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## 2020 Report

### On line working and job perceptions of graduates in Italy

Survey related to Covid-19 - first months of 2020

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## 1. Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease that emerged at the end of 2019 began threatening the health and lives of millions of people after a few weeks. The social and economic problems derived from Covid-19 have changed the development of countries, economies, families and individuals. This study examines the work conditions of Italian graduates, first and second level degree) at one and five years after graduation. AlmaLaurea Interuniversity Consortium (AlmaLaurea) was founded in 1994 and comprises 78 out of the 98 Italian universities. AlmaLaurea carries out every year two surveys on graduate profile and graduate employment status at one, three and five years from graduation. The ad-hoc survey carried out by AlmaLaurea was implemented from March to June 2020, and presents the results of more than 46.000 interviews at one year from graduation and about 19.000 interviews at five years from graduation. From the survey are excluded the graduates of medicine degree, due to emergency situation in act in that period.

Among first level degree graduates interviewed at one year from graduation, 60,8% of them are enrolled at a second degree course; the analysis will focus on those who chose not to follow the academic career (38,4%).

The influence of the work environment, job satisfaction and job performance was and still is a key focus in the human resource management sector (Brown et al., 2011; Chang and Edwards, 2015; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Akgunduz et al., 2018) and represents an important pillar in AlmaLaurea objectives as well. The international literature and studies have found that a good work environment will help employees strengthen their work efforts and acquire knowledge and skills (Lent et al., 2011; Lamm et al., 2015; Liguori et al., 2019). Since the global pandemic of Covid-19 started in Italy at the end of February 2020, entire communities have begun to stop exchanges not only economics and production but in particular work activities. In order to contain the spread of Covid-19, on 9<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 Italy have had to cease many economic and social activities. In order to enable employees to continue working in the process of combating the epidemic, employees have started to work online at home (Vaziri et al., 2020), which allows different categories of employees to continue their activities and to receive their salary with the help of technology. Such changes in job category (Kramer and Kramer, 2020) bring job insecurity to employees (Blustein et al., 2020). Generally speaking, the impact of employees' acceptance of online working within a different and unusual work environment on job

performance remains to be observed (Lamm et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2017; Akgunduz et al., 2018), especially because many people, graduates included, in such an uncertain situation and context feels stressed and anxious (Chang and Edwards, 2015; Schultz et al., 2015; Jemini-Gashi et al., 2019). Therefore, this essay intends to explore the situation and perception of graduates working activities in the context of the Covid-19 global pandemic.

## **2. On line working during the first phase of covid-19 pandemic**

Almost all graduates had an impact on their job conditions, especially with the increasing of on line working (smart working mode<sup>1</sup>), especially in public sector and services.

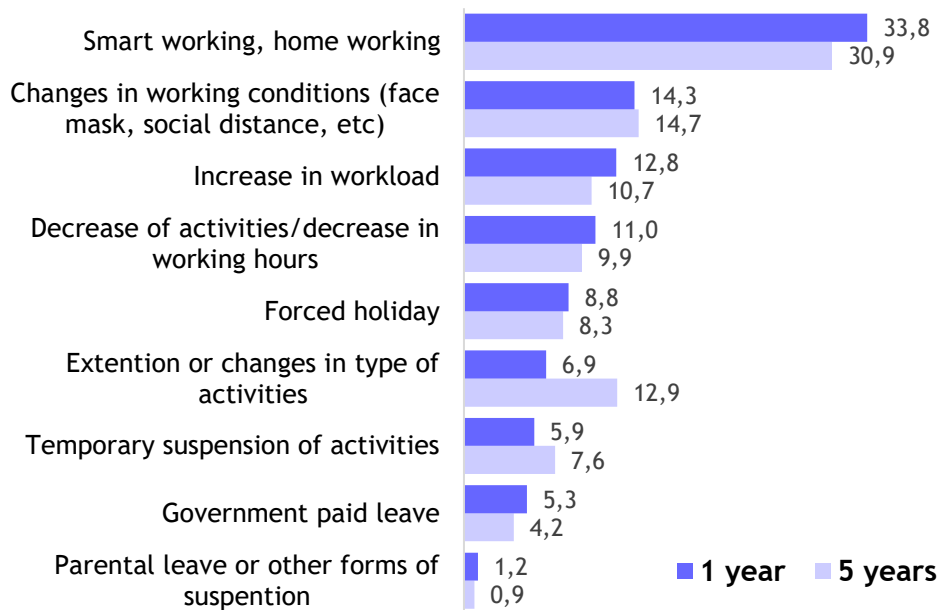
The AlmaLaurea ad-hoc survey tried to collect information related to their employment conditions soon after the Covid-19 outbreak.

