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Leadership for Digital Working: Towards a Contextual Ambidextrous Approach

Daniele Binci and Francesco Scafarto

Abstract

This chapter focuses on Smart Working (SW) adoption and its related leadership styles. We particularly aim at understanding how SW adoption requires an ambidextrous approach based both on directive and empowering leadership. Our theoretical framework, particularly, contextualizes the leadership approach by highlighting that within such blended context (off-site and on-site working mode), leadership should be ambidextrous, according to the specific working mode and, therefore, according to the opposite related dynamics, such as autonomy vs. control or task vs. objectives focus. The model, moreover, focuses on the importance of enabling an approach that implies new relational skills (or new combination of such skills) both for the leaders and the workers that, regarding their remote or physically approach, should evaluate to be more or less directive (or empowering). However, other contingencies should be analysed in order to have a deeper view for a successful SW adoption. Leaders and followers, therefore, need to be cognizant and aware about such contingent approach that claims for their flexibility and variety of behaviors, and they should develop, accordingly, a related behavioral repertoire. This contribution, by proposing a more complete and complex approach for SW adoption based on ambidextrous leadership, offers an original point of view that highlights the importance of balancing both directive and empowering leadership styles within a SW context.

Keywords: ambidexterity, directive leadership, empowering, smart working, advanced information technologies

1. Introduction

Nowadays organizations are continuously changing their business models due to a dynamic environment dominated by growing competition, new regulation and rapid technology evolution [1–3]. Digital technologies, such as cloud services and mobile devices, affect organizational work design [4] and enable constant connection to workplace [5–6]. Together with institutional change (i.e. normative issues) technologies have been allowing a disruptive scenario, by enabling the emergence of new business model, organizational forms and business processes, including social and working life. Digital Working, the possibility to work in a more flexible way in space (where work gets done) and time (when and how long workers engage in work-related tasks) dimensions [7–8] represents an example of such innovation. However, Digital Working adoption, and in general Digital Transformation, can

radically improve organizational performance [9], if macro-level changes actively interact with micro-level change [10–12] by reframing the cultural assumptions of organizations [13].

Among such assumptions, effective leadership is one of the main drivers for Digital Working adoption, as it is based on completely different employers-employees relationships, where employees' autonomy, trust and result-oriented activities are more important than control and task-focused behaviors. Accordingly, in the case of Smart Working (SW), a specific mode of Digital Working, an autonomous relationship between leader and worker is required, as tasks are usually performed away from the office. Since they cannot always interact in a face-to-face mode, they should compensate such physical distance by building trust, transparency and the reciprocal belief of honesty and effort towards organizational objectives [14]. However, SW context is not always characterized by off-site working as it is conceived as a blended approach which coexists also to the traditional, face-to-face, way of working.

Within a SW context, in fact, workers freely choose (according with specific individual agreement) on-site and off-site mode schedule for the working week. This peculiarity impacts on different organizational variables, namely, structure, processes and skills, and particularly it requires a set of leadership approaches that varies according to the modes in which workers decide to perform. Different implications derive from such peculiarity. By starting from such peculiar characteristic, the aim of this contribution is to understand more about leadership in SW context and, particularly, what leadership style should be applied for SW adoption. Our contribution is structured as follow.

We first describe the concept of Digital Working (and more specifically, of SW) and the main variables related to its implementation, namely, advanced information technologies (AITs), normative issues and cultural variables. Then, in-line with the study aim, we focus on specific cultural issues (particularly, leadership styles) relevant for its implementation. We describe two recognized leadership styles especially within a contingent perspective literature [15–17], namely, directive and empowering leadership. We specifically highlight how, for SW-oriented context (i.e. characterized by remote working and discretion about spaces, time and working tools choice), it is important to enable an ambidextrous approach to leadership according to working modes. This implies new relational skills both for the leaders and for the workers, which, regarding to their remote or physically approach, should improve organizational performance.

2. Smart working: a flexible approach to work

For the aim of this contribution we consider a specific, blended-type of Digital Working, also known as Smart Working. SW is a particular type of Digital Working, different from teleworking and remote working, as the former is usually configured as a mode of working outside the workplace through computer-based technology tools, by simply transferring the office work (and its scheduling and timing) to the home, while the latter can generally be executed without the mediation processes of digital technologies (AITs) and generally distant from office premises.

