LUISS Guido Carli
LIBERA UNIVERSITÀ INTERNAZIONALE DEGLI STUDI SOCIALI

UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

Master's degree in Management
Major in Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Master's degree in Innovation and
Industrial Management

Knowledge transfer in consulting companies: the consequences of remote training.

A multiple case study on the Italian consulting industry facing the training challenges of Covid-19 pandemic

Supervisors

Daniel Hemberg – *University of Gothenburg*

Donato Iacovone – *LUISS Guido Carli*

Student

Diletta Cardinali Pietracci

Graduate School
Academic Year 2021 - 2022

To my beloved grandmothers,

Monalda and Rita

"Let's not pretend that things will change if we keep doing the same things.
A crisis can be a real blessing to any person, to any nation. For all crises bring progress.
Creativity is born from anguish, just like the day is born from the dark night.
It's in crisis that inventiveness is born, as well as discoveries made and big strategies."

Albert Einstein

Knowledge transfer in consulting companies: the consequences of remote training.
A multiple case study on the Italian consulting industry facing the training challenges of Covid-19 pandemic.

© Diletta Cardinali Pietracci

School of Business, Economics, and Law at the University of Gothenburg Vasagatan 1 P.O. Box 600,
SE 405 30, Gothenburg, Sweden

All rights reserved.
No part of this thesis may be reproduced without the consent of the authors.
Contact: dilettacardinali@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact, bringing changes that can be considered definitive. The purpose of this research is to analyse the way knowledge is transmitted during the training process in Italian consulting firms as a consequence of remote working. This study aims to investigate in particular the major difficulties encountered by consulting companies in dealing with the necessity of having to carry out training in an online environment and the solutions that have been implemented to overcome these obstacles. To achieve this goal, a qualitative study was carried out by interviewing both trainers and trainees of leading Italian consulting companies. The results led to the creation of a framework that summarises the decisions and solutions adopted by companies and to the identification of a new training model. At the same time they showed how, despite countless attempts, it is still not possible to convey contents and skills that are particularly related to socialisation and interpersonal relationships through remote training.

Keywords: consulting companies, knowledge transfer process, training, remote working, hybrid working, digitalization.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First of all, I would like to thank my thesis advisors, Donato Iacovone from the Luiss Guido Carli University in Rome and his teaching assistants and Daniel Hemberg from the University of Gothenburg, for their support during the thesis writing process and their valuable advice without which this thesis could not have the shape it has now.

Secondly, I would like to thank my closest friends and among them those who accompanied me on this Double Degree journey for their friendship and presence in my life, as even unwillingly they helped me write this thesis.

Finally, I thank my family who allowed me to live this wonderful experience that was my master's degree and to whom I owe every milestone I have reached.

Gothenburg, 05/06/2022

Diletta Cardinali Pietracci

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION **10**

1.1 RESEARCH BACKGROUND 10
1.2 RESEARCH GAP AND PURPOSE 12
1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION 14
1.4 RESEARCH DELIMITATIONS 15
1.5 RESEARCH STRUCTURE 16

2. LITERATURE REVIEW **17**

2.1 THE CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE 17
2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SOCIAL CONTEXT IN THE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PROCESS 19
2.3 CONSULTING FIRMS 22
2.4 THE TRAINING MODEL 24
2.5 THE IMPACT OF DIGITALIZATION 28
2.6 THE NEW CHALLENGE OF REMOTE WORKING 30
2.7 THE ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE "NEW NORMAL" 34
2.8 THE ITALIAN SITUATION 37

3. METHODOLOGY **40**

3.1 RESEARCH STRATEGY 40
3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN 41
3.3 RESEARCH METHOD 43
3.3.1 SECONDARY DATA COLLECTION 43
3.3.2 PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION 44
3.4 DATA ANALYSIS 51
3.5 RESEARCH QUALITY 52
3.5.1 TRUSTWORTHINESS 53
3.6 METHODOLOGY STRUCTURE 54

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS **56**

4.1 TRAINING 56
4.1.1 BIG THREE 1 56
4.1.2 BIG THREE 2 57
4.1.3 BIG THREE 3 58
4.1.4 BIG FOUR 1 59
4.1.5 BIG FOUR 2 59
4.2 CHALLENGES 60
4.2.1 BIG THREE 1 60
4.2.2 BIG THREE 2 61
4.2.3 BIG THREE 3 63

4.2.4 Big Four 1 ..... *66*
4.2.5 Big Four 2 ..... *67*
4. 3 Solutions 68
4.3.1 Big Three 1 ..... *68*
4.3.2 Big Three 2 ..... *69*
4.3.3 Big Three 3 ..... *70*
4.3.4 Big Four 1 ..... *72*
4.3.5 Big Four 2 ..... *74*
5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION 76
5.1 Training 76
5.1.1 Informal training *77*
5.1.2 Formal training *78*
5.2 Challenges 79
5.2.1 Knowledge transfer process *80*
5.2.2 Social aspect *82*
5.2.3 Employee well-being *85*
5.3 Solutions 87
5.3.1 Digitalization *87*
5.3.2 Digital Mindset *90*
5.3.3 Training redesign *92*
5.4 Framework 96
6. CONCLUSIONS 98
6.1 Restating the research aim 98
6.2 Answering the research questions 98
6.2.1 The key challenges in the process of training remote workers online *99*
6.2.2 The way to achieve the same level of knowledge transfer by training *101*
6.3 Practical Implications 103
6.4 Theoretical Implication 103
6.5 Research Limitations 104
6.6 Future Research 105
REFERENCES 106
APPENDIX 110
A. Big three and big four data 110
B. Interview guide 111
C. Tables of the thematic analysis 113
D. Comparing table – challenges and solutions 114
E. Quotation tables 115

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1 - DISPOSITION OF THE THESIS 16
FIGURE 2 - SECI MODEL 19
FIGURE 3 - THE THREE WAVES OF MANAGEMENT CONSULTING 22
FIGURE 4 - STRATEGIC MODEL OF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT 25
FIGURE 5 - LEARNING OUTCOMES DIFFER BY TRAINING METHOD 26
FIGURE 6 - A PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION MATRIX 27
FIGURE 7 - PERCENTAGE OF REMOTE WORKERS OUT OF POTENTIAL WORKERS 30
FIGURE 8 - THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC CRISIS ON HRM 36
FIGURE 9 - DIGITAL TOOLS AFTER COVID 19 IN ITALY IN 2020 38
FIGURE 10 - NEW TRAINING MODEL 96

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1 - DETAILS OF INTERVIEWS 50
TABLE 2 - SUMMARY OF TRAINING ANALYSIS 79
TABLE 3 - SUMMARY OF CHALLENGES ANALYSIS 87
TABLE 4 - SUMMARY OF SOLUTIONS ANALYSIS 96

1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the research context is explained and the thesis problem leading to the research gap is emphasised. After analysing the research gap, the research question is formulated, followed by the study's limitations and the description of the structure of this research.

1.1 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

"It's in crisis that inventiveness is born, as well as discoveries made and big strategies." It is from this quote by Albert Einstein that the context of this research can be described. The crisis, in this case, is the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions put in place to curb it, which led to a substantial change in the way everyday actions and processes are carried out. The discoveries and big strategies are the solutions and practices that Italian consulting companies have implemented to continue training in this new reality.

The pandemic has presented Italy with the need to temporarily close and severely restrict, through the lock-down measure, the transit and movement of people. One of the most significant effects certainly concerns everyday work, which was carried out exclusively from home for several months due to the sudden, total, and prolonged lockdown put in place to stop the spread of the virus between March and May 2020.[1] Confined at home, forced not to be able to go out and not to work, companies and workers found themselves in the unusual condition of having to change and in some cases completely redefine working patterns, models, and procedures, resulting in an overall rethinking of the concept and nature of work. As far as training is concerned, it followed the dynamics of work since they are mutually related, at least in consulting companies, since much of the training of consultants takes place while they are working.

In 2019, Italy had 4.8% of workers in remote working situations, ranking very low in Europe, far behind Sweden, which leads the list with 37.8% of workers (also due to Swedish extreme environmental conditions at certain times of the year).[2] In April 2020, at the height of the emergency, more than a third (37%) of EU workers were reported to have started working from home. Italy, which before the

[1] (Assolombarda, 2021, "Lo smart working in numeri")
[2] (Assolombarda, 2021, "Lo smart working in numeri")

pandemic had been at the back of the queue, was one of the most responsive countries, with the highest percentage (40%) of remote workers.[3]

In the second period, corresponding to the so-called second wave of the virus, the government set up a lockdown that could be described as less rigid, in which freedom of movement and business closures were partial and temporary. But today, despite the total reopening of activities, remote work has not been abandoned.[4] The emergency has resulted in smart working going from being an available option that companies considered feasible in particular situations, to a real asset and resource from which companies have started to rethink their working patterns.[5] Remote working and so remote training are therefore now a reality in Italy and represent the macro subject of this study.

In particular, the research will focus on the analysis of the situation in the consultancy sector as these companies present two interesting characteristics. On the one hand, they are deeply founded on the knowledge transfer that takes place among their workers and on a fast and very formative learning process. On the other hand, they are also considered to be activities that have suited and continue to suit remote working, unlike for example factory and construction work, which indispensably require the physical presence of the employee in the workplace.[6] But the question is whether counselling can really do without face-to-face work. The goal will be to look into training bias and challenges related to training with regards to remote working trying to understand which are the most important elements that are lost in this new situation and how companies are facing or can face this problem.

In Italy, the turnover rate is high in the consultancy sector, and thousands of young people are recruited every year, so there is a need for a lot of training, maybe more than ever during this period.[7] Most consultancies are convinced that they have solved the problem, not only that, but they also believe it has led to a better situation. Everyone has wi-fi, a computer, a video camera, and basic computer skills, meaning that they can work from home, which is a big saving in terms of reimbursement, costs, and time.

But when people are not in the office, the development of emotional and technical skills becomes more difficult. This is because when there is no contact between colleagues, between supervisors and new

[3] (Assolombarda, 2021, "Lo smart working in numeri")
[4] (Gigauri, 2020, "Influence of Covid-19 Crisis on Human Resource Management and Companies' Response: The Expert Study")
[5] (Baska 2020, "Home working set to double post coronavirus crisis, survey finds."; Gartner 2020, "Gartner Global CFO Survey"; PwC, 2021, "Upskilling Hopes and Fears"; Delany, 2021, "What challenges will organisations face transitioning for the first time to the new normal of remote working?")
[6] (Kipping, 2002, "Trapped in Their Wave: The Evolution of Management Consultancies")
[7] (Ufficio studi PWC, 2020, "Smart Working")

employees, the transmission of skills that used to take place autonomously thanks to proximity and by living the same experiences together no longer works.[8] This happens especially when there is a negotiating element, as occurs in consulting everyday work. During meetings with clients, there are specific skills such as public speaking, time management, and people management that affect the success of the project. It is much more difficult to develop and implement these skills from behind a screen especially because of the lack of contact with other more experienced colleagues.[9]

For these reasons, new methods have been and need to be invented and tested, because in consulting companies the transfer of knowledge and development of skills that used to take place in the workplace, learning by doing, can in some cases no longer happen but even training that was done through weeks of onboarding or retraining period does not have the same effect when held online. It will therefore be important to understand which methods have been implemented to overcome this problem.

1.2 Research Gap and Purpose

As we have already pointed out, the importance of this topic can be seen in the large number of people who are in a remote or hybrid work situation in Italy also right now, and despite different companies, geographical areas, and sectors of interest the issue can be traced back to the same solutions, so the generalisability of the problem makes it of great relevance. Moreover, the subject of the research is quite recent as it describes a situation that has largely developed in Italy in the last two years, so it is little studied and of great significance. Furthermore, the remote working status will continue even after the end of the pandemic, as it gives many advantages in terms of costs and organization to consultancy firms, therefore it is not a temporary problem but a consolidated reality that should be studied in greater depth, to learn how to deal and how to coexist with it.[10] It could also be helpful for sectors other than consultancy because of the similarity of the situation with many other jobs since there is increasing use of remote working which does not stop growing.[11]

[8] (Nonaka& Takeuchi, 1995, "The knowledge creating company: how Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation")
[9] (Larsson & al, 2020, "Consulting in the digital era? The role of tomorrow's management consultants")
[10] (Lewis & Cooper, 2005, "Work-Life Integration"; Ortega, 2009, "Why do employers give discretion? Family versus performance concerns."; Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers."; Grant & al., 2013, "An exploration of the psychological factors affecting remote e-worker's job effectiveness, well-being, and work-life balance.")
[11] (Delany, 2021, "What challenges will organisations face transitioning for the first time to the new normal of remote working?")

The relevant literature converges in considering people as perhaps the most important asset for consultancies and the transfer of knowledge between them can be placed immediately afterwards.[12] It already underlines the fundamental role of the social aspect within the training dynamics as well as the tools most frequently used in remote working situations by companies. Focusing on recent years, many difficulties and obstacles have also emerged due to the need to carry out the training process online, as well as all other activities.[13] The literature is characterized by numerous contributions that cross analyse this issue and emphasize the importance of being in contact with others and working in a team during training and it is clear that there are challenges both for the organization, which has to try to involve its employees as much as those working in the office and for employees who have to acquire knowledge without being present on-site, with the difficulty then of the lack of face-to-face relations.[14]

However, partly because of the topicality of these events, the remote training difficulties of employees have not been adequately addressed in a context such as consulting sector, which performs according to the skills and knowledge of its workers. So, what is missing from the literature review is a closer look at the impact of remote working on training and knowledge transfer phases that are so important for consulting societies, the main challenges, and obstacles, and the way to overcome them.
There is a lack of an analysis describing the main elements that make up the process of knowledge transfer and competence creation and how these elements can also be achieved in a remote working context. This study aims to fill at least part of this gap by analysing learning and individual development strategies, underlining the challenges and the solutions that have been implemented so far to achieve the same level of training that was provided before, to understand which competencies can be transferred only with a face-to-face relationship, and so to discover whether the application of remote working is still feasible and/or useful after Covid-19. So, the research tried to investigate a new way of training employees because the literature is showing that learning by doing and working in a group is very important but since these activities can no longer be performed, a way must be found to fill this gap. What the research tries to do is also to understand how to create a similar value, and result, giving the same knowledge because due to the birth of new circumstances what was done before can no longer be done.