At one year after graduation almost all second level graduates (94,8%) declared that the emergency situation had an impact on their job activities. Among those, one third (33,8%) performed their jobs on line, while 14,3% had to change the work condition, among others personal protective equipment, etc. 12,8% declared an increase in workload while 11,0% declared a slowdown of activities due to a decrease in working hours or number of working days; 8,8% of interviewed declared that were forced to take holiday. The temporary suspension of activities and government paid leave involved about 11,2% of the cohort (Fig. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> With reference to Italian legislation (Law no. 81/2017), smart working or 'lavoro agile' refers to an employee-employer agreement according which working activities are performed partly on company premises and partly without a fixed location, within the limits of the maximum daily and weekly working time deriving from the law and national collective agreements. On the other hand, the so called 'telelavoro' (remote working) has been active in our Country for longer and has been differentially regulated between the public and private sectors.

**Fig.1: 2019 and 2015 second level graduates at one and five years after graduation: the impact of Covid-19 emergency situation on job activities (in %)**



We can notice that at five years after graduation the indicators does not change too much; the most relevant difference is related to the extension or change in type of activities (12,9% at five years after compared to 6,9% at one year after graduation).

Smart working was adopted mostly by graduates under employment contract, in public sector or services (especially education and research sectors as well as services for companies). Graduates at five years after graduation who used smart working were in particular those who perform office jobs (69,1%), a high specialized profession (59,2%), in particular engineers, architects, teachers and researchers, or a technical profession (57,7%).

Despite the fact that smart working has been often seen with negativity, represents an alternative work modality and in majority of cases does not have a negative impact on productivity or human relationships. We cannot say that is sustainable in a long term period.

At one year after graduation, less than half (39,3%) of the employees who performed smart working describe such experience as a positive one: the most used adjectives are “lucky” and “motivated”. The majority (59,0%) consider smart working as a negative experience using adjectives as “stressed” “estranged”, “frustrated”. Such adjectives were used

especially due to the lockdown period imposed by national authorities (declared by 55,7%), due to own family situation (17,1%), due to employer management of working modality (13,9%) and do to the use of available technological tools (10,3%).

The above mentioned indicators are similar if we consider the graduates at five years after graduation: 42,8% consider smart working as a positive experience, while the majority (56,9) consider it negatively.

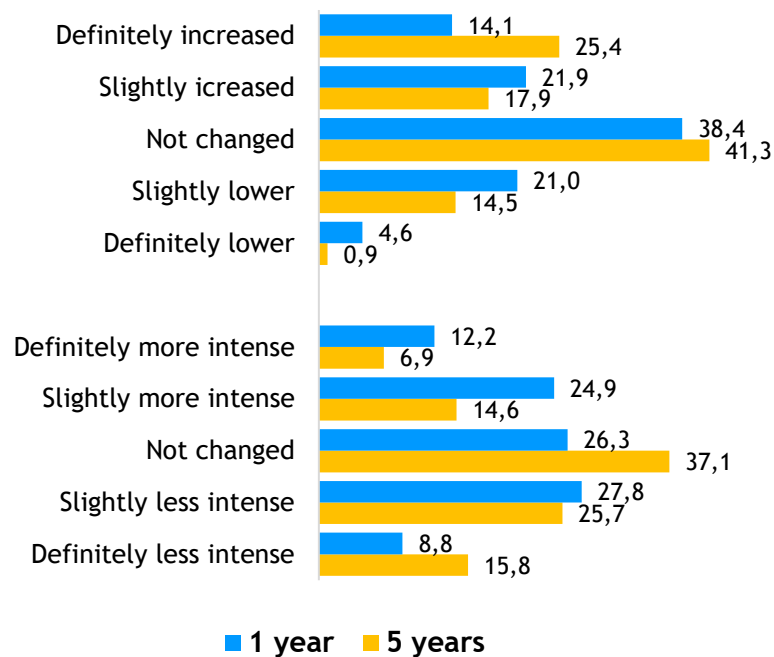
### **3. Productivity and human relationships**