Conversely, SW offers the possibility to work with flexibility in the space–time dimension throughout the mediation and support of AITs (i.e. group support system, cloud services or collaborative tools) [3]. However, it can be designed only for certain tasks that are not particularly depending on the organization physical premises: for instance, it is not applicable for medical or manufacturing units, while it is more adoptable for service-oriented organizations. The specific features of

SW provide organizations and workers with different advantages [3, 18]. The most important, by the organizations side, is the increase in productivity and organizational effectiveness. Such benefits are, at least in theory, related to the explicit responsibility towards individual and team job outcomes, due to more autonomy and less worker distraction: the off-site mode intensifies work for lacking of interruptions and makes it more liquid by offering the possibility to choose working during break as well as in the evening. SW helps organizations to develop a stronger goal orientation, which asks for more attention to goal setting and goal implementation [19]. These characteristics push organizations towards an organizational result-driven culture and, consequently, to a performance management approach. Moreover, from the individual side, SW mainly promotes people well-being (i.e. work-life balance and job satisfaction) due to the flexibility in working conditions enabled by the possibility to carry out tasks outside the company premises [18], with less time and budget spent on travel. Moreover, related to such factor, employees will probably increase their intrinsic motivation [20].

2.1 Macro-level change: technological and institutional issues

SW is very attractive for organizations, especially for the focus on goal orientation, organizational (and individual) KPIs and effective results. However, the adoption of SW without an integrated approach that considers the redesigning of business processes, as well as the reframing of cultural assumptions, is not sufficient to improve organizational performance (**Figure 1**). The literature is quite clear about the approach that should enable a digital transformation approach [7, 10] and, therefore, also the SW implementation. It does not happen automatically but requires a change management approach that involves a combination of hard (AITs) and soft (culture and leadership) variables that often require also a normative push.

Figure 1.
Main variables of SW adoption.

AITs should be reciprocally adapted to the requirements of the organization, namely, its basic assumptions, values and artifacts [13, 21]. According to sociotechnical systems principles and business process reengineering orientation to process measurement and radical changing through AITs [22], SW should be considered more than a technological transformation, as the introduction of AITs and the redesigning of business processes are a balanced and cross-disciplinary field for achieving strategic objectives [23]. Therefore, when organizations launch a digital transformation programme by implementing SW, they should redesign the overall working processes and workflows, by integrating technological issues within normative opportunities and cultural mind-set reframe, such as team interaction mechanisms [24], like relationship between leaders and followers, with a major focus on trust and on result-oriented behaviors. Only by the simultaneous implementation of AITs, legal issues and cultural reframe, workers can really benefit from SW advantages, like increased job meaning and autonomy as well as responsibility [25].

2.1.1 Technological issues

From a technological point of view, companies should design space for optimizing the work performance and use AITs (i.e. cloud services or smartphone App), for the dematerialization of the workplace. AITs should enable the paperless perspective adoption, like document-sharing digital platforms for performing and using digital information accessible at anytime from anywhere via digital and mobile devices. The concept of bring your own device (BYOD) describes how, for certain type of jobs, workers can perform far away from physical offices by only using their own digital device as tablet, smartphone or personal computer connected to a private or public network [3]. As a consequence of technology adoption, workers are always connected the office that is accessible anytime and anywhere.

2.1.2 Legal issues

Legal issues are fundamental drivers for SW diffusion and adoption especially for the public sector. For example, in the Italian context, SW (also called agile work) has been introduced by the Law no. 81/17, with the aim of increasing organizational productivity and enabling better work-life balance both in the private and in the public sectors. According to the Law no. 81/17, different aspects of SW are regulated, particularly:

- Workers' obligations: related to the possibility of performing outside the company's premises according to an adaptation of working hours within formal organizational rules limits, legal regulations restrictions and organization working schedules.

- Workers' rights: i.e. the regulation of use (when and how) of computers and mobile devices as well as the right to disconnection in order to enable the reconciliation of working, private and family life.

- Organizational issues: i.e. SW enables organizations to be more sustainable and competitive according to a way of working that should be more flexible and result oriented.

However, in Italy, for example, 1 year after the adoption of the Law no. 81/17, its effects are much more evident in the public sector than in the private sector. In 2018, 82% of large companies had already introduced or thought to introduce

Smart Working initiatives. In the PA, however, as many as 60% of organizations with agile work projects found stimulus after the Law adoption, and only 40% had foreseen it before [26].