[12] (Balaz, 2004, "Knowledge intensive services and knowledge-based economy in small European economies"; Mas-Machuca & Martinez Costa, 2012, A Study of Knowledge Culture in the Consulting Industry"; Kubr, 2002, "Management Consulting: A Guide to the Profession"; Lorsch & Thierney, 2002, "Aligning the Stars: How to Succeed when Professionals Drive Performance"; Dickman & al., 2006, "The role of Human Resource Management in consulting firms")
[13] (Ansgar & al., 2008, "Patterns of Human Resource Management in Consulting Firms")
[14] (Domsch & Hristozova, 2006; Human Resource Management in Consulting Firms")

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question gives the direction to the whole research, and represents its main purpose, since the study will aim to answer it, following a defined path according to its needs and features. Marx (1997) presents several possible sources of research questions, and some of them have been used here. In particular, the research question has been developed based on "new social and technical developments and social trends" and also considering the gap previously underlined by the literature review.[15] As far as the research question is concerned, it was initially conceived in this way:

RQ: "What are the key elements that are lost in the process of recruiting, training, and evaluating talents with remote working in consulting companies due to Covid-19."

However, having emphasized the importance of the research question, it is clear that, in deciding on it, much consideration must be given to some issues. Firstly, it is crucial to avoid both open and unclear research questions. About the former, it may lead the researcher to collect too much-unrelated data, which is not relevant for trying to address the research question, while regard to the latter may give the researcher weak and inappropriate data to reach clear and helpful conclusions.[16] Furthermore, what Bell & al. (2019) suggest is to have a research question "neither too broad nor too narrow" and, if it is multiple, the research questions have to be linked to each other. It soon became clear that the chosen research question was too long and too broad as it tried to address so many different factors. It was therefore decided to focus on one of the aspects present in the previous question to concentrate and not lump together several different areas. The newly developed research question takes the following form:

RQ (1): "What are the key challenges in the process of training remote workers online?"
RQ (2): "How can the same level of knowledge transfer by training be achieved with the tools of remote working?"

This respected more the criteria proposed by Bell & al. (2019) concerning the clarity and searchability of the question itself, as well as the opportunity to create a new and valid theory.
Obviously, even if not specified within the research questions, the context of analysis, as previously emphasised, is that of Italian consulting companies.

[15] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[16] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

1.4 RESEARCH DELIMITATIONS

Given the purpose and the context of this research, some delimitations have been made. First of all, as just underlined, it must be emphasised that the research is limited to Italian consulting companies. Moreover, among the various companies, those belonging to the two groups referred to as the "Big Four" and the "Big Three"[17] within the Italian landscape were selected.[18] This choice was made because the companies mentioned, whose names cannot be made explicit, are considered important and large enough to be representative of the consulting sector[19].

In addition, the research is limited to challenges and solutions related to the training process and not to work in general, although the two concepts are often overlapping since an important part of the training is that which takes place on the job.

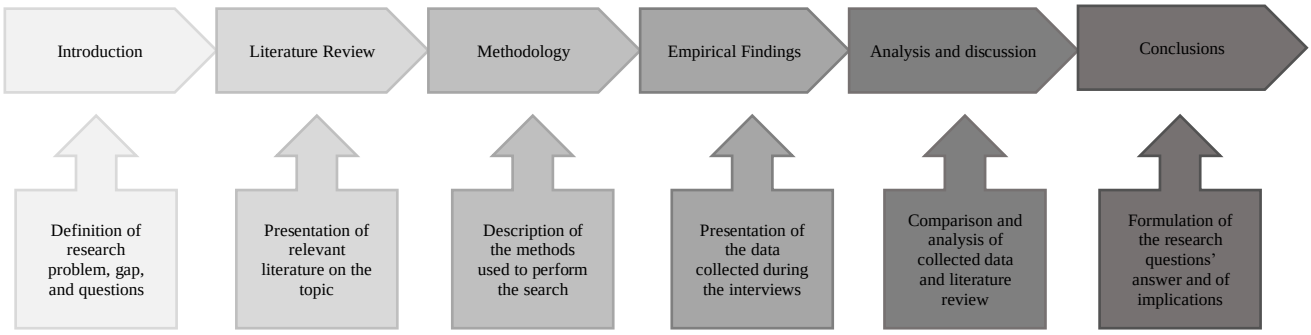
Furthermore, the concept of knowledge transfer only refers to the process between trainer and trainee or between colleagues or superiors when this represents a type of training. The problematic nature of knowledge sharing due to the reticence of employees is not investigated. Within the concept of knowledge transfer fall other types of transfers such as those of data needed to carry out a project. Often barriers are created between functions or departments within the company that prevent the open circulation of data and this falls under the umbrella of knowledge transfer.[20] But this research is limited to dealing with the difficulties that occur during the knowledge transfer process when it has as its tacit or explicit, voluntary, or involuntary purpose training.

[17] (Conventionally, these are the names given to the largest strategic (Big Three) and non-strategic (Big Four) consulting firms in Italy.)
[18] (Osservatorio Sul Management Consulting in Italia, 2018, "Rapporto Annuale 2017/2018")
[19] (For more specific data see Appendix A)
[20] (Joia & Lemos, 2010, "Relevant factors for tacit knowledge transfer within organisations")

1.5 RESEARCH STRUCTURE

This thesis is composed of six different chapters, following the order, and presenting the contents according to the graph below.

Figure 1 - Disposition of the thesis



(Source: elaborated by the author)

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter tries to give an overview of what the literature provides regarding the topic under consideration, the patterns that have emerged during the analysis and what is still to be studied. It is divided into eight sections which form the theoretical framework of reference. The structure of this literature review is designed to move from broader to more specific topics following the structure of the title and the research questions. It starts from the concept of knowledge to delimit its meaning, it, then, brings out the importance of the social aspect in the moment of knowledge transfer, followed by an overview of consulting companies and their training models. The section on digitalization represents the link between the old training model and the new one which is described in the following sections concerning the challenges faced by firms and employees with remote working and the response that companies have had to these changes up to now. Finally, the Italian context is briefly described.

2.1 THE CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE

Consulting companies are knowledge-intensive service providers and therefore knowledge is their core asset.[21] For this reason, the first topic to be analysed in more detail is the concept of knowledge, which is crucial to understand what the object of transmission from one party to the other is in the knowledge transfer process during the employee training phase.

The term knowledge has ancient origins and many nuances within it and for this reason, it becomes difficult to explain it with few words and to try to make this very abstract and broad concept concrete. This study does not aim to offer a complete definition of it in its wider sense but will limit itself to describing its meaning attributable according to the context of the research. In this specific case, therefore, knowledge will be analysed as a fundamental asset for organisations, as a competitive advantage, and as a skill needed to perform a business function.

A first definition is provided by Davenport & al. (1998), who describe it in the organizational context as "a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, expert insight, and grounded intuition that provides an environment and framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences

[21] (Balaz, 2004, "Knowledge intensive services and knowledge-based economy in small European economies"; Mas-Machuca & Martinez Costa, 2012, A Study of Knowledge Culture in the Consulting Industry")

and information. In organisations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices, and norms."[22] Thanks to this definition it is clearer that knowledge does not represent only one thing, it is, instead, very complex and different in its parts. Unlike other types of assets of a company, this one is intangible and not easily captured since it is embedded with human beings.[23] The same view is also held by Alavi & Leidner (2016) who state that "knowledge is information possessed in the mind of individuals: it is personalized information […] related to facts, procedures, concepts, interpretations, ideas, observations, and judgments." In this statement, there is both the view of knowledge as something broad and varied and its close connection with people. According to this paper, knowledge would not exist without the person who possesses it. What is found in books or databases is pure information that becomes knowledge once it has been acquired and processed by humans.[24]

Moreover, thanks once again to the contribution of Alavi & Leidner (2016), the multiformity of knowledge becomes even more apparent. They presented the various forms that knowledge can take. It can be seen as a state of mind, an object, a process, a status of gaining access to information or a capability and the company should choose how to manage its knowledge according to which of these visions is the most suitable for it. Alavi & Leidner, (2016) also define knowledge as "a state or fact of knowing" with "knowing" considered as a condition of "understanding gained through experience or study; the sum or range of what has been perceived, discovered, or learned".[25]

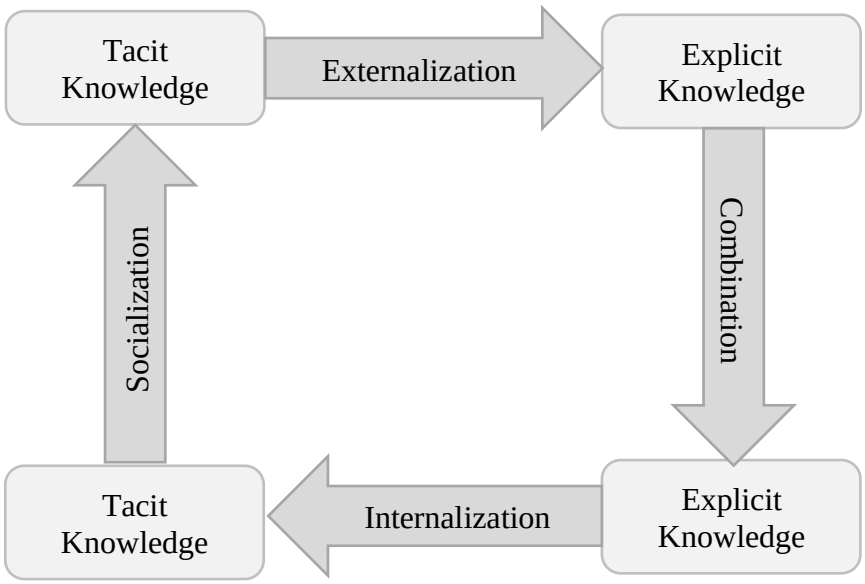
For the purpose of this research, Davenport & al. (1998) provides an interesting classification between tacit and explicit knowledge that can be useful to then analyse the transfer process. The former is the one stored in the mind and gained from experiences, while the latter is the decoding and documentation of the first. They can be transformed into the other by specific processes described in the SECI model (see Figure 2) which will be discussed and analysed in more detail in the following paragraphs.[26] Also McEvily & Reagans (2010) give their definition of tacit knowledge as "the degree to which knowledge is difficult to codify (e.g., in writing) or articulate" and because of this difficulty, it is often only possible to transfer tacit knowledge through direct experience and close observation.

After different versions by some authors, the concept of knowledge within the organisational reality can be summarised for the purpose of this thesis as everything from which a concept, a teaching, an

[22] (Davenport & al., 1998; "Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know")
[23] (Davenport & al., 1998; "Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know")
[24] (Alavi & Leidner, 2016, "Knowledge management and knowledge management systems: conceptual foundations and research issue.")
[25] (Schubert & al., 1998, "A Global Knowledge Medium as a Virtual Com- munity: The NetAcademy Concept")
[26] (Nonaka, 1991, "The Knowledge Creating Company")

experience is derived. What needs to be emphasised is the existence of a link between knowledge and the person who possesses it. This is why the human and social aspect is considered fundamental to the exchange of knowledge.

Figure 2 - SECI Model



(Source: Agung, 2015)

2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SOCIAL CONTEXT IN THE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PROCESS

What is interesting for this research is the situations and the way through which knowledge can be transferred in a working environment, to then investigate if the same transfer between employee and trainer could take place face-to-face and remotely in the same way.

Transfers of knowledge can happen at different levels, between single individuals, or from explicit sources of information, between an individual and a group and between more groups, and finally through the organization itself.[27] In line with this, there is the concept expressed by Tuomi, (1999). According to him, knowledge creation is a social phenomenon, it is not something that an individual can do alone and the process that leads to the exchange and development of knowledge takes place in social units which are referred to as "thought collectives". Tuomi (1999) also refers to the SECI Model when he talks about the socialization process in which the tacit element is given by a socially shared

[27] (Alavi & Leidner, 2016, "Knowledge management and knowledge management systems: conceptual foundations and research issue.")

meaning structure, which is created through a sociocultural process and internalized by society members during their psychological and behavioural growth.[28]

Having said that, the SECI Model can be further analysed. According to Tuomi (1999), it explains that knowledge is created through exchanges and synergies between members of a group or between individuals. In particular, as just mentioned, it includes the socialization phase, the process with which the tacit knowledge is transferred from one individual to other thanks to social interactions and experiences sharing. Indeed, some of the most effective ways to transfer knowledge are working every day together with a mentor, trying to imitate his actions, observing, and practising with him.[29] Physical proximity is also a factor that positively influences and helps to share since tacit knowledge cannot be extrapolated from books or databases, it must be transferred through social activities, such as living the same experience and being together in the same environment.[30] Going forward, the externalization phase is the individual process thanks to which the tacit knowledge is channelled into ideas, concepts, words, or images so that they can be encoded and shared.[31] During the combination phase, there is another social exchange in which external knowledge is transformed into new knowledge through the reworking and interpretation of a group and finally, the internalization phase is represented by the learning by doing concept, accompanied by reflections and group brainstorming.[32] So, it is clear that the social aspect is fundamental for knowledge to be created and transferred, as it is present in three of the four phases of the SECI Model. In line with this, Davenport & al. (1998) emphasizes the importance of the organizational routines and everyday experiences, such as courses, mentors, and situations, especially because the reality of work is very different from what is studied in theory and only by living it can one understand it fully.[33] So, also, in this case, the role of the social aspect in the knowledge transfer process is underlined in line with the rest of the literature.

