

# **Developing Sustainable post-Pandemic Agile Working Model: Managing paradoxes through Collaborative Intervention and Reflection**

*WOA2022 short paper proposal – Paper session – Track: Organizational models*

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## Abstract

Agile working arrangements developed under the pressure of pandemic suffer lack of thoughtful planning and capacity to handle organizational bundling and path dependencies effects. We show that it is necessary to deploy collaborative and reflective experimentation that leads each organization to establish its own sustainable arrangements of post-pandemic agile working built on idiosyncratic traits. This entails a complex and aware organizational change initiative that we view in the light of organizational becoming lens. Taking this path we interpret agile working arrangements as a multi-authored pattern developed through social construction dynamics sustained by generative and productive dialogues aimed at negotiating meanings and managing paradoxes. Finally, we observe an experimental development of post-pandemic agile working arrangements in an Italian PA bringing some contribution from the field.

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the processes of digitalization and exploration of new work arrangements (Agrawal et. al., 2020). Even if organizations and people were already experimenting with flexible arrangements of work before the pandemic, under the pressure introduced by the health emergency many of them have experienced remote working for the first time. Recent studies have shown that, over the last two years, there has been a massive and widespread adoption of flexible forms of working (Ker et al., 2021).

If during the pandemic organizations were adopting a day by day approach punctuated by the rhythm of the emergency, the post-pandemic scenario embeds an opportunity to approach the situation with consciousness. The possibility of building long-term sustainable agile working arrangements is outlined. Through the construction of these new ways of working, potentially it could be achieved a respectable improvement not only of the work performance but also the workers' empowerment and well-being (Babapour et al., 2022).

This article is structured as follows. In the theoretical framework, we will carry out a brief exploration of the agile approach and its transposal in flexible working configurations. After, we will shed light on the organizational bundling and path dependencies effects associated with the introduction of agile working. We also emphasize the need for a collaborative and thoughtful approach that can guide an organization in developing its own agile and post-pandemic work arrangements. Afterwards, we will debate some evidence from a ground-case offered by an Italian PA carrying out the development of its agile working arrangements through collaborative intervention and reflection. Finally, we highlight some remarks and suggestions to be deeply explored in future studies.

## Theoretical framework

In the last two years, to respond to environmental and technological changes, different typologies of work have emerged and as many definitions to describe them without universally accepted definitions (Athanasiadou, Theriou, 2021). For example, some authors adopt the “telework” expression as "*organisation of work by using Icts that enable employees and managers to access their labour activities from remote locations*" (Jaakson, Kallaste, 2010). Others utilize the term “smart working” as "*an approach to organising work that aims to drive greater efficiency and effectiveness in achieving job outcomes through a combination of flexibility, autonomy and collaboration, in parallel with optimising tools and working environments for employees.*" (El-Gamry, Heselwood, 2018). Some scholars instead utilize “remote working” to describe work activities that are performed far from the office or still “flexible working” underlining a spatio-temporal sense to emphasize work-life balance. Others again, fewer and fewer, utilize the term “homeworking” to emphasize that work is performed from your own home (Sullivan, 2003). Lastly, some scholars prefer “agile working”, defined as "*a way of working in which an organisation empowers its people to work where, when and how they choose - with maximum flexibility and minimum constraints - to optimise their performance and deliver 'best in class' value and customer service. It uses communications and information technology to enable*" (Grant, 2020).

Even if it is right and fair to point out that we still consider the issue unresolved, in the analysis proposed in this manuscript we adopt a perspective consistent with the definition of agile working (Grant, 2020). Especially in a post-pandemic perspective, the emerging flexible arrangements of work mean more than allowing workers to perform their work through the use of technology far from their traditional working place. The new flexible ways of working introduce in-depth changes that challenge the traditional meanings of work and orient towards the achievement of objectives, autonomy and empowerment. Notionally, by removing the traditional barriers to work (time, place, direct supervision), the dynamics of power are horizontalized and trust is placed in employees who, at the same time, respond with an adequate degree of conscientiousness and reliability. This means that agile forms of work require equally agile organizations.