2.2 Micro-level change: organizational features

In order to make SW effective, organizations should redefine their culture and redesign responsibilities deriving from the work relationship, particularly how managers and employees communicate with each other [27]. Cultural behaviors are, indeed, factors that have unique potential to promote or inhibit major changes in organizations. In fact, flexibility enabled by the opportunity to determine when and how (with which tools) to work is balanced by workers' responsibility and empowerment, mediated by motivational mechanisms that allow for self- and organization improvement.

2.2.1 Leadership for smart working: a contingent perspective

Within the cultural variables, we particularly consider leadership as an enabling process for the SW. Leadership is generally defined as the ability to influence others to actualization or achievement of a set of goals and objectives [16]. Despite different typologies of leadership proposed in the literature [16, 28–30], we consider a contingent perspective [15–16, 31–32] for examining the conditions under which each leadership approach to SW implementation is most effective.

According to such perspective, our basic assumption is that there is no a single best approach for the leader-follower relationships, but its effectiveness basically depends on the context [33]. We particularly use situational leadership theory within SW context by considering an ambidextrous approach [34–36]. Ambidexterity, a concept and framework initially proposed by Duncan [37], and then largely developed and applied [35, 38–41], is the ability to balance, in an integrated way, explorative and exploitative behaviors [42–43] carried out by the individuals or teams for organizations' survival and effectiveness. The use of ambidextrous approach suggests a paradoxical use of different leader behaviors to produce sustainable team performance [44]. According to Rosing et al. [34], we use the ambidexterity concept by focusing on two representative leadership styles: directive and empowering leadership.

They are specifically appropriate for dealing with blended working, characterized by the need for managing opposite dynamics such as autonomy vs. control or task vs. objectives focus.

Particularly, contextual ambidexterity leadership has been described through the concept of close (exploitative) and open (explorative) behaviors [34]. The former is typically associated to the set of leader behaviors that includes setting guidelines, monitoring task accomplishment and taking corrective action. We consider such behaviors as directive leadership style. The latter is typically associated with behaviors that encourage people to independent thinking (think out of the rules) and acting (to do things differently) by experimenting breaking of routines and rule and supporting efforts to challenge established approaches and status quo. We categorize such behaviors as empowering leadership style.

In the following sections, we describe directive and empowering leadership styles by highlighting that, for the blended characteristics of SW context (off-site and on-site working mode), there is no best way for leadership. Instead, we claim for a more contextual ambidextrous approach in which rules and autonomy as well as control and trust alternates each other according to the specific working mode and contingencies.

2.2.2 Directive and empowering leadership: towards an ambidextrous approach

Directive leadership is usually adopted on large organizations characterized by formal processes, procedures and rules that are used for controlling employees' productivity and behaviors. According to literature, directive leadership is effective for these organizational typologies in which rule, hierarchy and control are standard methods for managing people: they act as explicit coordination mechanism for followers, in which autonomy, trust and decision-making capabilities are substituted by the leaders' instructions, commands and control. Within such context leaders usually give followers specific directions and detailed instructions about task execution, by pushing them on performing task requirements according to formal rules and procedures [28]. Directive leadership is mainly top-down, as it relies primarily on position power that excludes followers' participation into the decision-making process. It is associated with task-focused direction, expressed through leader instructions, orders and goal setting process. The strong tendency to control of subordinate actions with close supervision, task planning and scheduling [29, 45] and punishment [46, 47] aims to influence followers' behaviour by ensuring that they follow procedures.

While directive leadership focuses upon external and top-down control of people, structure and rules, empowering leadership relies on internal control, self-direction, culture and values [20, 28]. According to the concept of empowerment, defined as an "extent to which leaders enhance autonomy, control, self-management, and confidence in their teams" [48], p. 541, leaders encourage the development of followers by lacking direct supervision and more responsibility-taking culture [29] through independent decisions, thinking and acting. The main assumption is that followers can perform tasks better in autonomous way [49], as empowerment intrinsically motivates workers [20]. The enabled relationship between leaders and empowered followers is, in fact, characterized by delegation, mutual trust, consensus and equal responsibility, thanks to bottom-up flow of communications and shared decision-making.