Another relevant aspect is the key role of technology. Especially in these last years, technological progress has given rise to valuable tools and infrastructures that speed up, improve, and simplify the process of transmitting knowledge.[34] But despite the great progress made in this field, it should not be

[28] (Tuomi, 1999, "Data is more than knowledge: Implications of the reversed knowledge hierarchy for knowledge management and organizational memory")
[29] (Alavi & Leidner, 2016, "Knowledge management and knowledge management systems: conceptual foundations and research issue.")
[30] (Argote & al., 2003, "Managing Knowledge in Organizations: An Integrative Framework and Review of Emerging Themes.")
[31] (Tuomi, 1999, "Data is more than knowledge: Implications of the reversed knowledge hierarchy for knowledge management and organizational memory")
[32] (Nonaka& Takeuchi, 1995, "The knowledge creating company: how Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation")
[33] (Davenport & al., 1998; "Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know")
[34] (Davenport & al., 1998; "Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know")

forgotten that these new resources are only instruments, warehouses, which do not create knowledge and would not be able to transmit it on their own without the irreplaceable role of the human being.[35] They are data carriers, but as pointed out above, it is only from individuals or groups that true knowledge is created.[36] The role of these groups, especially as regards tacit knowledge, is to take part in the same experiences and to influence by their actions, voluntarily or involuntarily, one's perception and memory of the situations thus encountered.[37]

Furthermore, according to Eraut (2004), there are four different working activities which usually result in learning. The first one is the participation in group activities, useful to create common knowledge and share different views. Then, there is working alongside others, to learn from them, especially tacit knowledge. The third is tackling a challenging task that needs the support of someone experienced and continuous on-the-job attempts. Finally, working with clients and becoming an expert at dealing with new situations. Again, there is the predominance of the social element in the knowledge transfer situation.[38]

Finally, what is common in the literature is the role of relationship, confidence, and emotional attachment. It was found that for workers having a close relationship helps to transfer knowledge more easily. [39] It should be borne in mind also that this process benefits the receiver but has a cost for the transmitter, who "gives" his knowledge to another. Therefore, establishing a relationship between the parties would help the exchange. This is because communicating and interacting daily builds emotional attachment and trust, which can foster a predisposition to share knowledge.[40] In an organisation designed to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, where efforts are made to reduce physical and psychological distance, members have the opportunity to work together and learn from each other, learn by doing, and learn from observation.[41] Moreover research has shown that those who learn by observing acquire much more even though they would not be able to explain what they observed in detail so it is clear how much this aspect and its absence impact knowledge transfer processes.[42]

---

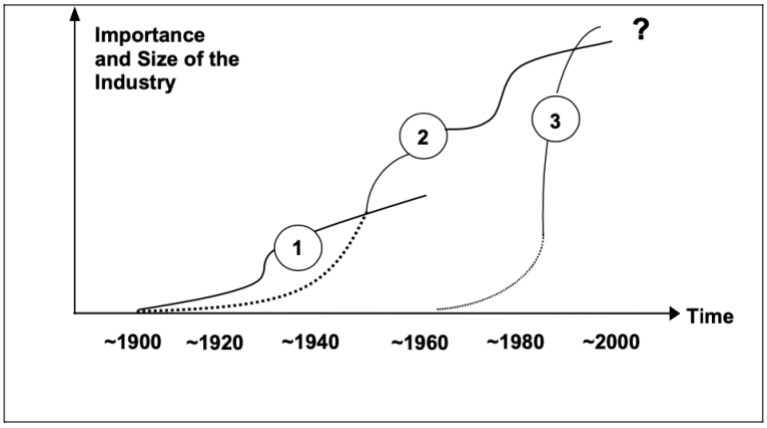
[35] (Eraut, 2004, "Informal Learning in the Workplace.")
[36] (Davenport & al., 1998; "Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know")
[37] (Eraut, 2004, "Informal Learning in the Workplace.")
[38] (Eraut, 2004, "Informal Learning in the Workplace.")
[39] (McEvily & Reagans, 2010, "Network Structure and knowledge Transfer: The Effects of Cohesion and Range.")
[40] (McEvily & Reagans, 2010, "Network Structure and knowledge Transfer: The Effects of Cohesion and Range.")
[41] (Argote & al., 2003, "Managing Knowledge in Organizations: An Integrative Framework and Review of Emerging Themes.")
[42] (McEvily & Reagans, 2010, "Network Structure and knowledge Transfer: The Effects of Cohesion and Range.")

2.3 CONSULTING FIRMS

As the subjects of this study are consulting companies, the analysis of the literature review was also aimed at understanding the mechanisms by which these firms operate, their core assets and their relationship with knowledge.

Consulting is a relatively new business. Although administrators of major industries have sought external advice since the beginning of the 19th century,[43] management consulting is traced back to the first two decades of the twentieth century.[44] Since then, three waves of consulting can be underlined, each defined by the type of services given and the organizational characteristics of each firm (see Figure 3).[45]

Figure 3 - The three waves of Management Consulting



(Source: Kipping, 2002)

Beginning with the first wave of consulting, according to Kipping (2002), it took off in the early 1900s and the initial aim of those offering these services was to help clients improve their operational efficiency. The range of action of these first companies was not yet international as they were still small, remaining with their initial structure even in the period of most prosperity and they then left room for new types of more developed companies. The second wave of consulting became widespread in the 1950s, due to the emergence of new demand from customers, who not only needed help with organizational efficiency but also wanted other types of support. The two main characteristics of these types of firms were their increasing internationalization and the merging of common organizational characteristics into a professional partnership (P2) model.[46] The third wave of consulting firms started

[43] (Ferguson, 2002, "The Rise of Management Consulting in Britain")
[44] (Wilkinson, 1995, "What Is Management Consulting?")
[45] (Kipping, 2002, "Trapped in Their Wave: The Evolution of Management Consultancies")
[46] (Rose and Hinings, 1999, "Global Clients' Demands Driving Change in Global Business Advisory Firms.")

at the beginning of the 1980s with the entry of other types of companies with related backgrounds, such as accountancies, auditors, IT providers, and so on, who decided to expand their business, driven by low barriers to entry, very high profits, and the possibility of exploiting the knowledge of their sectors in the consultancy business. These companies developed a new organizational model defined by Powell & al. (1999) as managed professional businesses (MPBs). Finally, the increase in the number and complexity of businesses explains the strong development of consultancy services at the end of the 21st century.[47]

As previously pointed out, a consultancy firm is an organisation that offers its clients professional services and the opportunity to use its intellectual capital and knowledge to solve their problems or achieve their goals.[48] Even though consultancy projects are different from one another there are common elements that can be found in the various companies. Consultancy firms are professional service firms because they provide services to other entities, and knowledge-intensive firms because knowledge is what they provide.[49] In fact, according to Ambos & al. (2009) "Knowledge is the resource that consultancy firms sell (...) and the knowledge generated and shared internally represents the main service they offer their clients".
The workforce of these companies will therefore be highly specialised and skilled, and the knowledge they possess will enable them to solve the complex problems posed by their customers.[50] The main way for consulting companies to gain a competitive advantage is therefore to have more or better knowledge than their competitors. According to Dunford (2000), it is the accumulated knowledge and the ability to learn that determines the future of a consultancy firm and its ability to be responsive to competitors.

Moreover, consulting companies are also one of the most human relations-based businesses. Maister (1982) states that there is a great deal of interaction with the client in these types of companies. In agreement with this, Carucci and Tetenbaum (2000) emphasise that close cooperation with the customer is crucial for creating value. The interaction between client and advisor is not only practical but also mental and emotional and for this reason, human skills are essential to create the ideal situation for the exchange to be fruitful.[51]

There are currently three main types of consultancy companies on the Italian scene: first of all, the so-called "Big Four", which are big accountancies, recognisable by the diversity of their services ranging

[47] (Testa G., 2004, "Il management strategico delle società di consulenza")
[48] (Kubr, M., 2002, "Management Consulting: A Guide to the Profession"; Sarvary, M., 1999, "Knowledge management and competition in the consulting industry")
[49] (Von Nordenflycht, 2010, "What Is a Professional Service Firm? Toward a Theory and Taxonomy of Knowledge-Intensive Firms")
[50] (Von Nordenflycht, 2010, "What Is a Professional Service Firm? Toward a Theory and Taxonomy of Knowledge-Intensive Firms")
[51] (Svensson, P., 2010, Doing Value: "Exclusion and Inclusion in Management Consultant-Client Interactions")

from audit to assurance, management consulting to legal services and many others. Then, there are the "Big Three", i.e., companies specialising in strategy and management consulting. Finally, many small companies focused on various sectors of industry are present.[52]

2.4 THE TRAINING MODEL

In the previous section, consultancies have been described as service providers, and their most important asset was recognized to be knowledge. The consulting sector bases the concept of knowledge on the factors of experience and skills possessed by the professionals at the company's disposal. For this reason, as already pointed out, the training of its employees is a crucial process.

As was the case for the notion of knowledge, the training concept also has several definitions. Nadler & Wiggs (1989) describe it as the set of activities that a company carries out to instruct its employees and teach them the values and skills necessary for their work or its improvement.
A similar concept is that of Aguinis & Kraiger (2009) who define it as the approach of the company in influencing the skills and knowledge of an individual to improve his or her performance.

The components of what it is transmitted can be divided into "informal" and "formal" training.[53] The former is a complementary part of "learning from experience", it is a more flexible way of teaching, and it implies receiving knowledge from other people almost unintentionally.[54] The latter is defined as a formal process established by organizations to teach individuals specific business knowledge.[55]

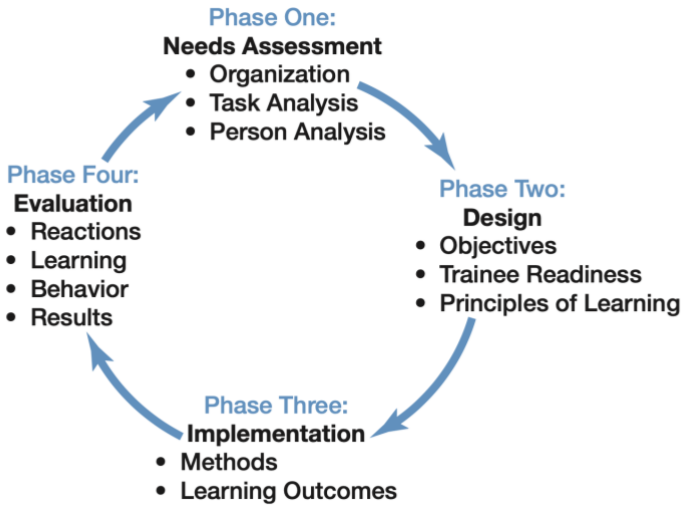
As has been said, training is one fundamental activity for consulting companies since it is solely on the work of the employees that productivity and the achievement of the firm's objectives depend on. It is used to ensure that workers can carry out their tasks in the best possible way so that they are profitable for the firm.[56] For this reason, training is included in the strategic decisions of the company[57] since it is also an investment for them. They are growing and improving their most important assets.[58] Limiting

[52] (Osservatorio Sul Management Consulting in Italia, 2018, "Rapporto Annuale 2017/2018")
[53] (Jacobs & Park, 2009, "A proposed conceptual framework of workplace learning: Implications for theory development and research in human resource development.")
[54] (Eraut, 2004, "Informal Learning in the Workplace.")
[55] (Jacobs & Park, 2009, "A proposed conceptual framework of workplace learning: Implications for theory development and research in human resource development.")
[56] (Graubner & Richter 2003, "Managing Tomorrow 's Consulting Firm"; Hunter, 1999, "The 'New HR' and the New HR Consultant: Developing Human Resource Consultants at Andersen Consulting.").
[57] (Vinten, 2010, "Training in Small- and Enterprises.")
[58] (Becker, 1993, "Human capital")

or withdrawing resources from training could be a mistake for consultancies, as in the long run, they would end up with much lower quality workers who generate less revenue as a result.[59]

Training is made of several sub-processes and activities that differ from company to company but can be traced back to the same types and modalities. According to Snell & Morris (2019), there are four steps to developing a type of training that is effective for employees and therefore fruitful for the company. They are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 - Strategic Model of training and development



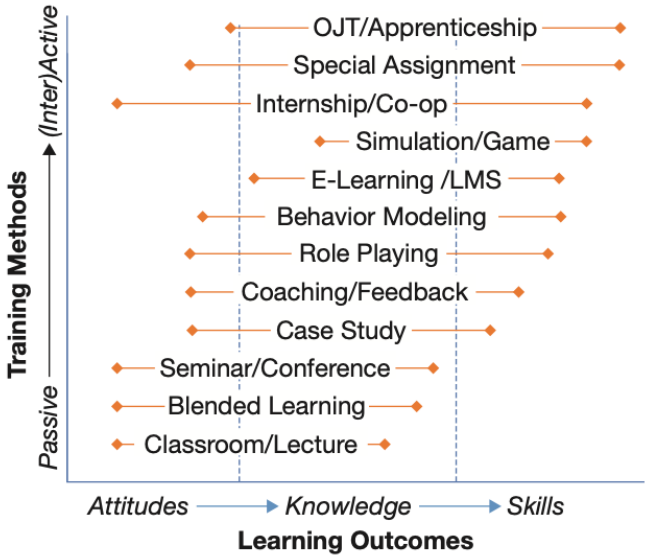
(Source: Snell & Morris, 2019)

The first one needs assessments, is to understand what kind of training is needed, and what skills and knowledge have to be achieved at the end. In this regard, the difference between hard and soft skills is underlined. Hard skills are tangible and more formally teachable qualities, while soft skills are not measurable and depend on judgement and personal characteristics. In the first category we find for example IT, and budgeting skills, while in the second leadership or time management training.[60] The second phase involves establishing the design of the program, the definition of the goals and the way to reach them, together with the assessment of the readiness and motivation of employees and the incorporation in the program of the so-called, principles of learning, that must be followed during the program. They are for example active participation and repetition and goal setting.[61] The third phase is the most interesting for this study as it analyses how training is delivered. As presented in Figure 5 several training methods differ considering on one side the learning outcomes, which can be attitudes

[59] (Graubner & Richter 2003, "Managing Tomorrow 's Consulting Firm")
[60] (Snell & Morris, 2019, "Managing Human Resources")
[61] (Snell & Morris, 2019, "Managing Human Resources")

or skills, and on the other side the passive or active role of the trainee.[62] Given the importance of the topic in relation to this study, it will be analysed in more detail also later.

Figure 5 - Learning outcomes differ by training method



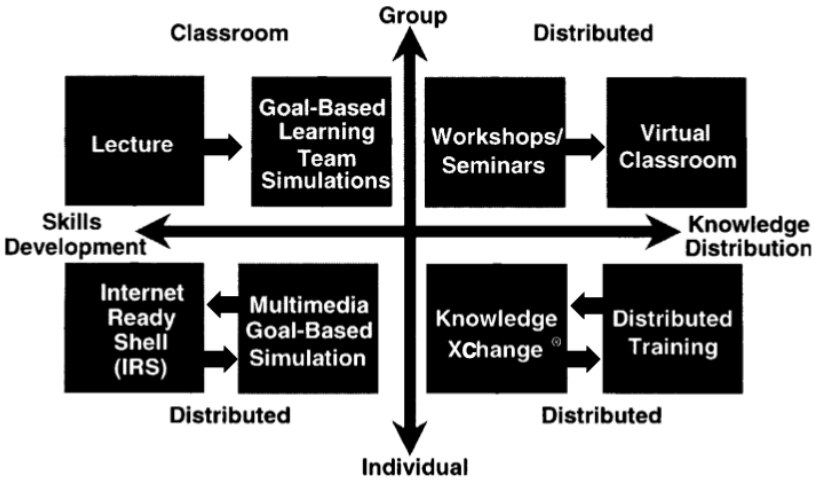
(Source: Snell & Morris, 2019)

Finally, in the fourth phase, the company evaluates the result of the training according to the goals initially set and the methods used.[63]

Coming back to the third phase, to further analyse training delivery methods also Hunter (1999) was also considered. He presents a matrix with several specific types of training from Anderson Consulting (see Figure 6). In this second model, they are divided into four groups according to the same variables shown before, skills development training or knowledge distribution training and the other two that point out the difference between individual and group training.