In terms of productivity perceived by employees, for 38,4% the smart working does not have any impact, while for 36,0% of them, the productivity increased (21,9% slightly increase, 14,1% strongly increased). At contrary, 25,6% consider a worsening of their productivity (21,0% slightly and 4,6% strongly worsening).

The situation seems to be strengthen at five years after graduation (Fig.2): 41,3% of those who performed smart working declared that was no impact on their productivity, 43,3% declared an increase in their productivity (25,6% strongly increased, 17,9 slightly increase) while only 15,4% declared a worsening of their productivity (almost all, 14,5% a slight worsening).

In terms of human relationship and smart working (especially with work fellows) 37,1% of employees at one year after graduation consider an enhance in it, while 36,6% consider diminishing of such relationship; for 26,3% of them there is not impact on human relationships due to smart working condition. At five years after graduation, the percentages are 21,4%, 41,5% and 37,1%. The fact that on line working modality does not particularly affect the human relationships (or really enhance it) can be probably explained due to the extended use of digital communication tools (as Skype, Teams, Zoom, Google Meet).

**Fig. 2 - 2019 and 2015 second level graduates at one and five years after graduation: smart working and its impact on productivity and human relationships (in %)**



#### 4. Return to normality

What do we expect from smart working in the future, soon after the end of emergency situation? 69,4% of graduates considers that smart working is sustainable only in some sectors, 5,4% considers that is sustainable in all sectors, while 25,2% consider not sustainable at all. At five years after graduation the percentages are 65,2%, 2,6% and 32,3%.

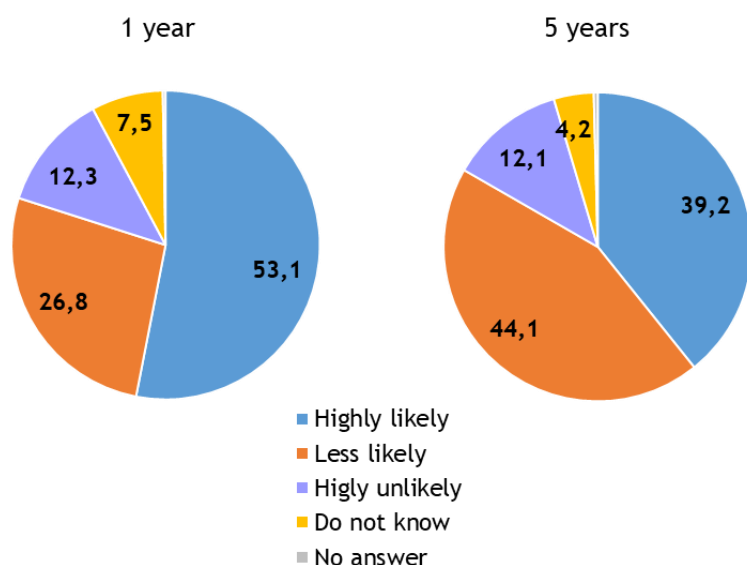
The ideas that smart working is sustainable only in some sectors is underlined by graduates employed in health sector, public administration and finance. The idea that smart working is not sustainable at all is underlined by employees in education and research sectors.

There is optimism for the future? More among graduates at one year after graduation: generally speaking, 53,1% of graduates at one year after graduation consider that in next six months will probably face a return at normality (as before the emergency situation); 26,8% consider a return to normality less probable, while 12,3% strongly consider not possible such return. The remaining 7,5% are not able to assess such variable (Fig.3).

