offered just by digitisation which, unlike *smart working*, until now at least, is focused much more on the product offered to the visitors.

For these reasons, it proved impossible to identify a clear connection between cultural operators and *smart working* practices, despite the fact that it is possible to identify several elements potentially delineating some interesting scenarios for their future interactions.

Conclusion: potential developments of 'smart working' practices for cultural operators

This paper analyses the evolution of *smart working* practices in the Italian Public Sector, with a specific focus on the cultural sector, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, it specifically highlights the challenges faced by the cultural sector due to the health crisis and examines the sector's efforts to adapt by implementing organisational restructurings and embracing digital initiatives, such as the development of podcasts, videogames, and enhanced integration of information systems.

In light of the diminishing impact of the pandemic, there appears to be a waning perception of the imperative role of *smart working* practices in the preservation of cultural sites. However, it can be contended that, despite this viewpoint, numerous cultural sites, particularly those that see lower numbers of visitors and those that are situated in remote areas distant from major tourist attractions and paths, could significantly enhance their operational efficiency and allocation of resources through the adoption of *smart working* practices. Furthermore, new digital tools have the potential to enhance the attractiveness of cultural sites located outside more established tourist paths. Since part of the resources derived from the implementation of

the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) in the aftermath of the pandemic are devoted to this, efforts are being made to support the digitisation of Cultural Heritage across the Country in various forms.

Consequently, the role of the technical officer is expected to play a significant part in the future of heritage-related jobs, working in close collaboration with Cultural Operators. Similar to the practice currently underway inside large tech companies, physical presence in an office may no longer be necessary for effective working processes (Surma *et al.* 2022). Therefore, the introduction of software could not only introduce a relatively new position within the organisational structure of a cultural site or institution but also aid in meeting the evolving expectations and diverse needs of future visitors.

The lack of implementation of software processes for cultural operators working in heritage sites and institutions can be attributed to various reasons. This resistance stems from the belief that these processes contradict the intrinsic physical nature of heritage sites and institutions, as perceived by the Italian Public Administration until very recently. However, the advent of digitisation processes presents novel opportunities to introduce innovative technologies in the cultural sector and revolutionise the way visitors engage with local Cultural Heritage.

Efforts initiated prior to the Covid-19 pandemic have revealed numerous opportunities for technological advancements within the cultural landscape. These advancements are expected to persist in the foreseeable future, as technology continues to permeate various sectors. Although social media has yet to make significant headways in integrating with the organisational structures of heritage sites, museums, and other cultural venues, it has the potential to become a valuable tool as these institutions undergo a broader digitisation of their services. As a result, new professions such as technical officers and computer specialists are likely to become common figures within their organisational frameworks.

It will be intriguing to closely engage with cultural venues that embrace these new technological tools and analyse how the working structures of museums and other cultural institutions evolve as a result. While there have been some attempts to assess the impact of digitisation on museums, tourist attractions and cultural sites, less attention has been

given to understanding the corresponding changes in work processes and organisational structures.

Ultimately, and despite the thematic focus of this paper primarily being on Italy, it is acknowledged that a broader perspective could yield valuable contributions. It would be interesting to enhance the understanding of how *smart working* practices are integrated within the Italian Public Administration by conducting a comparative analysis with other European Countries. As public administrations in similar countries can adopt diverse approaches in organising work, and subsequently have varying effects on the amount of work that can be carried out remotely, additional research on how different national contexts in Europe have implemented remote working practices for civil servants could provide valuable insights (Sostero *et al.* 2020). Experiences from other European countries provide reports on good practices in the matter of coworking in public spaces that could be experimented with and, if relevant, adopted in other territories, including Italy. In this sense, the first coworking spaces in Prague, including babysitting services, constitute an interesting example, together with the creation of coworking spaces within public libraries in peripheral or suburban areas in Norway or Catalonia, mainly designed to reduce commuting (Mariotti and Rossi 2023). These examples support the hypothesis that new workspaces may no longer be just spaces equipped exclusively for carrying out work activities, but that they could become multifunctional environments (equipped with services for childcare, professional skills updating, socialising, etc.) that can positively contribute to the work-life balance of each employee (Mariotti and Rossi 2023), as argued in the previous sections. Given that estimates suggest the continuation of the remote working trend in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, many private companies are currently redefining their workspaces (Mariotti *et al.* 2022b). Rather than individual offices or workstations, they are designing open, shared, or hybrid spaces. Moreover, companies are opening new offices or hubs in dispersed locations that are closer to their employees' homes (Mariotti *et al.* 2022b). It could thus be interesting to monitor whether, and to what extent, this phenomenon also applies to the Public Sector across Europe, with a particular focus on Italy. Specifically, there is potential for museums, libraries, and other similar public sites to be transformed into workspaces that can accommodate remote workers and facilitate a proximity working strategy. The reorganisation of these 'third places' (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982) represents another great challenge for public administrations in the medium and long term, warranting further dedicated research efforts.

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Arturo Mariano Iannace
arturo.iannace@imtlucca.it
He is a PhD Candidate at the IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca, in the Analysis and Management of Cultural Heritage track. Current research interests concern politics, history, cultural heritage, and the economic, cultural, and social development of Italian 'Aree Interne'. He is an Ordinary Member of the Game Science Research Center, where he began the development of gaming prototypes for university and school-level teaching and learning of history. He recently presented one of these projects at the International Medieval Conference in Leeds, UK (May 2023), and at the conference The Middle Ages in Modern Gaming (June 2023).

Davide Emanuele Iannace
davideemanuele.iannace@uniroma1.it
He is a PhD candidate at the CNR-IRCrES and La Sapienza University of Rome, specializing in Policy Impacts Evaluation and Analysis. His research focuses on RandD in Europe, infrastructure development and evaluation. More recently, he has approached into studying rural and inner areas and their developmental aspects. He is a visiting researcher at OPERAS-PT and in the PALOMERA working packages 2 and 3. Among his most recent publications: with Iannace D.E., *Evaluation of research infrastructures in the Social Sciences and Humanities field. A proposal for a new approach*, DISSE Working Papers n.18, 2023.

Sara Pane
sara.pane@uniroma1.it
She is a PhD candidate at La Sapienza University of Rome. Her research focuses on European public institutional communication and the issue of the European public sphere. She specifically examines European policies related to digital and environmental transitions. She is also a contract Professor at the University of Turin where she serves as communication coordinator for the Jean Monnet Chair Com4t.EU (Communicating for Transitions in Europe). Among her most recent publications: with Sarrica M., La bicicletta come esempio (possibile) di "doppia transizione" ecologica e digitale nell'Unione europea: una lettura attraverso la prospettiva delle rappresentazioni sociali, in Passafaro P.P., Metastasio M., Bocci E. (eds.), *La mobilità sostenibile nelle scienze sociali: ricerche e riflessioni*, Della Rocca Editore, 2023.