[62] (Snell & Morris, 2019, "Managing Human Resources")
[63] (Snell & Morris, 2019, "Managing Human Resources")

Figure 6 - A professional education matrix



(Source: Hunter, 1999)

In both models, there are some shared methods which are also widely used and relevant according to the literature.[64] For example, the most common is on-the-job training (OJT). It allows the employee to learn thanks to the experience acquired under everyday working situations.[65] It usually provides for a trainee to be supported by a more experienced person. When there is a lasting and strong relationship between them, the mentor also has a sort of investment in the development of the employee. It is also intended as mentoring.[66] Mentoring programs are fundamental for a company to be successful since the presence of a deep relationship between senior consultants and apprentices enhances the development of the latter by promoting the growth of the whole company.[67] Going forward, there are some practices called special job assignment, which consists of the job or task rotation during the training activity and simulations, with which the practical skills and principles and values are transferred without actually being at work.[68] Moreover, behavioural models, are training systems in which the right way to behave in different situations is shown to trainees. Similarly, coaching is represented by a constant flow of information and knowledge as well as support and supervision shared by managers with subordinates.[69] There are also seminars and conferences, useful to communicate values, and for discussions as well as classroom training, or forums, workshops, and meetings.[70] All these activities include the development of teamwork and socialization and are promoted by companies as essential to the process of improving

[64] (Snell & Morris, 2019, "Managing Human Resources"; Domsch & Hristozova, 2006; Human Resource Management in Consulting Firms"; University of Minnesota, 2016, "Human Resource Management")
[65] (Snell & Morris, 2019, "Managing Human Resources")
[66] (University of Minnesota, 2016, "Human Resource Management")
[67] (Domsch & Hristozova, 2006; Human Resource Management in Consulting Firms")
[68] (Snell & Morris, 2019, "Managing Human Resources")
[69] (Snell & Morris, 2019, "Managing Human Resources")
[70] (Snell & Morris, 2019, "Managing Human Resources")

and reviewing each other.[71] As suggested by Hunter (1999) "the group dimension of exercises is very important for the training process in consultancies".

Finally, especially nowadays, new web-based training systems have been developed. They are designed to exploit technology to facilitate the teaching process.[72] They include among others every type of e-learning, virtual classrooms, just-in-time and microlearning, online courses, social media and so on.[73] As far as Italy is concerned, the topic is not dealt with specifically because training in consultancy firms is different in each country, starting however from the processes implemented at an international level, the main points of which have been previously described. No further information has been included because in the literature there is a constant reference to the procedures that are in charge of the practices decided by the parent companies.

2.5 THE IMPACT OF DIGITALIZATION

The last methods just mentioned in the previous paragraph fall under the broader theme of digitalization. According to Gartner (2020), a possible definition of this growing trend is "the use of digital technologies to change a business model and provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities. It is the process of moving to a digital business." This transition started even before the deployment of Covid-19, with varying intensity according to different industries, geographical locations and so on. Inevitably, however, with the start of the lockdown, companies had no choice but to begin or accelerate their digitalization process, and consultancy has been no exception.[74]

Digitalization increases the effectiveness, competitiveness, and affordability of consultants by moving a large part of their activities to digital technology.[75] This transition is about putting the digital as the primary objective, developing new techniques and methods to ensure an agile work and support experimentation to become a digitalized company[76] and the Human Resources department has been appointed to support this process since they have to guide their employees through the innovation needed to face the unexpected and new situations that the digitalization carries with it.[77] These changes

[71] (Domsch & Hristozova, 2006; Human Resource Management in Consulting Firms")
[72] (University of Minnesota, 2016, "Human Resource Management")
[73] (Snell & Morris, 2019, "Managing Human Resources")
[74] (Gigauri, 2020, "Influence of Covid-19 Crisis on Human Resource Management and Companies' Response: The Expert Study")
[75] (Christensen & al., 2013, "Consulting on the cusp of disruption.")
[76] (Snow & al., 2017, "Designing the digital organization")
[77] (Deloitte, 2014, "Building your Digital DNA"; Gigauri, 2020, "Influence of Covid-19 Crisis on Human Resource Management and Companies' Response: The Expert Study"; Delany, 2021, "What challenges will organisations face transitioning for the first time to the new normal of remote working?")

involve the whole company and in particular, three areas: digital workforce, enabling new practices (the "digital DNA") to become a network-based organization; digital workplace, equipped with modern communication tools; and, as said before, digital Human Resource, leading the organization through change.[78]

Considering employees' skills, they have to be updated to be able to deal with the process and objectives of a digital organization. [79] For this reason, according to Ferrari (2919) new methods such as microlearning and blended learning are being increasingly used to meet the need to take up as little time as possible from workers while teaching them as much as possible. They consist of training on digital platforms and short modules adapted to the needs of professionals. The former is an activity designed to transfer knowledge shortly and concisely. Employees can use it in their free time or when they need it, thanks to its brevity and its use on mobile devices. The second is a mixed form of online and face-to-face learning that synthesizes the strengths of both.[80] Previously, technology was only a means to support face-to-face education, whereas in this case, it becomes the protagonist of the teaching model.

In addition, the exchange of experience between the older and newer generations, known as reverse mentoring, is becoming increasingly important to merge the technological skills of the younger generation with the practical skills of the more experienced.[81] Finally, to run processes, companies have equipped themselves with tools and assets to support this transition, such as automating organizational processes, computers, software, digital platforms, Artificial Intelligence, robotics, augmented reality and blockchain[82] and above all, they have sought to promote a culture of digital transformation to lay the foundations for Human Resources to pave the way for the rest of the company.[83]

In general, therefore, digitalization has had a considerable impact on the activities of consultancies in terms of updating and innovating the organization, its processes, and tools, which have fortunately facilitated the transition to remote working.[84]

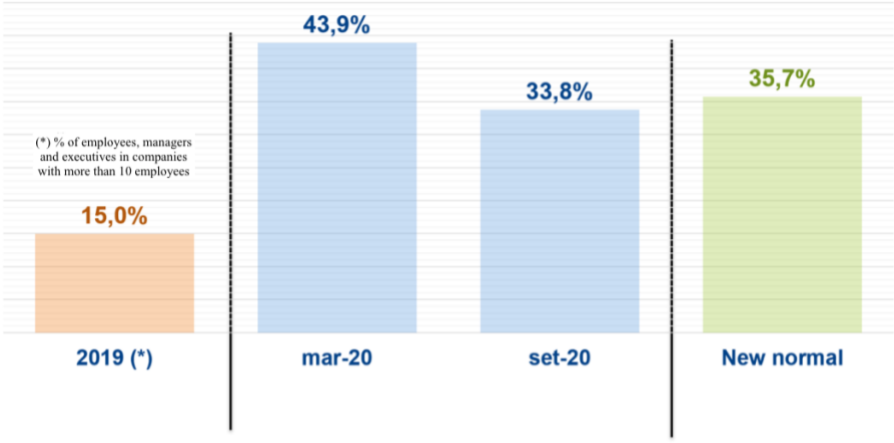
---

[78] (Deloitte, 2017, "Rewriting the rules for the digital age")
[79] (Larsson & al, 2020, "Consulting in the digital era? The role of tomorrow's management consultants"; Gigauri, 2020, "Influence of Covid-19 Crisis on Human Resource Management and Companies' Response: The Expert Study")
[80] (Ferrari, 2019, "Mediamorfosi dell'e-learning")
[81] (Ferrari, 2019, "Mediamorfosi dell'e-learning")
[82] (Larsson & al, 2020, "Consulting in the digital era? The role of tomorrow's management consultants"; Gigauri, 2020, "Influence of Covid-19 Crisis on Human Resource Management and Companies' Response: The Expert Study")
[83] (Gigauri, 2020, "Influence of Covid-19 Crisis on Human Resource Management and Companies' Response: The Expert Study")
[84] (Larsson & al, 2020, "Consulting in the digital era? The role of tomorrow's management consultants")

2.6 THE NEW CHALLENGE OF REMOTE WORKING

The remote working and the digitalization process have developed rapidly because of the spread of Covid-19.[85] In 2020 more than 40% of workers in Italy found themselves in remote work, and even after 2021, this scenario has not returned to pre-pandemic status. As Assolombarda (2021) estimates in its report, in fact, 35.7% of workers are still in this situation (see Figure 7).[86] After having developed methods and tools to carry out the working activities during lockdown many organizations now consider the presence of employees working both remotely and in the office as the "new normal".[87] Also, according to the McKinsey Global Institute, (2021) 20% – 25% of employees in advanced economies would like to work remotely after the end of the pandemic situation.

Figure 7 - Percentage of remote workers out of potential workers



(Source: Centro Studi Assolombarda elaboration on Politecnico Observatory data)

This is happening because remote working is seen as a more flexible and adaptable mode, which can bring advantages for both workers and employers. However, this has brought with it new needs and requirements as well as challenges and difficulties. [88] These situations can easily be traced back also to remote training giving the close link between work and training activities and will therefore be analysed in this section.

[85] (Gigauri, 2020, "Influence of Covid-19 Crisis on Human Resource Management and Companies' Response: The Expert Study")
[86] (Assolombarda, 2021, "Lo smart working in numeri")
[87] (Baska 2020, "Home working set to double post coronavirus crisis, survey finds."; Gartner 2020, "Gartner Global CFO Survey"; PwC, 2021, "Upskilling Hopes and Fears"; Delany, 2021, "What challenges will organisations face transitioning for the first time to the new normal of remote working?")
[88] (Gigauri, 2020, "Influence of Covid-19 Crisis on Human Resource Management and Companies' Response: The Expert Study")

First of all, remote working is a flexible way of working, which involves staying away from the office, and presupposes a high use of technology.[89] In such a new scenario, from one side the firm has to acquire knowledge and experience in the field to be able to deal with this change, on the other side, employees have to gain hard and soft skills to manage the remote working practices.[90] The idea that remote working is more flexible and profitable for both employee and employer stems from several factors. First of all, from the company's perspective, the absenteeism is much reduced as there are far fewer reasons to be unavailable when working from home.[91] Not having a large number of people in the workplace means reducing the rental of space, real estate, in-house technology, equipment, and utility bills.[92] It also decreases the number of people in the office and promotes more organization and less confusion, saving spaces and giving the image of a flexible workplace. It makes available human capital, even if distant, which could not be taken into account before, thus losing valuable people.[93]

For the same reason, on the workers' side, as there are no longer location constraints, there are many more positions available, in different parts of the country or even the world and also people with physical impediments or children can be hired since they can work from home.[94] Moreover, not having a fixed site provides greater flexibility of resources and customer service in a wider range of locations.[95] Finally employees could benefit from more manageable working hours and less commuting, increasing their work/life balance, decreasing work-related stress and their finances.[96]
Also, from a social point of view, remote working would lead to less commuting and therefore less pollution, less congestion, and more accident-free roads. Moreover, thanks to the wider range of people's involvement during the recruitment process or in the course of everyday working life, there would be more equal opportunities and less discrimination. [97]

---

[89] (Delany, 2021, "What challenges will organisations face transitioning for the first time to the new normal of remote working?"; Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers.")
[90] (Gigauri, 2021, "Effect of Covid-19 on Human Resource Management from the perspective of digitalization and work-life balance")
[91] (Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers.")
[92] (Gartner 2020, "Gartner Global CFO Survey"; Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers.")
[93] (Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers.")
[94] (Choudhury & al., 2019, "Is It Time to Let Employees Work from Anywhere?"; Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers."; Kröll & al., 2021, "Flexible Work Practices and Organizational Attractiveness in Germany: The Mediating Role of Anticipated Organizational Support.")
[95] (Ulrich & Yeung, 2019, "Agility: the new response to dynamic change."; Kalleberg, 2001, "Organising flexibility: the flexible firm in a new century.")
[96] (Lewis & Cooper, 2005, "Work-Life Integration"; Ortega, 2009, "Why do employers give discretion? Family versus performance concerns."; Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers."; Grant & al., 2013, "An exploration of the psychological factors affecting remote e-worker's job effectiveness, well-being, and work-life balance.")
[97] (Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers.")

But on the other hand, this situation affects the performance and quality of employee training as, as previously underlined, it is linked to interactions with other individuals in the workplace.[98] An important consequence of remote working, noted also above, is the difficulty that it creates in sharing knowledge since it builds separation from the workplace[99] by confining or eliminating the opportunity for workers to undertake informal exchanges with directors and associates.[100] There is a lack of communication when compared to face-to-face doubt explanations and approvals since remote working makes it more difficult to clarify issues and obtain instructions. [101] With remote working, there is no sharing of ideas either since there are fewer group works or collaborations in which projects are carried out together developing creativity and invention.[102] This reduces the chance to participate in tacit knowledge and information sharing.[103] Explicit knowledge can be sent by technological means, but for tacit knowledge, which is also more valuable, a strategy is needed from Human Resource Management to ensure that the degree of knowledge transfer is always the same.[104] Moreover, workers are no longer supervised and evaluated by managers and thus become "invisible" in their eyes, so that career growth or progression is not possible or sometimes they can even lose their jobs because of the weak relationship with managers.[105] Finally, having little influence on people and events in the workplace, being more detached from the dynamics of the company will also be less likely to develop the desired career path.[106]

Another topic addressed is the schedule of the day. It is at the discretion of the worker who often works non-stop, with fewer breaks, without interacting with colleagues, and ends up finding it very difficult to switch off at the end of the day and resume the next day, the home-related stress level is certainly very high.[107] There are high barriers to productivity when there is a lack of work-life balance of the employee since it causes increased stress and decreased work motivation; higher costs of internet and

[98] (Shearmur & al., 2020, "The exaggerated reports of offices' demise: the strength of weak workplace ties.")
[99] (Grant & al., 2013, "An exploration of the psychological factors affecting remote e-worker's job effectiveness, well-being and work-life balance.")
[100] (Nardi & Whittaker, 2002, "The role of face-to-face communication in distributed work."; Golden, 2006, "The role of relationships in understanding telecommuter satisfaction."; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007, "The Good, the Bad, and the Unknown About Telecommuting: MetaAnalysis of Psychological Mediators and Individual Consequences.")
[101] (Kulkarni, 2021, "A Review of Remote Working/ Work from Home Culture: Pros and Cons.")
[102] (Wright, 2017, "In focus: IBM extends remote work ban."; Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers.")
[103] (Andrews & Smits, 2019, "Using Tacit Knowledge Exchanges to Improve Teamwork.")
[104] (Donnelly & Johns, 2020, "Recontextualizing remote working and its HRM in the digital economy: An integrated framework for theory and practice")
[105] (Yang, 2009, "Love your job? Then save it!."; Churchill, 2021, "Number of promotions halved during Covid, research suggests."; ONS, 2021, "Homeworking hours, rewards, and opportunities in the UK: 2011 to 2020")
[106] (Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers.")
[107] (Shearmur & al., 2020, "The exaggerated reports of offices' demise: the strength of weak workplace ties."; Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers.")

electricity, distractions, and limited communication with co-workers and management.[108] Also the weight of the workload increased a lot since employees are unable to regulate their working hours efficiently in work-from-home circumstances.[109] Moreover, since in these cases there is a distinct lack of teamwork, people may feel separated from the group and lose faith in their teammates or superiors. According to Kulkarni (2021), demotivation and frustration may occur as a result of both a lack of team spirit and a failure to establish a work-life balance.