At five years the graduates in employment are less optimistic: 39,2% declares that probably will be a return to normality, 44,1% consider less probably while 12,1% highly

consider not probable such return. Such vision can be explained due to graduates experience in labour market as well as probably the economic crisis and slow job market recovery.

**Fig. 3 - 2019 and 2015 second level graduates at one and five years after graduation: return to normality perception within six months (in %)**



## 5. From crisis to opportunities

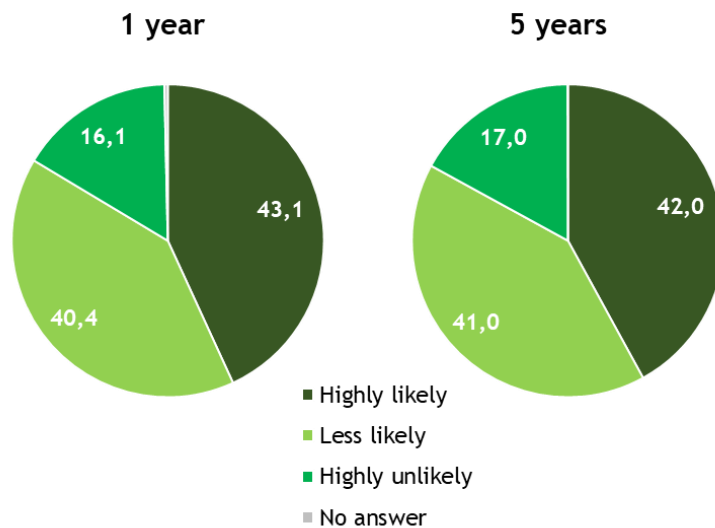
Even if the future is not certain, the graduates consider that new skills and competences will be requested. For almost half (48,5%) of graduates enrolled at second level degree, the Covid-19 emergency situation allow them to test or gain new skills useful for their future jobs: especially for women employed in health sector. The impact of such experience was higher among second level graduates due to the fact that they are more integrated in labour market: more than 60% of graduates at both one and five years after graduation consider such experience as an opportunity to test or gain new competences useful for their future professional career.

The perception regarding the impact on their future opportunities, independently of their employment status, shows us that 51,3% of second level graduates at one year after graduation declared that this situation will have an impact on their job opportunities; 34,5% consider less probable while 13,9% consider highly unlikely such impact. At five

years after graduation, the perception is similar: the percentages are 47,6%, 35,7% and 16,1%.

In terms of skills, at one year after graduation 43,1% of graduates considers highly likely the need of new skills, 40,4% less likely, while 16,1% highly unlikely (Fig. 4). 61,3% of graduates consider that the emergency situation allowed them to test or gain new skills useful for their future professional activities. At five years after graduation the relative percentages does not change to much: 42,0%, 41,0% and 17,0%, while those who faced test of gain of new skills represents 62,8%.

Fig. 4 - 2019 and 2015 second level graduates at one and five years after graduation: the probability of new skills requests on their professional activities after the end of emergency period (in %).





## Conclusions

Based on the isolation level during the Covid-19 pandemic first phase, this study analysed the status of graduates employability in Italy in the work environment when they faced the pandemic. The study investigated also their perception related to smart working, impact on human relationships, return to normality and use of new skills for their future professional activities.

The results indicated that employees were positively related to the return to normality but with an increase of request for new skills in their job activities.

It is also worth noting that the individual and organizational support mechanism implied that employees from public and services sectors were likely to be more involved in the working environment.

In strict isolation, employees tend to have work powerlessness, job insecurity, stress, and other factors when facing the pandemic.

This study can help for further analysis related to the expectation and desire for wellbeing from employees under the pressure of isolation in a pandemic can effectively provide them with relief from the stress and uncertainty of various negative factors arising from the pandemic.

Since there are policies for different levels of isolation led by the COVID-19 pandemic, such environmental conditions affect the differences in the psychological cognition of employees in different.

In consequence, managers should count up the number of employees who have information technology tools first and measure whether tasks or work are able to be done online; and the tasks or work that are not suitable for online working should be adjusted to ensure as much as possible a better work environment.

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