The introduction of these work arrangements impacts the organization at various levels, generating bundling effects between the key organizational dimensions affected by the agile working adoption, including the mindset, the culture, the structure, the systems and processes, the environment, and the people's behaviors. Consequently, the development of agile working arrangements is a complex and conscious organizational change initiative aimed at correctly interpreting the post-pandemic organizational and environmental dynamics. We view this organizational change initiative in the light of organizational becoming lens (Tsoukas, Chia, 2002). Accordingly, we interpret the resulting agile working arrangements as multi-authored pattern developed through generative and productive dialogues (Tsoukas 2009, Thomas, 2011) where a wide range of engaged actors negotiate meanings (Hardy 2005, Weick 2005, Thomas, 2011), addresses the several path dependency dynamics (Sydow and Koch, 2009), manage the tensions associated with the trade-off and paradoxes (Lüscher, Lewis, 2008) that arise during the development of the agile working arrangements and gradually develop a consensual perspective via social construction dynamics (Weick and Quinn, 1999).

Considering organizations not as fixed entities but as unfolding enactments (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Carlsen, 2006), mechanistic and rigidly planned approaches seem to be outdated and misleading (Martignoni, Keil, 2021). Hence, according to Thomas and colleagues (2011:22) "*a change plan is a "discursive template" which has to be interpreted by those whom it addresses in the context of specific local circumstances* (Tsoukas and Chia 2002, p. 579)".

This calls for emergent, flexible and holistic approaches in which the current arrangements are challenged to create a common understanding and coherent sensemaking (Weick, 1995, Kraft et al, 2018) about the uncertainty inherent in the development of a new and flexible form with the characteristics previously defined. Progressively, via social construction dynamics they develop a consensual perspective that pulls the organization from a state of uncertainty to one of greater workable certainty (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). The process of attributing socially negotiated and constructed meanings also allows the organization to deliberately break the links of path dependency (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), unravel and untangle the bundles.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated and imposed the adoption of new flexible forms of work, often little pondered due to the constraints imposed by the urgency. Conversely, the post-pandemic situation has to be considered as a "clean state" in which a conscious design process is necessary to correctly interpret the post-emergency organizational and environmental dynamics to develop sustainable agile working arrangements. In fact, adopting an antifragile perspective (Taleb, 2012), the post-pandemic scenario introduces the opportunity to co-construct a completely new work arrangement coping effectively with uncertainty and responding to external solicitations to meet the organizations changing needs (Chia, 2017) by leveraging organizational resilience, defined as "*the maintenance of positive adjustment under challenging conditions such that the organization emerges from those conditions strengthened and more resourceful*" (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007: 3418).

### ***Developing Sustainable post-Pandemic Agile Working Arrangements: a case analysis and discussion***

The project described below is still ongoing and has been promoted by a Regional Public Administration (RPA), located in Northern Italy. Arranged according to the action-research principles, it is aimed at developing sustainable solutions able to address the different types of activities, culture, relationships and coordination needs that exist between the organizational units and sites.

The development of the agile working arrangements in RPA is articulated in the following main steps: 1) creation of the change leading coalition of the project, 2) analysis of existing work practices; 3) definition of the implementation strategy of agile working arrangements based on integration of contextual data, literature review and good practices 4) planning and first operational steps, which provides for the writing of the POLA (organizational plan for agile working), according the Italian normative 5) small-scale implementation and monitoring 6) dissemination to the whole organization.

The development of Agile Working arrangements is a complex and pluralistic task in which a single individual cannot define and implement a vision valuable as acceptable by powerful stakeholders. Consequently, it requires collective leadership (Denis, 2001). In this view, the constitution of an "Agile Change Group" was the first step of the project. The members of this group are the top managers, including the General Director, an internal coordinator, other actors informed on specific fields (such as Gender Equality Group representatives, known as CUG in Italian PA) and a team of external researchers. Playing complementary roles and working together harmoniously, the members of the group were tasked to build, define and sustain the implementation process of the agile working arrangements within the organization. The group started defining the organizational policies of the POLA. During this process the key challenge has been to address several dilemmas that we summarize in the following tensions: control vs autonomy, bureaucracy vs discretion, performance vs well-being. The Agile Change Group acted to resolve the resulting conflicts through generative dialogues by negotiating, discussing and co-constructing the principles and the meanings associated with agile working. Among the activities carried out by the group in step 2 and 3, two deserve special attention. The first is the assessment of the enabling organizational conditions required by agile working. The Agile Change Group, in line with national guidelines for drafting the POLA, has considered strategic evaluate the organizational conditions that support agile working (i.e. ICT; training) before experimenting with agile working arrangements. The assessment involved all the members of the change leading coalition. Counteracting the risk of an overly self-referential view of top management, the combined action of assessment,