From the company's point of view, employees working remotely are much more difficult to control and motivate and all the benefits that used to accrue from teamwork and the sharing of ideas are lost.[110] This is the concept of "employee disengagement", which indicates the situation in which the trainee is less involved, dedicated and is less willing to perform work-related duties more efficiently on a physical, emotional, and cognitive level.[111]

Finally, also, in this case, there is the social aspect to consider, because working alone, remotely, could create an autistic society made up of individuals who lose the sense of living with others and are completely isolated.[112] According to Scott Schieman, a sociology professor at the University of Toronto's St. George's campus, Zoom video calls will never replace the in-person human interaction,[113] and this could lead to greater discomfort for some people if the situation persists for a long time. Remote working depletes resources for many individuals due to a variety of causes, including inadequate interpersonal relationships, feelings of professional isolation, and having fewer touchpoints with colleagues and superiors. [114] Isolation is also connected to the loss of focus, lack of self-control and disconnection from decision-making. There is a scarcity of incidental dialogues and peer review, which could have helped advance work and solve problems.[115]

If the consulting sector is considered specifically, all these statements are equally true. Considering the physical distance during customer meetings for example or the employee training process, it is clear that a face-to-face relationship helps to form trust between people which will influence the success of

[108] (Mustajab & al., 2020, "Working from home phenomenon as an effort to prevent COVID-19 attacks and its impacts on work productivity.")
[109] (Kulkarni, 2021, "A Review of Remote Working/ Work from Home Culture: Pros and Cons.")
[110] (Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers.")
[111] (Adisa & Adekoya, 2021 "Remote working and employee engagement: a qualitative study of British workers during the pandemic.")
[112] (Baruch, 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers.")
[113] (Hirsch, 2021, "Sustaining corporate culture in a world of hybrid work.")
[114] (Adisa & Adekoya, 2021 "Remote working and employee engagement: a qualitative study of British workers during the pandemic.")
[115] (Mitchell & Novaes, 2020, "The pros and cons of working from home: Newspapers illustrators' views on remote work during the pandemic of Covid-19 in Brazil.")

the process. Furthermore, expanding the distance between the parties may increase the difficulty of communication.[116] In addition, the massive use of technological tools creates the need for further training and greater awareness of risks such as cyber-attacks, fraud, and data leaks.[117] In conclusion, it is true that at the beginning of the pandemic people appreciated the change and novelty of working from home, but gradually the lack of social interaction, communication, and physical activity together became more and more apparent. At the end of the pandemic only very few people would still want to work completely remotely.[118]

Having said that, it is clear that there are challenges both for the organization, which has to try to involve its employees as much as those working in the office and for employees who have to acquire knowledge without being present on-site, with the difficulty then of the lack of face-to-face relations. Like any other system change in a company, remote working presupposes an adaptation of practices, processes, and organizational culture, which must be centred on autonomy, mutual trust, and team spirit. [119] Companies that look for alternative solutions and do not move quickly to address the skills gap between old and new employees have failed or will fail to perform at the same performance level as before. The new challenge is now to better manage resources and establish a permanent learning culture and digital practices among employees.

2.7 THE ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE "NEW NORMAL"

A great effort to adapt their business model and organizational culture has been implemented by companies to deal with Covid-19 but also today they do not stop looking for new solutions and methods to try to get the best out of the hybrid working condition that has now been established [120] since, with the technologies development that will continue to add efficacy to processes, remote working will become an irreplaceable part of the training.[121]

Obviously and above all, the most used medium to face the remote situation was video calls and videoconferences, which were rated far better than simple phone calls or email exchanges, although

[116] (Shearmur & al., 2020, "The exaggerated reports of offices' demise: the strength of weak workplace ties.")
[117] (Larsson & Teigland, 2020, "The Digital Transformation of Labor.")
[118] (Shearmur & al., 2020, "The exaggerated reports of offices' demise: the strength of weak workplace ties.")
[119] (Hirsch, 2021, "Sustaining corporate culture in a world of hybrid work.")
[120] (Delany, 2021, "What challenges will organisations face transitioning for the first time to the new normal of remote working?"; Hirsch, 2021, "Sustaining corporate culture in a world of hybrid work")
[121] (Adisa & Adekoya, 2021 "Remote working and employee engagement: a qualitative study of British workers during the pandemic.")

there remains a large preference for face-to-face meetings.[122] All companies have therefore equipped themselves with the right devices for such eventualities, which are becoming more and more specialized and high performing.[123] As more people work from home, organisations are utilising teleconferencing to conduct review meetings and provide more direction to their employees. Also, effective knowledge-sharing methods such as email and other sources of information can be used.[124] The online platform and Learning Management System tools have been revised and made more engaging, participative, and attractive.[125]

In addition, to bridge the lack of sociality, companies tried to design teaching and learning tactics that improve online engagement and interaction between the trainee, such as cooperation, problem-solving and role-playing, to promote more informed and motivating learning. [126] For these activities, working groups should be carefully constructed, supported by a competent manager who can maintain a high level of concentration, recreate a working space within the virtual space and lead the sessions and work with the full confidence of the participants, sharing with them the company's values.[127] Furthermore, due to the difficulty of monitoring employees while working from home, dashboards and digital data measuring work and performance are needed online,[128] at the same time, a great level of trust and communication must be established between parties.[129]

Of course, this is not enough for employees to achieve the same level of performance as they did when working in presence. It will be necessary to rethink the approach to staff training, taking advantage of new technologies to compensate for the lack of opportunity to pass on tacit knowledge and experience.[130] Self-isolation and no socialization have a strong negative impact, which is why HR practitioners need to keep the level of sociability very high with virtual interaction and well-thought-out working relationships and by redesigning workers' tasks and positions according to their

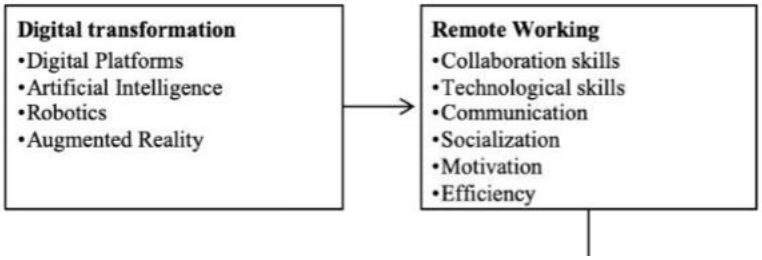
[122] (Singer-Velush & al., 2020, "Microsoft Analyzed Data on Its Newly Remote Workforce")
[123] (Delany, 2021, "What challenges will organisations face transitioning for the first time to the new normal of remote working?")
[124] (Kulkarni, 2021, "A Review of Remote Working/ Work from Home Culture: Pros and Cons.")
[125] (Garcia-Ortega & Galan-Cubillo, 2021, "How to improve students' experience in blending learning? Evidence from the perceptions of students in a Postgraduate Master's Degree.")
[126] (Garcia-Ortega & Galan-Cubillo, 2021, "How to improve students' experience in blending learning? Evidence from the perceptions of students in a Postgraduate Master's Degree.")
[127] (Delany, 2021, "What challenges will organisations face transitioning for the first time to the new normal of remote working?")
[128] (Narayandas & al., 2020, "Lessons from Chinese Companies' Response to Covid- 19.")
[129] (Gigauri, 2021, "Effect of Covid-19 on Human Resource Management from the perspective of digitalization and work-life balance")
[130] (Adisa & Adekoya, 2021 "Remote working and employee engagement: a qualitative study of British workers during the pandemic.")

propensities.[131] They have to think that social and personal resources such as having a goal in group work, being able to build interpersonal relationships with co-workers, feeling personally responsible for specific tasks and outcomes, and having a network of people are fundamental for employee growth and development.[132] For this reason, companies increased the amount of face-to-face meetings whenever possible, especially at the beginning of the training phase, to encourage relationships between colleagues.[133]

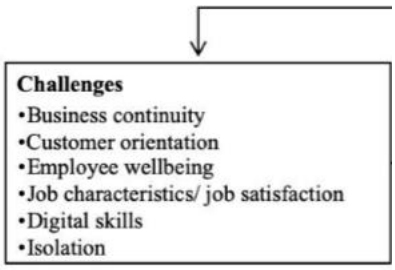
Another change that companies must make is the development of autonomous employees, in the sense that organizations must allow employees to work according to their schedules enabling them to operate independently. In this way, people can be more creative without the rules that they have always been used to when working.[134] If the company fails to develop an approach that will enhance and promote talent through remote working, it will not be able to compete in the market.[135] Human Resource workers themselves need to have more specific knowledge on how to deal with these moments of great crisis and sudden change, as well as a well-defined plan of the technologies, approaches, and processes to be adopted to ensure organizational continuity.[136]

This outline in Figure 8 provided by Gigauri (2021) highlights the main elements on which the literature review agrees when talking about the digital revolution taking place to meet the needs dictated by Covid-19 and the challenges of remote working.

Figure 8 - The impact of the pandemic crisis on HRM



[131] (Gigauri, 2021, "Effect of Covid-19 on Human Resource Management from the perspective of digitalization and work-life balance")
[132] (Adisa & Adekoya, 2021 "Remote working and employee engagement: a qualitative study of British workers during the pandemic.")
[133] (Adisa & Adekoya, 2021 "Remote working and employee engagement: a qualitative study of British workers during the pandemic.")
[134] (Kulkarni, 2021, "A Review of Remote Working/ Work from Home Culture: Pros and Cons.")
[135] (Delany, 2021, "What challenges will organisations face transitioning for the first time to the new normal of remote working?")
[136] (Gigauri, 2021, "Effect of Covid-19 on Human Resource Management from the perspective of digitalization and work-life balance")



(Source: Gigauri, 2021)

2.8 THE ITALIAN SITUATION

Since February 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy has had a significant impact on the world of work and workers because of the total lockdown that lasted 3 months. Although on the one hand, the pandemic has forced companies to resort to extraordinary ways and means to maintain and guarantee continuity of employment that would otherwise be impossible, on the other hand, it is thanks to it that a series of innovations have been tried out on a large scale and for a good period.[137]

Those innovations have remained active even after the main phase of the emergency has passed and have emerged as opportunities and possibilities even in times of normality. Some companies were initially completely unprepared for the new requirements, but consultancies had a high level of digitalization and were already using remote working. So, what happened in their case was that the procedures were increased and improved and extended to many more people than before.[138]

A new normal has now been established, in which 89% of large companies and 62% of public administrations are expected to maintain remote working and 4.38 million workers are going to use a hybrid form.[139] The main modes of training implemented by consultancy companies during the pandemic, which are continuing to be used now, concern onboarding and training courses. The impetus at the moment is in the digital area, as all employees must have the right skills for a world that is

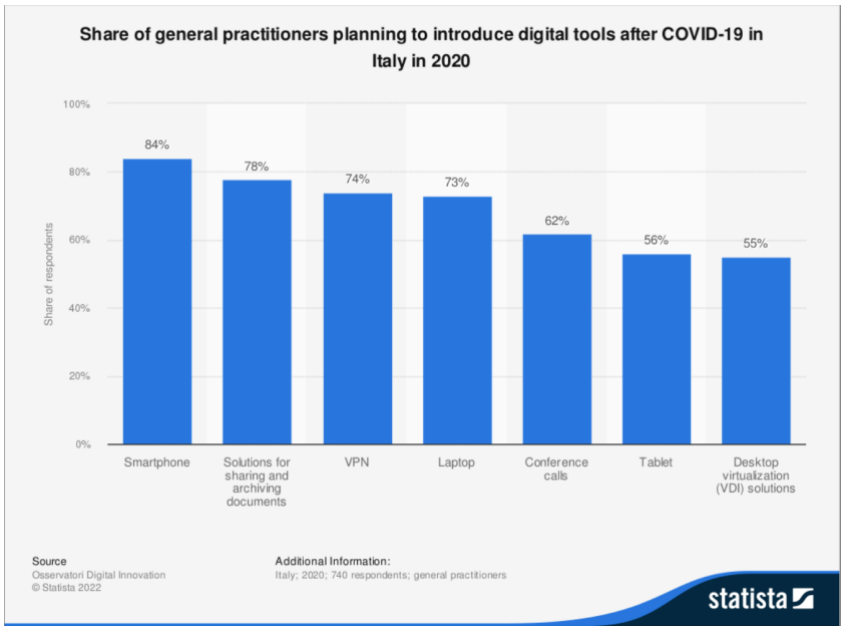
[137] (Osservatorio sullo Smart Working del Politecnico di Milano, 2021, "Smart Working in Italia: dati, numeri e trend post-pandemia").
[138] (Osservatorio sullo Smart Working del Politecnico di Milano, 2021, "Smart Working in Italia: dati, numeri e trend post-pandemia").
[139] (Osservatorio sullo Smart Working del Politecnico di Milano, 2021, "Smart Working in Italia: dati, numeri e trend post-pandemia").

becoming increasingly digitalized. This is why onboarding programs and training courses were developed with specific sessions on these topics.[140]

The development of digital skills among employees is a crucial element for enabling remote working: it is important to know how to use different technologies, to know how to work and collaborate in virtual teams, to re-organize work activities using new digital tools and connections, and to be able to use various communication tools according to the circumstances.[141]

Indeed, new technologies have been introduced as is shown in Figure 9. In particular, the Smart Work Observatory of the Politecnico of Milan recognises four types of areas that have been developed: social collaboration (instant messaging tools, web conferencing, fixed-mobile convergence), security (secure solutions that guarantee the exchange of sent and received data thanks to Virtual Private Networks or virtualization solutions via the Cloud), mobility (tools such as laptops, notebooks, tablets, smartphones that allow people to connect at any time and place) and finally workspace technology (Wi-Fi, centralized printing systems, videoconferencing tools and telepresence systems).[142]

Figure 9 - Digital tools after Covid-19 in Italy in 2020



(Source: Osservatorio Digital Innovation, Statista, 2022)

[140] (BCG Report, 2021, "Il nostro impegno in Italia", Ufficio studi PWC, 2020, "Smart Working", EY Report, "Rapporto di Missione 2021")
[141] (Ufficio studi PWC, 2020, "Smart Working")
[142] (Ufficio studi PWC, 2020, "Smart Working")

Having said that, the literature review revealed shortcomings in the processes and programmes implemented specifically by consultancy firms, how these are carried out and above all whether they are effective in imparting knowledge. The study and interviews that followed the literature review attempted to bridge this gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter includes a description of the methods with which the research is conducted, and the results are analysed. First of all, the research strategy and design are pointed out, followed by the research method's choices regarding primary and secondary data collection. The primary data collection section also presents the sampling methods, the interview guide, and the explanation of the way the interviews were conducted. Then, the data analysis method is described, and an explanation of the quality of the research is developed. Finally, a recap of the chapter's structure is provided to understand the connection and the reasoning behind the different choices.