Despite the clear concept boundaries and differences between directive and empowering leadership styles, there is no consensus in literature about the effectiveness superiority of one style over another. Leadership effectiveness seems, in fact, context-dependent.

Directive leadership has been found be useful for the trauma centre, where employees have to follow orders and instructions that leaders formulate, especially where severity was high or when the team was inexperienced, while empowering leadership was more effective when trauma severity was low and when team experience was high [17]. Similar to such perspective, other studies found that empowerment is most appropriate when tasks are not urgent but innovative (if subordinates have the appropriate skills) [16]. Other studies show how directive leadership is useful for improving confidence and motivation to participate in technology-supported teams by reducing role ambiguity [50]. Further, directive leadership is positively related to performance within more structured tasks or problems [51], while empowering leadership is effective for less-structured tasks by allowing employees to generate more solution for problems [52].

However, related to environment stability, heterogeneous teams within stable environments may view directive leadership as unnecessary and prefer instead a participative decision-making process [53]. Under such situations directive leadership may cause unnecessary conflict [53]. Increasingly, directive style is appropriate for subordinates with an external locus of control [54] and may be also necessary in heterogeneous teams when the environment is dynamic, in order to bring together

the diverse team views for dealing with problems [53]. Finally, operating in online contexts, the structure and goal setting associated with directive leadership is likely more important than empowerment, especially during the early stages of online group interactions [55].

Given such context-dependent effectiveness of leadership styles, we adopt a contingent perspective: there is no a best way for managing people, but effective leaders should exhibit behavioral flexibility, namely, they need to display a variety of leadership styles depending on the situation [56].

3. A framework for flexible working: contextual ambidextrous leadership

Despite academic literature and professionals suggesting for an effective SW implementation, a transition towards more empowering behaviors [3, 7, 57], there is no evidences related to a more comprehensive approach for such transition. However, we think that SW adoption could also be facilitated by the directive leadership approach. In this conceptual contribution, we try to fill this gap by following a contingent view of leadership, based on directive and empowering styles. It suggests that SW adoption requires both leadership styles. According to SW mode, in fact, employees alternate, during the working week, both on-premise and off-site working, by requiring different leadership styles.

Our framework focuses on a more contingent idea about leadership for blended working, by highlighting that within a SW context, according to the general idea that one type of leadership will be effective in one situation, but a different type of leadership will be effective in another situation, leadership should be ambidextrous.

Particularly, our model considers four main quadrants based on the combination of different gradients of directive and empowering leadership in order to describe how, for a blended working context, not only an empowering leadership style is necessary (according to a work typology that is flexible and liquid), but also an ambidextrous style based both on directive and empowering leadership. In fact, a SW adoption implies a blended mode of working, where the same employees, or teams, perform their tasks in a blended fashion (off- and on-site) according to working schedule.

Therefore, leadership should be developed accordingly: it sometimes coexists with the traditional way of working, in which rules, procedures and leader instructions, typical of directive leadership, are necessary and sufficient for leading the workers, while during periods of off-site working, where face-to-face approach and visual control are excluded, it is necessary to set a leadership approach based on followers' autonomy and trust, typical of empowering leadership. This peculiarity requires a set of leadership approach that varies according to the modes in which workers decide to perform. Therefore, different scenarios derive from such peculiarity. We describe such scenarios on the theoretical framework on **Figure 2**.