external researchers, and data already collected has favored a collegial recognition of strengths and weaknesses. Most importantly, the group then subsequently recognized the need to collect data on the same elements by involving workers at the operational level. The second is the definition of “clusters of agile working activity”. The clusters definition took into account the idiosyncratic traits of different activities and services, appearing as a mediation of the standardization vs customization trade-off that occurs among organizational units. The initial analysis, carried out by the Agile Change Group and all departments directors (step 2), led to differentiating 3 clusters. Cluster I, named “Highly flexible work” referred to management activities in support of corporate governance; Cluster II, called “Work of highly flexible operative teams” concerned technical-environmental activities mainly carried out in teams; Cluster III titled “Work by phases” concerned laboratory activities which are highly based on technological tools not remotely transferable. This analysis showed that clusters differed mainly for the degree of flexibility and coordination methods. In Cluster 1, which mostly provided for an individual organization of work, the employee should have agreed and coordinated their activities mainly with their middle manager, according to the service needs. In Cluster 2, employees should have defined teamwork with their middle manager. Lastly, in Cluster 3 the teamwork and middle manager should have identified shifts and specific activities that could have been done remotely. In sum, through dialogical activities it has been possible to achieve socially constructed solutions and a clear and convincing vision which has been collected in the POLA that became the template for the implementation step.

In this phase, actors belonging to different organizational levels (managerial, middle management, operational staff) have been involved in the project, for a total amount of 200 employees. Besides, the organizational units involved in the experimental implementation were collaboratively chosen on the basis of their representativeness of the various work activities which characterize RPA. The implementation step is supported by a set of specific "monitoring and training devices". Among the devices adopted, questionnaires for staff, diaries (Ohly et al., 2010) and meetings with middle managers were supplied to collect data on structural, managerial, and relational aspects of agile working while carrying out the activities. Two strategic objectives were sought: first, to assess the balance between cluster peculiarities and organizational sustainability during the implementation. Second, to evaluate the outcome of perceived performance and employees' well-being among different clusters.

Moreover, during the experimental phase, an observatory was set up to involve trade unions and ensure a space for discussion to share the implementation plan with representative stakeholders. In addition, an initial training meeting has been promoted with the personnel involved in each cluster to foster the process of change. Monthly meetings with the middle management were also planned to support coordination practices, verify the effectiveness of the management systems and collectively examine and address barriers and resistances to change perceived by actors involved in the experimentation. In this way, a key role of middle managers was recognized in producing and disseminating cultural and practice change. Taken together, the devices support an "agile" approach to change where action, observation, and reflection are connected in a generative feedback loop.

### ***Discussions and contributions***

Some organizations have not yet decided whether to adopt agile working after the pandemic is over. Others, on the other hand, have already decided to adopt agile working as a way for developing a sustainable approach to work, that is capable of increasing both organizational performance and flexibility and employees well-being. Among them, the case described above represents a valuable experience, as it is aimed at supporting (in an Italian PA) the development of multi-authored agile working arrangements through generative and productive dialogue among different organizational roles. From the explorative analysis proposed in this manuscript we can bring the following suggestions to be deeply explored in future studies.

First, sustainable agile working arrangements are twinned with an agile organization. When developing agile working arrangements, the whole organizational system is involved in this transition, at different levels and dimensions all impacted simultaneously adding complexity to the process.

Second, agile working arrangements developed under the pressure of the emergency situation suffer lack of thoughtful planning and capacity to care for the potential effects of organizational bundling and path dependencies that are created. Thus, an agile working arrangements should be interpreted as a multi-authored arrangement developed through generative and productive dialogues (Tsoukas 2009, Thomas, 2011) where a wide range of engaged actors negotiate meanings (Hardy 2005, Weick 2005), manage the tensions associated with the trade-off and paradoxes (Lüscher, Lewis, 2008) and gradually develop a consensual perspective via social construction dynamics. Third, we would stress that attention should be paid to the synthesis of these trade-offs that arise from agile working arrangements development and that the success of its development is strictly related to the management of these tensions. In the case considered in this study the tensions were: standardization vs customization of the procedures among the organizational units, organizational control vs employee autonomy, waterfall approach vs agile approach, bureaucratic procedures vs individual discretion, individual management vs group management, prescription vs open dialogue, performance vs. well-being. Fourth, our analysis suggests that, according to an antifragile perspective, pandemic has created significant learning opportunities to capitalize during the development of post-pandemic agile working arrangements. Facing complex and stratified scenarios with which individuals and organizations will have to face more and more in the future, unambiguous and simplistic looks are not only dated but even dangerously misleading. Trivialization, unable to grasp the nuances of reality, risks leading to the

abandonment of the adoption of agile working methods because it generates dynamics that are fearfully expensive in its application.

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