3.1 RESEARCH STRATEGY

According to Bell & al. (2019), the research strategy is the approach that has been chosen to answer the research question, and it is linked to the methodological assumption. As previously mentioned, the investigation of this study concerns the challenges and the obstacles in the training process in consulting companies and the solutions implemented for its proper functioning also in a remote working situation. The research question has an exploratory purpose since it aims to find out new data about a topic that has not been previously investigated and represents a gap in the literature. Moreover, the most suitable approach is the abductive one, through which theory and data are compared iteratively, so that research can be addressed according to one or the other source.[143]

So, to properly analyse these contexts, it was decided to collect data from some actors who live or have lived an online or hybrid training experience, both on the side of instructors and learners, investigating the strengths, the weaknesses of the process of training readapted to the pandemic and post-pandemic situation and trying to figure out the obstacles that have been encountered and their solutions.

Then, considering the research question and the data needed to answer it, a qualitative strategy was selected. This choice was made because, to give a proper contribution, the topic needs to be examined in-depth and analysed from different points of view, so that the key common elements between the different cases can be found, and only a qualitative strategy can collect the different experiences, perspectives and perceptions of subjects which may be useful for this intention.[144] Moreover, as already

[143] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[144] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

stated, the lack of theories and literature on the subject makes it difficult to collect enough elements on which to base quantitative research, since it needs initial data to build a questionnaire or a structured interview.

If on the one hand qualitative approach helps to obtain the respondent's point of view and to achieve the appropriate flexibility for the research, it also has its drawbacks. First of all, it is considered too subjective because the results obtained depend very much on the researcher and his/her interpretation of them.[145] Furthermore, whereas a questionnaire is fixed and independent, an interview is strongly linked to its interviewer and thus makes qualitative studies difficult to replicate, which is a big penalty for the research. On the other hand, however, the accuracy with which each step of the research has been described seeks to encourage its reproduction as much as possible.[146] Going on, another problem is related to the generalisability of the results of qualitative research, which cannot be guaranteed since one or a few cases in analysis cannot be representative of the entire category. [147] However, considering that this study is not intended to be a summary of the complete situation but to introduce some observations about the topic, qualitative research can still be used. Finally, qualitative research is sometimes less transparent than quantitative research mainly due to the sampling process. This could certainly be solved with more accuracy during the selection and the related explanation of the sampling process will be shown in the next sections.[148]

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The scope of the research design is to describe how the data will be collected and analysed. It represents one of the most important steps in research as it "guides the execution of a research method and the analysis of the subsequent data".[149]

Bell & al. (2019) also explain that there are different types of design which should be selected according to the characteristics of the research question and the most appropriate way of conducting the study. In particular, the options to choose from are experimental, cross-sectional, longitudinal, case study and comparative design. So, considering that this study is intended to use qualitative research, since the aim is to build a new theory or at least to explore a topic not yet deepened, the cross-sectional and experimental designs are not suitable as they are mainly used for quantitative research. Longitudinal design instead presupposes an analysis at several different points in time and it was deemed to be too costly and time-consuming also because the main goal of the research is not to collect data over time.

[145] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[146] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[147] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[148] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[149] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

Finally, what has been considered to be the best approach is the case study design since it analyses a case providing a more accurate understanding and a huge amount of details.[150] Also, according to Bell & al. (2019), the case study design, is the right one for exploratory studies that aim to find new results and theories.

As this research wants to take into account more than one case i.e. different consulting companies that are facing a distant work situation, the multiple-case study design was selected as the most suitable. This represents a variation of the single case study, that is useful when different situations are taken into account and the scope is to examine them together, comparing the results and underling the common findings. It is exactly by considering the conflicting and common aspects of the various cases that it is possible to think critically about the issue at hand.[151] Increasingly used in business research, this design is seen as a part of the comparative design, since it allows "the researcher to compare and contrast the findings deriving from each of the cases. This in turn encourages researchers to consider what is unique and what is common across cases, and frequently promotes theoretical reflection on the findings".[152]
Thanks to this approach the researcher manages to become more aware of the issue, through careful analysis of the cases and the contrast between them, while paying less attention to the general context.[153]

Considering the topic and the purpose of this study, the exploratory nature of research and the research gap mentioned earlier, this design has been chosen. Indeed, it allows theory-building thanks to the comparison of the cases, and it encourages the selection of findings and evidence relevant to the specific research.[154] What this study aims to achieve is an "emerging theory" extrapolated from the common findings identified in the interviews and with the comparison of the personal experiences of those who train people in consulting companies, as well as of those who are trained in this new unconventional situation. Finally, this approach also made it possible to overcome the restrictions which, due to Covid-19, would make it difficult to be present in the companies' locations during the training moments, thus not being able to carry out the study through the pure observation of reality.

[150] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[151] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[152] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[153] (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991, "Better Stories, not Better Constructs, to Generate Better Theory: A Rejoinder to Eisenhardt.")
[154] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

3.3 RESEARCH METHOD

Both primary and secondary data collection were used to answer the research questions of this study. In particular, through the collection of data extrapolated from the literature review, it was possible to understand the generally acknowledged challenges and solutions relating to remote working. Subsequently, through the primary data collection, the challenges encountered by the interviewees were highlighted. The primary data collection also made it possible to identify how training and the transmission of knowledge took place during remote working, highlighting the circumstances in which this led to the achievement of the objective in the same way as face-to-face training and those in which this did not happen.

3.3.1 SECONDARY DATA COLLECTION

To carry out the primary data collection, it was necessary to first analyse what has been collected up to that moment on the subject under examination, to understand how far the current knowledge of the topic goes and to be able to formulate a starting point for continuing the research. For this reason, this study started with the literature review of the articles dealing with the selected context to understand what issues were not yet addressed and what was the gap to be filled.[155] As specified by Bell & al. (2019), there are three main steps in conducting a literature review: the first is about analysing the research question and starting to plan the review, in the second the conduction of the review begins, followed by the final step of reporting and dissemination.

For this reason, to start, the research questions were previously examined and then a plan was drawn up according to which the review first started with articles on knowledge transfer and the social aspect of this transition. Then more specific articles on the knowledge transfer process and training in consulting firms were sought. Furthermore, there was a search dedicated to the impact of digitalization on the training process and to conclude, some studies on the challenges and solutions found by consulting companies to the remote working situation have been analysed with a final focus on the Italian situation.

In performing the literature review, many different databases were used (Google Scholar, Emerald, Web of Science, Scopus, Semantic Scholar) and some specific keywords were considered such as knowledge transfer, training process, the impact of digitalization, consulting companies, Italy, Covid-19, and remote working. The main results are that the literature concerning the old model of knowledge

[155] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

transfer in consulting companies is well-detailed, although it does not specifically analyse the Italian reality. However, as already mentioned in the previous sections, a clear analysis of the implemented solutions to the "new normal" and research on how they are more or less effective depending on the situation and the object of the training are not yet available. It is starting from this gap in the research that this analysis began.

Finally, it is necessary to underline the limitations of literature review in the context of qualitative research. These can be traced back to the exclusion and inclusion criteria used for the selection of the articles analysed during the review as these are determined by the researcher and may be affected by his subjectivity and choices and lead to one result rather than another.[156]
To try to avoid this misleading influence, for the aim of the research the exclusion criterion used has been the language, as papers which are written in other languages than Italian, or English were not considered. For what concern the inclusion criteria, the relevance to the topic under discussion was considered.

3.3.2 PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION

After analysing the relevant literature, the primary data collection was carried out. As previously underlined, it was essential to obtain the data related to the direct experience of people working in consulting companies, both from the perspective of trainers and trainees. This collection was performed with the conduction of semi-structured interviews. They are frequently used when dealing with qualitative research and exploratory purpose, as in this case.
The study needed an instrument that was able to provide a good level of flexibility, but which was also able to deliver the necessary results and understand the personal experiences of the people examined. On the contrary, questionnaires do not allow respondents to express themselves freely but enclose their opinions in numbers or predefined choices, and this is why they are used in quantitative research, the same can be said for structured interviews since they have similar characteristics as questionnaires but are carried by an interviewer.[157] With these methods, the possibility of going outside the interview path would have been lost, while given the subjectivity of the experiences an interesting part of the interviews could have remained unheard. On the other hand, unstructured interviews have the problem that, because of their extreme degrees of flexibility, they do not always lead to the same results. But in the case of a multiple case study design aiming to compare the data from different interviews, there is the need to obtain the same type of data. So, this choice was made because the semi-structured interview fits perfectly with the goals of the research.[158]

[156] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[157] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[158] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

One of the main advantages of this approach is linked to its flexibility, which allows the researcher to explain in more detail the questions posed to the respondents if they have not been fully understood or ask for clarification in case of imprecise answers. There is also room for questions in addition to those of the predefined structure if they are considered interesting for the purpose of the research, as direct contact with the respondent allows this possibility. Moreover, the not-so-rigid structure of the interview makes the participants speak more freely, bringing out interesting and rich answers according to their opinions and perspectives. In particular, opting for semi-structured questions and following an interview guide, rather than an unstructured interview, creates a balance between flexibility and both more focus and comparability.[159] Indeed, as previously underlined, this kind of interview is particularly necessary for this research since there are multiple cases and two levels of sampling. With this method the different experiences of the respondents are collected and analysed in the same way, getting comparable results. But to perform a comparison, since the interview was carried out with several interviewees, its "structured" part is necessary to perform similar interventions.[160]

Some drawbacks are planning, carrying out and analysing semi-structured interviews since they are time-consuming and complex processes but for the characteristics of this study, multiple case study design is still the most valuable method.

Sampling and respondent selection

Sampling is the act of selecting how many and which respondents will be interviewed. Once again what guided the selection was the research question. As described in Bell & al. (2019) "Research questions are likely to provide guidelines as to which categories of people (or whatever unit of analysis) need to be the focus of attention and therefore sampled."

In this case, a purposive sample was used. It is based on the identification of cases according to predefined criteria and it often identifies characteristics according to which the selected components must differ to increase the variety of the sample.[161] This choice was made because both the research question and the research strategy typology exclude a probability sample since the respondents cannot be selected randomly but must be relevant to the topic, i.e., they must be part of the consulting sector and have to do/have done training or be/have been trained remotely. Therefore, to be useful in answering the research question, the ideal subjects are, first of all, HR managers, since as a result of the literature review in the first chapter, it emerged that HR plays a key role in planning and setting up the necessary

[159] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[160] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[161] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

measures and tools for the training process to be successful despite the online use. For this reason, they would be able to provide very interesting insights into the motives and modus operandi of their choices. However, they didn't actively carry out the training function or at least not only them. This was done also by the more experienced consultants, managers, partners or even the colleagues of the newcomers, who certainly carry out the HR instructions, but who experience the difficulties of training the newcomers themselves. So they must also be interviewed to have the most direct report of the training experience. Finally, subjects who, as new employees or after changing consulting companies, experienced the online training process, during the lockdown or later in some cases, can be also useful to give perceptions of the same situation seen from the other side of the coin. The goal was to have a trainee and a trainer for each company interviewed to have data on experiences from both perspectives but from the same company.

Initially, convenient sampling was used, as in addition to the basic requirements, the availability of the respondents and the researcher's initial contact network played a key role. However, this did not affect the most important characteristics required for the sample, which were maintained. To be able to increase the segment and not risk limiting it due to the poor knowledge network of the interviewers, snowball sampling was also used. This means that at the end of the conversations the interviewees were asked to identify another possible subject suitable for the research.[162] As they had just carried out the interview, they had a very clear profile in mind of the ideal person to answer the same questions and they also have a network that allows them to identify more than one possible candidate, so this led to a very accurate sampling.

For what concerns the sample size, although it is very difficult to know what the right number of interviews is to carry out since it certainly varies according to the number of comparisons to be made,[163] and taking into consideration Warren (2002), he believes that to make several comparisons, there is the need of a larger sample. Since in this research there is only the comparison between trainers and trainees, the number of interviews initially planned was around 8 but thanks to snowball sampling it was possible to reach 10 interviews, also because there are no further different characteristics or scenarios to be compared in this study.

The objective was therefore to consult trainers or HR managers in charge of learning and training development and trainees hired preferably just before Covid-19 who had experienced the transition phase from face-to-face to online training within Italian consulting companies.

[162] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[163] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

First of all, to meet the requirements of the sampling, figures corresponding to the trainer characteristics were sought thanks to the author's network, starting with the three Italian strategic consulting companies. As previously requested, both HR recruiters and managers were interviewed. Once initial contact was established with them, possible trainees were also identified through snowball sampling. Subsequently, to make the sampling homogeneous and to also interview companies outside the strategic consulting sector other trainers and trainees belonging to two of the Italian Big Four companies were reached through LinkedIn and email correspondence. The LinkedIn search had also interested two other strategic consulting companies outside the Big Three and the other two belonging to the Big Four that had been excluded from the first contact. These were not interviewed as they either responded negatively to the interview request or did not provide an answer.

Finally, the reader must be aware of the lack of generalizability which characterizes not only qualitative research in general but also purposive sampling since the choice of the segment of the population is made according to the judgment of the researcher which therefore influences the results. The sample cannot, therefore, be representative of an entire population but will only be useful in generating new concepts that can be further studied, deepened, and generalised.

Interview Guide

The interviews were designed taking into account the research question and the literature review to understand what elements needed to be further researched and the Interview Guide was written to provide a structure on which to base the interviews so that they would be as uniform as possible, and the results would be comparable.[164]

Two separate interview guides were prepared to form the basis for the interviews, and a lot of attention was put to keep the language at a comprehensible level to the target audience while questions were constructed to reduce the likelihood of being of a leading nature.[165] One guide was focused on the HR managers and trainers that have experienced the remote working training and the other one was addressed to the trainees that represent their counterparts. The reasoning behind this is twofold; firstly, the questions to managers and trainers are more oriented to understand their position and opinion about the challenges of remote working and about the solutions implemented so far, and more technical insights on the methods used and the reason why they were chosen from an organizational structure level. On the other side, the questions for the trainees are more oriented towards understanding their

[164] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[165] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

feedback on how the training process works more directly, to know if any serious gaps can be detected and because they could give some interesting hints on improvements and future perspectives.