3.1 Quadrant I

Within this quadrant there is mainly a situation where leadership is not effectively exercised, due to a lack of the possibility of exercising organizational power. These situations fall into the case of autonomous jobs and individual entrepreneurs that make autonomous decisions for their organizations and companies. This quadrant can be considered as a transition quadrant, especially if the entrepreneur decides to grow, by opening the quadrant II or quadrant III scenario.
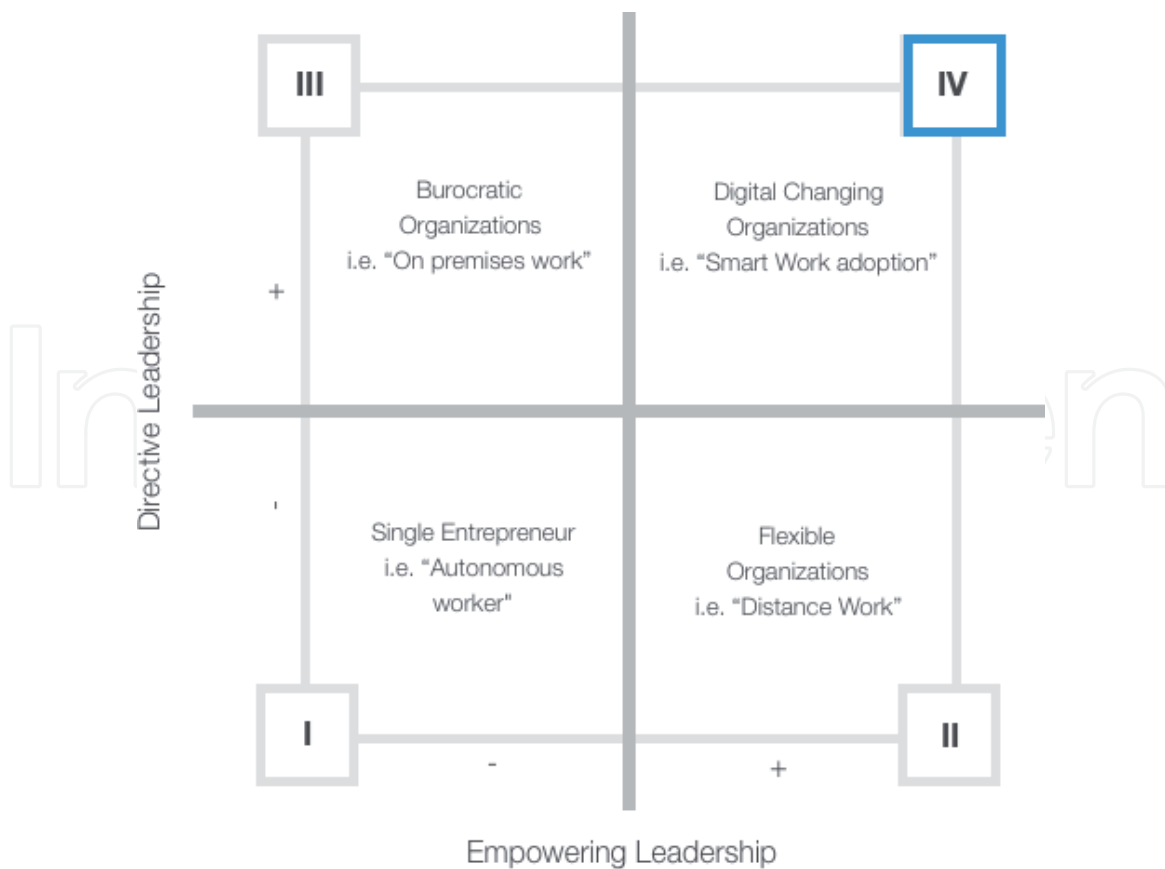
Figure 2.
Theoretical framework about leadership styles.

3.2 Quadrant II

Under quadrant II falls the directive leadership styles, typical of large and bureaucratic companies, characterized by routines' implementation, procedures and standardized behaviors. Under this situation leadership should be predominantly hierarchical in order to align followers to leaders' directives/instructions and organizational routines and to assure reliability and regularities of operations.

Moreover, such organizations use procedures and rules for control of employees' productivity and behaviour. According to literature, directive leadership is effective for these organizational typologies in which rule, hierarchy and control are useful mechanism for managing people, as directive leadership configures a strong situation for which there are uniform expectancies regarding appropriate followers' behaviour [58] in which productivity and behaviors are strictly controlled. The strong tendency to control of subordinate actions with close supervision, task planning and scheduling [29, 45] and punishment [46–47] aims to influence followers' behaviour by ensuring that they follow procedures.

Typical examples of organizations with directive leadership style are healthcare organizations, public administrations and public utilities but also large enterprises. The complexity of such organizations and their size usually require highly standardized and vertical decision-making procedures and mechanisms.

Within such organizations usually directive leadership is mainly top-down, as it relies primarily on position power that excludes followers' participation into the decision-making process which is the traditional coordination mechanism.

Such organizations have also spaces for a more flexible management in regard to emergencies or change in management projects, i.e. agile oriented. In fact, in case of emergencies or unforeseen, leadership should switch from a directive mode to an empowering one [32]. However, these switching processes are contingencies in

which leadership styles alternate themselves in order to match the specific situation, which is usually an ordinary one.