The aim was to structure both the interviews in three different moments. In creating them, a funnel method was adopted, i.e., following a logical thread, which moves from more general to more specific topics. In the introduction, generic information was asked to the respondent, such as his/her role in the organization, the functions he/she usually performs and the possible link between core and non-core competencies with the different methods of transmission (face-to-face and remote). In the middle section, there are some relevant questions, regarding the challenges that were faced during the remote training process. They want to underline the differences between online and face-to-face training, the most difficult practices to be carried out online and the capabilities that are impossible to transfer online. In the final part, there is room for some reflections such as if given the choice, it would be preferable to work permanently in remote working or in presence and also what are the further solutions to be implemented that have not yet been developed, but first of all the most common solutions that have caught on immediately were asked.

The guides have small differences in the questions, to make them suitable for the two changing roles of the interviewees, but maintain the same structure and content so that the differences and the common points between the two interviews could be clearly seen and then analysed. In this way, data can be obtained from more points of view and the collection had a more heterogeneous character, which led to greater comparability of the results.

Before submitting the guide to the interviewees, a pilot was sent to some contacts of the researchers working in consulting companies, to check if the questions were understandable and stimulating. A reproduction of the two interview guides can be found in Appendix B.

Conducting the interviews

The interview process was always preceded by an email sent to the selected candidates containing a brief explanation of the research project, an abstract of the thesis work and an invitation to participate in the study as an interviewee. Following a positive response from them, a reminder email was sent with the appointment, the link to the call and the Interview Guide mentioned above, so that the interviewee could read it and know the questions beforehand to have time to think about possible answers.

The interviews were all conducted online due to the physical distance between the participants, but this did not affect the collection of the results; on the contrary, it facilitated the participation of more subjects

who would not have been willing to travel. The lack of physical contact, in this case, did not create any problems as no specific tools or practical demonstrations were needed to carry out the interviews, but only a stable internet and audio-visual connection which was always found during the conversations. The platform for the interview was chosen by the interviewees, the selected options were Microsoft Teams or Zoom. They were consulted individually, to avoid mutual influence, since the research needs to capture their different point of view and experiences. Furthermore, although there could be problems related to the functioning of the technology, this method proved to be convenient because it is very flexible for both the interviewee and the interviewer in terms of time and travel since they could have the interview wherever they want and there are time and costs savings. Finally, a respondent can feel more comfortable behind the screen and far from the interviewer.[166]

The interviews were conducted in Italian, as all participants were Italian native speakers, and this would have greatly facilitated understanding and conversation. The interviewer wrote the questions of the guide in Italian as well as early notes from interviews and transcripts and then the results were translated into English, paying attention to the vocabulary and the general sense of the conversation, trying not to influence the final meaning. The interviewees were also initially told that answers would have been used only for study purposes and that they could have decided to not have their names included in the transcription, to let them free to disclose also confidential information and to give them the possibility not to answer questions if they did not want to. However, their identity is not determinant for research so the names can be excluded without consequences.

Before starting the interview, it was also always asked whether the interview could be recorded. This was done to be able to listen to it again and to transcribe it accurately so that no passage is lost, especially because they have to be translated into English for the final analysis. Moreover, a true transcription is needed to avoid any influence of the interviewer, as the qualitative research aims to present the respondent's perspective as transparently as possible. Finally, in this way, the interviewer was free to actively participate in the discussion by showing interest and making the respondent feel listened to and at ease, and there was also the possibility to take notes, useful for the final comparison between transcripts and first impressions.

As the interviews were designed to be flexible and modifiable, often during the discussions the interviewees deviated from the main question and came up with very interesting insights. In that case, the questions that were asked accordingly were added later to the Interview Guide because they were considered useful for the subsequent interviews. Moreover, to guarantee the similarity between each interview any further comments or explanations by the interviewer were written down and provided

[166] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

again in the following appointments, this was done to have good cross-case comparability, which is needed for the case study analysis.[167] Immediately after the end of each interview, the most important sentences were underlined together with a list of the challenges and solutions that had emerged. In this way, the subsequent analysis was much facilitated.

The length of the interview varied between 20-57 minutes, and it depended on the availability of the participant and his/her involvement in the training process dynamics. The interviews were performed between the 4th of April and the 3rd of May 2022 and every interview was transcript within two days to have clear in mind the meaning and the interpretations of the discussion.

Table 1 summarises the most important information concerning the respondents and the interviews conducted.

Table 1 - Details of Interviews

	Interviewee	Company	Interviewee's role	Duration	Date	Platform
Trainee (t)	A.t	Big Three 1	Business Analyst	20 min	27/04/22	Zoom
	B.t	Big Three 2	Junior Analyst	23 min	29/04/22	Teams
	C.t	Big Three 3	IT Consultant	46 min	04/04/22	Teams
	D.t	Big Four 1	M&A Intern Analyst	29 min	27/04/22	Teams
	E.t	Big Four 2	Analyst	24 min	09/04/22	Zoom
Trainer (T)	A.T	Big Three 1	Senior Recruiter	20 min	13/04/22	Zoom
	B.T	Big Three 2	Senior Manager Recruiting	22 min	22/04/22	Teams
	C.T	Big Three 3	Training Manager	37 min	14/04/22	Zoom
	D.T	Big Four 1	Learning Consultant	57 min	03/05/22	Zoom
	E.T	Big Four 2	Talent Recruiter	29 min	29/04/22	Teams

(Source: elaborated by the author)

[167] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The scope of the data analysis is to generate new insights and knowledge about the topic of the study. Since qualitative research has an exploratory purpose, it does not allow for standardization of results, as might be required in the quantitative analysis. In this case, what is useful to achieve is precisely the diversity of data and their comparison. The tool that allows this type of analysis is the thematic analysis and coding since it brings out similarities between different results and helps to draw out common themes by labelling them within the answers of the interviewees.[168] Those themes were identified through a coding process which involved different stages, in this specific case they were three. First of all "data-centred" or "emerging" concepts were underlined by searching in the answers collected during the interviews, then, the second step was to compare these codes and group them into relevant themes. Finally, the themes were in turn grouped into macro aggregates.[169] This type of analysis is useful since the collected data are mainly words and there would be no clear way to compare them otherwise. To understand which elements to emphasize and which are the most important themes of the interviews, some indicators such as repetitions, similarities and differences, missing data, and theory-related material were taken into consideration.[170] In this sense, the literature review turns out to be very important as it allows the recognition of all the elements that were already highlighted.

First of all, the relevant sentences were underlined immediately after having interviewed each person to mitigate the issue of influencing the data collection. Moreover, a list of challenges, solutions, knowledge, and skills that can be transferred was written at the end of each interview, to have references from first impressions to compare later with transcripts. Then, to proceed, the transcript of the interviews has been read repeatedly until being familiar with the data collected. Compering the insights from the transcript and the lists, the emerging concepts were identified and specified with a label, then the labels were used to form a set of several codes that were assigned a common theme.

So, the analysis began with the identification of the first-order concepts which were then grouped within the aforementioned themes according to their affinity. At the end of this process, three main aggregates were highlighted with which to answer the research questions, "Training", "Challenges" and "Solutions". These macro-areas were created by grouping two second-order themes for "Training" and three second-order themes for "Challenges" and "Solutions". A table showing the coding process carried out, the concepts, themes and aggregates identified can be found in Appendix C. The table was

[168] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[169] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[170] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

designed according to the structure of the interview guide and the literature review, in which the aforementioned concepts of training, challenges and solutions are addressed.

The decision to use this type of approach lies in the fact that thematic analysis allows the researcher to generate insights from the collected data and to identify different themes and relevant patterns with a certain level of flexibility[171] and this is in line with the exploratory goal of the research that aims to give a theoretical contribution on the investigated topic.
However, because of the key role of the researcher's interpretations, this method may lead to the loss of important information and to an ambiguous interpretation of the data which depends on the subjectivity of the researcher, due both to the perception of the words and concepts expressed by the respondent and to the linguistic difference (English-Italian) which generates a further difficulty in the choice of the most appropriate terms. To avoid misunderstands and distortions the coding was double-checked by the researcher. Despite these risks, this method remains the best for the analysis of a semi-structured interview as it allows the transcripts to be compared and brings out the themes with which the research question can be answered.

3.5 RESEARCH QUALITY

The most common criteria for assessing a research study are reliability, replicability, and validity, but these are strongly related to measurement and so linked to quantitative research. Although some authors, such as LeCompte and Goetz (1982) or Kirk and Miller (1986), have also applied these principles to qualitative studies, most consider them unsuitable.[172] For this reason, a new approach with other criteria was created in parallel to those of quantitative research which were more suitable for qualitative ones. There are two main aspects to be considered, trustworthiness and authenticity. The former is divided into credibility (parallels interval validity), transferability (parallels external validity); dependability (parallels reliability) and confirmability (parallels objectivity).[173]

For what concerns the latter, authenticity is a criterion to be met for research that has a relevant social or political purpose aimed at a fair understanding of the social context of the research to generate a reaction and change. Although this research aims to find a new way to deal with the challenges of remote working there is, from the researcher's point of view, not such a clear social purpose and therefore the need to ensure this criterion.

[171] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[172] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[173] (Lincoln and Guba; 1985, "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria")

3.5.1 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Credibility

The credibility of a study is reflected in the readers' confidence in its results and findings. It can be achieved by properly conducting the research and by the endorsement of its results as plausible by the subjects in the context of the study. It was done by being transparent with the interviewees about the scope of the interview right from the start, and explaining to them the goal of the project. Moreover, during the interviews, the author wrote notes that were confirmed at the end of the interview by the interviewees and were used in parallel with the transcripts during the coding phase.[174]

Transferability

This criterion concerns the possibility of replicating analyses carried out in different contexts or with different sampling. Usually, qualitative studies target a limited group of individuals or specific and unique situations. There is therefore no need or possibility to replicate them. Sometimes, however, it may be interesting to try to replicate a qualitative study, in which case it must clearly and meticulously set out every feature, there must be a density of details and a precise description of how the analysis was carried out to ensure replicability.[175] For this purpose, this study reports a clear description of which context and which period have been analysed, which are the consulting sector and the Covid-19 and post-pandemic period to underline which characteristics and dynamics are involved in the study, allowing the reader to investigate possible commonalities for further research.

Dependability

Dependability is the ability of the study to be reliable and consistent during the research process. This can be ensured through an auditing process that records the whole research process from beginning to end, going through all its intermediate stages to have an accessible and searchable record that can be reviewed.[176] This approach is undoubtedly time-consuming and expensive but regular and repeated supervision of the work such as this study had can help ensure its dependability.

Confirmability

The fourth criterion is confirmability. It is ensured if the research is free of influences and has not been diverted by the will or bias of the person conducting it. Complete objectivity cannot be achieved even

[174] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[175] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[176] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

if one wants to, but by trying to carry out the work clearly and correctly and by paying attention to possible influences, recognising them, and mitigating them, the research should have achieved a good credibility result. The monitoring process provided by both colleagues and supervisors also helped to ensure confirmability.[177]

3.6 METHODOLOGY STRUCTURE

The choice of how to proceed is made first of all considering the research question and the best way to answer it since it represents the starting point and guideline for the whole research process. As this research question does not seek to prove a theory but to find new evidence, it is carried out with abductive reasoning.[178]

Starting from this premise, the selected strategy is qualitative research since it is the one that works most effectively with the exploratory study. This type of project aims to investigate new and poorly studied topics and it is, therefore, useful to formulate new knowledge.[179] Research design and data collection methods have been adapted accordingly. About the design, the most appropriate one is the case study design, since the research is conducted qualitatively, and it is suitable for exploratory studies. It starts with an analysis of the subject, called the observation phase, from which the theoretical contribution, consisting of the findings generated by the case study process, was extrapolated. In particular, the multiple case study design was chosen considering its ability to broaden the horizon of the search and allow the comparability of the results to obtain more a comprehensive view.[180]

As far as the data collection method is concerned, a purposive and snowballing sample and a semi-structured interview were chosen because non-quantitative data need a lot of flexibility and adaptability, which these two approaches provide. The former ensures that the subjects to be interviewed have the right characteristics for research, while the latter holds the properties to perform a targeted but flexible data collection, leaving room for later changes and interventions. Finally, the data analysis method chosen is thematic analysis. This is because it allows a detailed analysis of the written data of qualitative research and codifies it by bringing out the results needed to answer an exploratory research question.[181] Each part of the research was designed to be aligned and useful to the others, but above all to obtain the

[177] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[178] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[179] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[180] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")
[181] (Bell & al., 2019, "Business Research Methods")

necessary means to answer the research questions, the first and most important objective of the research process.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In this chapter, the results of the research, and the main findings from the conducted interview are presented. The structure of the chapter follows the topics of the literature review and the way the interviews were conducted. In this sense, the findings have been summarized in three main categories, "Training", "Challenges" and "Solutions". For each category, the presented results are divided by company. To maintain the anonymity of the respondents, the consulting companies are referred to as the "Big Three" for the three strategy consulting companies and the "Big Four" for the others two. Within each sub-section, there is a further distinction between the interview with the trainee (t) and the interview with the trainer (T) of the same company.

4.1 TRAINING

4.1.1 BIG THREE 1

Trainer (A.T)

The interviewee starts by pointing out that the company, being a global firm, was already used to carrying out some kind of online training. Certainly, however, Covid-19 accelerated the process even more by creating new needs. At this moment the "new normal" format, already known in terms of everyday work, is also applied to training. So the company's objective is now to bring back into presence the courses that people who have just joined the company take. The discriminating factor is the interpersonal component. It plays an important role since meeting colleagues and exchanging opinions and ideas is useful to feel more part of the company. In that case, courses are held in the presence. This choice is made because anything related to communication, e.g. public speaking courses, best achieves its objective when it can be seen how a person moves from head to toe when practising and teaching.

On the other hand, when the focus is more on the content of the course than on the outline, the online format, for example with plenary sessions and break-out rooms, remains the first choice. Technical skills can also be effectively transmitted using virtual training that can be used independently or by virtual classrooms that allow more technical content to be passed on. Moreover, online training certainly increases course attendance because it helps employees to be present in any case.

Trainee (A.t)

About the training, the interviewee talks about the various phases that characterised his personal experience. Firstly, the company provides an initial week of onboarding, during which concepts are transmitted concerning the methodologies used by the company to solve the problems that arise in everyday tasks and projects. Subsequently, in the second week, topics related to identity and corporate culture, feedback mechanisms, and non-core skills are dealt with. This was carried out entirely remotely. There were plenary sessions, where everyone was listening to the speaker introducing topics and during the session, he or she always tried to keep up the interaction.