3.3 Quadrant III

Research states that empowerment is appropriate for flexible, decentralized and less formalized organizations, where participation and autonomy on performing tasks is emphasized.

Accordingly, under quadrant III falls empowering leadership, typical of more flexible organizations, usually represented by small size companies and start-ups. Such situations are characterized for high level of flexibility and are defined as weaker than those of quadrant II, for the lack of expectations for appropriate behaviors [58].

Leaders, in such situations, have more fluid boundaries than larger and stable organizations structures and have more discretion and less bureaucracy to deal with.

Empowering allows the team to participate to decision-making and take ownership of the provided solutions for improving productivity and achieve more effective and efficient results.

Empowerment is a style of leadership that predominantly characterizes the small work groups where the tendency is towards the resolution and management of emerging problems that do not require a high level of standardization, but rather operational flexibility even beyond the role to enable everyone to find the right solution to a certain task, activity or routine.

Symmetrically to what happened to quadrant II, also within such quadrant organizations are more rigid. Therefore, a structured approach, typical of directive leadership styles, may be required. Start-ups or flexible organizations that decide to grow need to be more structured, with more rules, procedures and hierarchy. Also in this case, like quadrant II, organizations need to follow a sequence from empowering leadership style to a more directive one.

3.4 Quadrant IV

While in quadrant II and quadrant III there are basically static styles of leadership, which can, however, change over time according to the specific situation of the organization, for example, a bureaucratic organization whose typical style is directive that wants to become agile or that it is managing an emergency or a small organization (where the style is typically empowering) that wants to grow should leave room for a more directive one where rules of procedure and hierarchy can guarantee the stability path linked to the growth of the company, the quadrant IV combines the two styles of leadership within the same context. Under quadrant IV fall the digital changing organizations, particularly large companies that exploit high potential of innovative projects by digitally transforming their core processes, like SW adoption. In large companies SW phenomenon is widespread, and its impact is increasingly evident and pervasive. This is, for example, what emerges in the Italian context from the survey of the Politecnico of Milano Report on Smart Working [26]: 56% of large companies surveyed (on a sample of 183 large companies, with more than 250 employees) have implemented SW projects; 16% of them are in the testing phase and are developing pilot projects that generally last about 6 months and involves about 14% of the employees; 44% of the companies are extending the participation to a wider audience; and the remaining 40% of companies' projects have taken off and involved all those who can be included in the initiative.

Under this quadrant leadership styles are completely different from the previous ones: it embraces contexts that need both the directive and empowering behaviors

in order to match continuously the requirement for the complex nature of SW processes. Leaders should enable (together with workers) a mixed approach oriented to autonomy, by leveraging on trust and result orientation, as well as to hierarchy, by setting rules, procedures and formal control. Therefore, within such quadrant, we claim the need for a more contextual ambidextrous leadership.

Smart Workers are, in fact, peculiar workers that, according to working schedule, perform both in a traditional bureaucratic way (on premises, as under quadrant I), where directive leadership is most effective, and in a more flexible mode according to an autonomous and trust-oriented context (on a more empowered setting, similar to quadrant II).

Contextual ambidextrous leadership balances the two opposite leadership requirements for blended working at the same time: close (exploitative) and open (explorative) behaviors. The blended peculiarity of SW conceived by definition for off-site (online) and on-site (offline) working needs different, sometimes opposite, leadership styles, namely, a contextual ambidextrous approach.

Leaders and followers (blue and white collars) should behave accordingly: when workers perform on-site, leaders and followers should adapt themselves to a strong situation, by interacting with a directive and task-based leadership, as tasks are monitored day by day, with a lacking of attention to final results, autonomy and trust, in a fashion typical of quadrant II.

Conversely, when workers switch to an off-site mode, both leaders and followers should adapt their approach to an empowering style based on autonomy, trust and result orientation, through the support of collaborative and mobile technologies, by performing as digital workers, in a more flexible fashion typical of the quadrant III.

The importance to enable an ambidextrous approach, therefore, implies new relational skills (or the combination of actual skills in a different and innovative way) both for the leaders and for the workers that, regarding their remote or physical approach, should be able to switch from directive to empowering and finally improve organizational performance.

Leaders and employees should be able to manage a repertoire of behaviors, namely, be hierarchical and directive (from the point of view of the manager); be able to follow rules and instructions (from the point of view of the follower); be able to empower by giving autonomy, trust and checking for final results (from the point of view of the manager); and be able to receive responsibility for results and work autonomously (from the point of view of the follower). The situation that falls under this quadrant is very different from the previous ones.

In this case, when team members work on-site, they usually have to exploit in order to get the job done. Thus, their team leader needs to support them in doing so with directive behaviors. Conversely, when team members work off-site, the context changes completely. They are far away from the colleagues and from their leader. They should accomplish task, as in the previous situation, but can encounter problems (systems and application that do not work, software that are not updated), or should decide about important issues without the possibility of having the real-time opinion of their boss or colleagues.

Therefore, they need to be supported also into an empowerment approach, for starting to explore ways to handle these issues by developing new solutions or better ideas without specific instructions or rules. Accordingly, the leader should change his/her style by displaying opening behaviors to encourage team members to complete job autonomously, search for new solutions, to think in different ways and to risk by going beyond existing schemas.

According to literature [34], this case claims for continuous switching between different styles and different situations that are not organized sequentially, but in a rather complex and unpredictably fashion.

4. Theoretical and practical implications

Building on contingent view of leadership or situational perspective, in which leadership and its effectiveness are dependent upon the context [32], our contribution aims at understanding more about which leadership styles should operate within a Digital Working context. It particularly offers an original point of view related to the role of contextual ambidextrous leadership for Smart Working adoption, in which blended working (on-site and off-site) requires an ambidextrous approach, namely, directive and empowering leadership. According to existing literature, which emphasizes the importance of empowerment flexibility and agility for digital transition [3, 7, 57], we propose a more complete and complex approach by highlighting also the importance of structure and rigidity typical of directive leadership. We particularly claim for an ambidextrous approach by refocusing, besides the empowering leadership style, also the importance of structure, command and control of the directive style. Effective leaders, therefore, should exhibit behavioral flexibility, namely, they need to display a variety of leadership styles, directive and empowering, depending on the situation [56].

Our findings particularly suggest new directions for research about leadership within digital changing organizations towards more dynamic aspects of leadership styles, including the contextual ambidexterity approach [35], and the related "switching" process, from directive and empowering, and vice versa, within the same context of Smart Working adoption. Our study underlines the importance of complementing empowering leadership with directive one, with a finer-grained look at the contextual capacity for leaders and followers to manage reciprocally directive and empowering relationships, in a quite paradoxical fashion.

The first theoretical implication is related to leadership for Digital Changing Organizations (i.e. SW oriented), which requires more than empowering, flexible and liquid approach.

Particularly, flexibility and liquidity, in the case of SW adoption, should be related to the theoretical concept of the ambidextrous theory [38, 41] and ambidextrous capacity, the capacity for leaders to delegate people as well as to direct them with regard to the specific situation in which the Smart Worker is going through. Ambidextrous leadership means, in this sense, the possibility for the teams to work both in directive and empowering fashion, by asking them to continuously adapt to such changes within the context in which they are working in. According to existing literature [15, 16], we claim that for SW approach there is no the best leadership style (i.e. empowering style) but a best leadership approach, as the leader (and followers) should be able to switch their behaviors according to the specific working mode they are dealing with. Studies about ambidextrous leadership [34] have advanced the understanding of open (empowering) and close (directive) leadership styles. Accordingly, we further extend such insights within a SW context, which, differently from an innovation project (that ends with the innovation implementation), requires a contextual ambidextrous approach in which the switching process between directive and leadership style is continuous.

The second theoretical implication is a consequence of the first one and is related to how managing the transition towards the ambidextrous leadership. Particularly, it requires, for SW context, a change management process in which leadership should be considered as continuously adapting to the context. This means that within SW context, change management, from the leadership point of view, is more than a planned approach [59]: it should be a permanent process in which organization and teams search endlessly for the most adapt solution for achieving effectiveness: a continuous search for the most effective combination of directive and empowering styles.

Therefore, within a Smart Working context, there is a different perspective that changes from how to sustain the transition from "directive" to "empowering" to an approach focused on how to sustain both "directive and empowering" styles. By analyzing the IV quadrant of our framework, we highlight the interesting idea of an interwoven process of changing in which complexity, more than linearity, leads the transition to an ambidextrous approach.

Our contribution has practical implications as well. Particularly, we suggest that an effective ambidextrous leadership requires, from a practical point of view, the development of an adequate mind-set, mainly throughout training on ambidextrous strategic mind-set that calls for both exploratory and exploitative behaviors. Leaders must internalize, transfer and reinforce ambidextrous ways of thinking and working by encouraging followers to accept different behaviors not as improvisation or lack of vision but as an overall strategy that considers the necessity of being adaptive, directive and empowering, depending on the specific context.

5. Conclusion

Our contribution aims at understanding more about which leadership styles should operate within a Digital Working context.

In Section 1 we have contextualized the concept of Digital Working, and more specifically the concept of SW, by distinguish it from other innovative ways of working, like teleworking and remote working.

In Section 2 we have described the main variables related to SW implementation, namely, AITs, legal issues and cultural variables. According to literature, we have highlighted how, conceptually, the effectiveness of SW adoption mainly depends on the simultaneous implementation of such variables. Particularly we have described AITs as enabling tools that allow organizations to efficiency and effectiveness (SubSection 2.1) and legal issues as enabling factors for digital innovation (SubSection 2.2). Moreover, as described in SubSection 2.2, we have focused on how SW adoption can radically improve organizational performance, only if macro-level changes, by interacting with micro-level change, reframe organizational cultural assumptions, like leadership approach.

Within the Sub-subSection 2.2.1, we set our basic assumption of situational approach of leadership for analyzing our research problem and focusing particularly on the ambidextrous perspective for managing SW contexts, namely, the simultaneous and paradoxical application of opposite behaviors: close (exploitative) behaviors, similar to directive leadership, as it includes setting guidelines, monitoring task accomplishment and taking corrective action, and open (explorative) behaviors similar to empowering leadership, as it includes independent thinking, the breaking of routines and supporting attempts to challenge established approaches.

In the Sub-subSection 2.2.2, we have described the peculiarities of directive leadership, more top-down, control-oriented and task-focused, as well as of empowering leadership more focused on workers autonomy, self-leadership and performance oriented. We have also highlighted that despite the clear concept boundaries between directive and empowering leadership, there is no consensus in literature about the effectiveness superiority of one style over another, which seems more context-dependent, as results from some research evidences that we have reported about the contingency effectiveness of directive and empowering leadership.

Therefore, in Section 3, we extended the reasoning about contingent leadership by building, presenting and describing our conceptual framework.

Such model highlights how, under a SW blended context (off-site and on-site working mode), leadership should be ambidextrous according to the specific

working mode and, therefore, the opposite related dynamics such as autonomy control or task objectives focus.

Particularly, we have highlighted the importance to enable an ambidextrous approach that implies new relational skills (or the combination of such skills) both for the leaders and for the workers that, regarding their remote or physically approach, should improve organizational performance. Therefore, leaders and employees should be able to manage a repertoire of behaviors, namely, be hierarchical and directive (from the point of view of the manager); be able to follow rules and instructions (from the point of view of the follower); be able to empower by giving autonomy, trust and checking for final results (from the point of view of the manager); and be able to receive responsibility for results and work autonomously (from the point of view of the follower). In fact, the ambidexterity approach should be applied not only regarding the way in which workers decide to perform: the leader and followers should also evaluate the more or less directive (or empowering) behaviors not only regarding off-site or on-site mode but also other important variables related to the Smart Workers. We propose, as examples, the following:

1. Digital skills: Digital skilled workers need less directive behaviors than workers less confident on AITs platform; the latter needs to be more directed and controlled when they perform on the digital environment.

2. Workers' age: SW represents a quasi "natural" way of working for digital natives that have grown up on digital age, while it is something of unusual for traditional workers that should adapt to the innovativeness of the AITs that are, nowadays, the most part of the organization population.

3. Organizational size: SW represents a digital transformation issue mainly for big and medium size companies, which often redesign their process according to more effective and cost-saving organization (i.e. premises, equipment and electricity). Such organizations are typically hierarchical with a lot of procedures and organizational levels.

4. Life cycle of the SW project implementation: During the initial phase of a SW project, organizations usually need more explorative oriented behaviors that empowerment can enable (experimentation, search and risk taking), while during the mature phase, they need exploitative behaviors, more oriented to the exploitation of the actual procedures and rules.

Future research should look at such further specific SW contingencies in order to deepen the understanding about the effectiveness of ambidextrous leadership.

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