4.1.2 Big Three 2

Trainer (B.T)

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the company's strategy has been to do a hiring freeze, i.e. no new consultants have been hired due to the uncertainty of the situation. The difficulty of this job is that most of the time the work is carried out in teams and for new people coming there is the need to acquire the toolkit, the tools that are used for presentations, the tools to make graphics, so it was necessary to have preparation sessions and the support of platforms was essential in this situation. But it was very difficult, especially at the beginning, and so the choice was made not to hire. On the other hand, after a few months of consolidation, the hard skills preparation went quite smoothly and there were no major difficulties people performed well because of their ability to adapt.

Trainee (B.t)

According to the interviewee, at the level of general hard skill courses, there is a push from superiors to get as many certifications as possible through video and e-learning because employees' professional development is very important for the company.
Soft skills, on the other hand, were more often transmitted through face-to-face training or interactive and engaging training because otherwise concepts such as public speaking, leadership, and team-building could not be shared. From the trainee's point of view, the training in his company is well structured as it offers a mirror of core and non-core skills that everyone needs to learn to improve and be able to do the job better, from which he can choose.

4.1.3 Big Three 3

Trainer (C.T)

The first important testimony of this interview is related to the type of training concerning onboarding. In this case, the company was oriented towards a solution in presence in which employees from different countries would have gathered and had a week of training courses, but the pandemic has blocked the travel and the movement of participants, and the company has reprogrammed this type of project online. Again, the interviewee confirms that at the level of structure and IT tools the company was already quite prepared, and at that point the reasoning was focused on how to reschedule the training.

In this case, the distinction between some processes that could also work online and others that needed to be revised was immediately clear, because some training was very interactive, with exercises that required physical movement, so the programme was revised and readapted. Subsequently, the company has moved towards a structure calibrated concerning the content, the hardest aspects of the training, those related to technical information, have been and will be delivered with the online format, and the part related to human skills, soft skills, or those related to behavioural skills, are developed in person. The interviewee states that despite an initial difficulty in bringing employees back to the classroom due to various factors such as the organisation of the agenda, the result obtained when people are all together is better and more visible.

Trainee (C.t)

The interviewee explains the training proposed by the company, which consists of the initial weeks of onboarding comprising basic training in which it is explained how the company works, what are the committees for promotions, what is the up or out path that exists, how to leverage all the knowledge of the company.

"I did the first two weeks of training all remotely. We were all on Zoom, the presenter, the participants, and there was the shared material. This is part of the training of all those who enter at any level. After three months from this one, there is another training, always done remotely, and in the first year you have training weeks that are scheduled regularly, which gives you the basis on other characteristics of the consultancy to learn, like for example how to present to the client".

According to him, these types of training, which are more bureaucratic, standard and require less interaction, can be carried out remotely without a big price to pay while for those types of training. Where there is a lot of work to be done together, innovative solutions are developed, and there is the challenge of collaborating in a team, as much breakout rooms are a reliable tool, they cannot replace the experience of having everything in person. He was talking, in this last case, about the second type

of training, the one you learn by working on a project, for example, through learning by doing, and identifies it as very difficult to learn remotely.

"I indeed tried to coordinate a bit with my project leader, when I could I attempted to come to headquarters but then when we were closed in our houses I had to have a relationship with them through Zoom sessions, and for those who have to train from scratch like me this dynamic makes you lose a lot because being attached to the person you are working with means to ask questions real-time, while it's different to manage it with Zoom, it's more complicated and the effectiveness is lost."

4.1.4 Big Four 1

Trainer (D.T)

From a training point of view, there have been factors that have influenced and continue to influence every organisation that are hybrid work, digital transformation, and generational integration. These three concepts have therefore entailed a necessary rethinking within the company as well as in universities or schools about how to perform learning because first of all the way people learn has changed. After all, also their needs have actually changed along with the motivational drivers. The company from this point of view is changing into a Social Enterprise, in the sense that every change that is made, for example, to the learning phase is designed in such a way that it has an impact on people, in terms of work-life balance for example. The company's Observatory is working in this sense on the evolution of learning systems, trying to understand how to move from face-to-face to distance learning, exploiting the opportunities offered by digital technology with synchronous and asynchronous training projects such as the Academy.

Trainee (D.t)

As far as basic training is concerned, the one that transmits skills concerning Excel, PowerPoint, and other tools and instruments, has been and continues to be carried out online in the format of video lessons that can be watched at any time. For other topics of company dynamics and values, seminars are often organised, so in general, the training related to hard skills is carried out online. For soft skills, the face-to-face meetings are always preferred.

4.1.5 Big Four 2

Trainer (E.T)

According to the interviewee's experience, training has undergone irreversible changes since the lockdown period and will continue to be modified.

"It has been a good journey and we are still on this path of transforming training. At the time when we had to deal with the pandemic and lockdown, we were able to reorganise immediately because we were very used to online training."

Although the company has always delivered most of its training with face-to-face solutions, it has had asynchronous video courses, e-learning and virtual classes, mostly used for international training. But as soon as the lockdown experience started, the first thing was to completely redesign the training in terms of content and modalities. As not much consulting work could be done at first, the time was used to carry out as much training as possible, especially on the new skills, tools and processes needed to manage work online and from home. Now the focus has shifted to training on hybrid work. The strategy regarding training is partly decided globally and partly by the local team. The global one says that 70% of technical courses should be delivered virtually and 30% could be physical. On the other hand 50% of soft skills courses, for example, the ones related to leadership, sales, and teambuilding skills, can be done in presence.

Trainee (E.t)

The fact that training was all done remotely because people couldn't even leave their house at the beginning of the pandemic initially aroused curiosity and stimulated a lot, but later made the enjoyment of training very hard, ineffective, and repetitive. Fortunately, the situation has now changed in the sense that the company has learnt to structure training suitable for every occasion. If virtual tools are applied to the right competence, they can be even more effective than a physical classroom and thus can enable optimal learning. For certain subjects e-learning works better, especially if the topics are technical, e.g. learning to use Excel, or learning about procedures.

4.2 CHALLENGES

4.2.1 BIG THREE 1

Trainer (A.T)

The two main obstacles of online training pointed out by the trainer are related to the lack of concentration and difficulty of attention on the one hand and the penalisation of the human and learning-by-doing side on the other hand. First of all, it emerged that the possibility of doing something else during the online training leads to a significant decrease in concentration, it is very often the case that the audience is not focused on training but is continually distracted by the information coming through

the computer. In the case of face-to-face training, on the other hand, distractions are very limited, and it is possible to engage the listeners much more, and therefore to transmit concepts and contents in a better way. Secondly, those activities that were aimed at developing teamwork and team-building skills, and therefore consisted of physical practices, e.g. building something together or solving a practical problem, cannot be carried out online as effectively. Learning on-the-job also suffered, in the sense that it was no longer possible to stand next to a person and show him/her how a tool works, or to ask for advice at the exact moment it is needed.

Trainee (A.t)

The biggest challenges faced by the trainee were first of all related to the difficulty of entering a large, new reality and not being in the same room with new colleagues and therefore not having the opportunity to get to know each other. This problem was encountered not only with colleagues but also with superiors. Every day the training sessions were chaired by the partners or managers, to whom one could ask questions and considerations remotely, but one could not create the bond that would have been created in presence:

"When I met partners in the office the next day, I was more intimidated to say hello, because I didn't know if that person would recognise me or not. It is one thing to see each other in person in the same room, even if you are in a group with many people, and quite another to see each other through a screen."

Another difficulty noted was that of the self-study, which had to be carried out after working hours, and therefore represented a heavy activity, which took quite some time and did not add any value.

4.2.2 Big Three 2

Trainer (B.T)

The first difficulty highlighted is related to the fatigue of being alone, having a person on Zoom rather than beside is much less immediate and brings little in terms of social experience. The part that is also very much missed is that relating to corporate culture, to soft skills. According to the trainer, people who joined in 2020/2021 have never seen or met each other.

"I'm the person who knew all the employees before the pandemic because I am the first point of contact, now I don't know people, I mean I know their names, but I can't match their faces. So there was a bit of

a lack of this sense of aggregation which is very strong in consultancies because you work in teams most of the time."

Face-to-face training is very important. Working online it is more difficult to exchange opinions, spend time together even to get away from work and not think about it for a few minutes. The confrontation between people is the basis of a job like counselling, the first learning passes through those moments. The possibility to stay at home if you want to must be ensured, but the experience of a recruiter and trainer perceives the need to create sociability, meet peers, and people of the same seniority and create a group. Moreover, online training presents the problematic nature of "Zoom fatigue", due to this phenomenon, the practice of staying for many hours in front of the computer is not effective, because it is alienating, tiring, monotonous and repetitive.

Trainee (B.t)

The respondent, in this case, found himself during the pandemic having been moved to a different, more technical area, so problems with his training emerged in a major way.

"I studied economics, and I found myself working in IT and technical fields for which I didn't have the skills, so it was difficult to follow a project and if I don't understand anything about the problem the technician is telling me, I can't help him".

From his point of view, the biggest difference was the possibility to confront each other in person side by side. Remotely there is both the problem of losing concentration and the difficulty in passing on certain concepts and instructions. Despite a commitment that can be total, distance learning does not allow to "recover". Once the concept has not been understood one cannot ask a colleague for an explanation, or the teacher to repeat it since it is much more difficult to speak from behind a computer. In addition, pre-pandemic there was also the possibility of carving out hours in the day for managers to train consultants, to better coach them on specific skills or company values and practices to follow. These moments represented a very important form of knowledge transmission that has been lost with online training.

The social aspect also plays an important role, because whereas before everyone knew each other, and had the confidence to ask about courses or general questions because they spent, for example, their lunch break together, during the lockdown everyone knew nothing about their colleagues, but the difficulty also came from the fact that after hours of online training no one wants to spend more time at the computer, no one wants to ask more questions or wants to go deeper into concepts. Lack of sociability also leads to being shyer during online sessions, and not wanting to express opinions in front of people one does not know. Moreover, training on the job and learning-by-doing are two aspects that

are very difficult to convey online. The difficulty here lies in the fact that the most experienced people who could help and train are always very busy, and scheduling calls is not so easy since nowadays life is marked by calls.

"Once it was different because we were in the office and there was no need to schedule a meeting to talk about things that could be solved in five minutes by going to the other room. For example, I had to speak to my supervisor again, I wrote to him to see if he had five minutes for a call because I wanted a quick clarification about the last topic we discussed in class, and he told me to speak to him on Thursday afternoon. It was a problem that would have been solved in one minute, but instead, I had to wait three days when if I had been in the office I would have gone there, and it would have been solved already."

Another problem is related to work-life balance because sometimes managers make appointments to explain and clarify concepts according to their busy agendas and in that case, a trainee might have to listen to and understand difficult concepts at nine o'clock at night.

4.2.3 Big Three 3

Trainer (C.T)

In the pre-pandemic era, it would never have been imagined that the consulting onboarding could be virtual because it also represented the moment of engagement and networking of people, which is fundamental to their training. Connected to this, the first difficulty that emerged from the interview was the lack of sociability and interpersonal connection.

"I've been doing training for twenty years, I do it because I love being in the classroom watching people, hearing and perceiving the noises and feelings that people transmit to you, and I must say that the time spent in front of the screen where I didn't know where to look with those black windows and the lack of knowledge of the Zoom instrument were quite disruptive."

In addition, with virtual training, there is also a level of learning that is lower, because people are in the room, but it is only them who decide what to learn. While in the classroom, there is an informal moment, rumours that allow having a level of learning a little higher that is declined in the possibility of asking a question to the colleague, which in the virtual does not usually happen, and even less so if there are new recruits who do not have a high degree of confidence with their colleagues in the video meeting. Moreover, perhaps face-to-face training is more memorable because there are more senses involved. In virtual training, there are fewer, and because humans react to stimuli it can be that particular light, noise, or scent activates sensors that create more fixed memories.

Another perceived difficulty was related to employee saturation. In the past year, the fatigue of participating in virtual training was clearly noticed, whereby people were no longer able to learn through these means even though the topics might be important or engaging. The general trend could be traced back to a parabola. If at the beginning there was a moment of difficulty, then because of the novelty of virtual training the response was high, but at a certain point, the general feeling was that people could not learn anything without at least an alternation between presence and virtual. Moreover also the topic of "Zoom fatigue" was mentioned, because being always connected in front of the computer, there was no longer a balance and separation between the time of training and the time of work. While the former was a more informal moment of rambling, now it has become burdensome because it happens in the same way as daily work.

From the point of view of the trainer's role, the difficulties were related to the need to be understandable and flexible. In the first case, the frustration of the trainers was related to seeing the cameras turned off and their appeals to turn them on not being heard, but they had to continue teaching by understanding the situation. A good trainer must also be flexible had to have both the ability to read immediately when to leave the lesson and follow the classroom instead, and the capacity to understand when the interlocutors need to talk or not since maybe one day, they are active and participative and the next day they need to listen. In a physical classroom, the signals are stronger, in an online situation, everything is more difficult.

"If I'm in a classroom and I see someone taking a mobile phone, I can just glance at them and say - can I help you, do you need to take five minutes? - do you know how many times I've seen people online who weren't following or were on the phone, but it is more difficult to say something to them. Not to mention when they are with the cameras off, it's just impossible to understand them".

Trainee (C.t)

The first important point highlighted by the interviewee was the difficulty for those, as in his case, who have little knowledge of the so-called consulting toolkit, to learn it fully at a distance. Even many of his colleagues, especially juniors who were at their first work experience, had to learn everything remotely without the proximity of a superior who has no time to devote to them among the thousands of meetings but if he had been at the next desk, he would surely have had a minute. But training is not only important for what you learn but also for the people you know, and this remotely is not achieved. The theme of socialization also returns in this interview:

"For these training, we would all be in one place one week, we would all know each other, and it was much better because I could build my network, which is unthinkable now with meetings on Zoom."

As pointed out by the trainer, the trainee also underlined that in the official formal training the concentration is minimal, and the interaction is helped by the platforms, but they will never reach the same level of concentration and transfer of knowledge of the training in presence, also because there are lots of people with the camera being lowered to do something else. As far as learning-by-doing is concerned, it depends on the organization of the company and on the relationship that has been created with the mentor. It's probably a bit slower than it might be if there were proximity between people because the moments when one looks and shares and gives feedback are separate and deferred in time and there is also the lack of confidentiality between colleagues or new hired and supervisors, that leads to having a slow and poor communication and knowledge sharing.

Another variable that emerged was that of the client and according to the interview, success with the client is at least 50% relationship. This figure is obviously at the heart of the business of consulting companies. There is no better way to understand how to manage the relationship with them than to learn from colleagues, who can teach several tools and ways of working. But if the meetings and gatherings are on Zoom there are sure to be a lot of people and it is difficult to establish the relationship that would be necessary to get to know and understand each other better. And compared to the way the pre-Covid relationship with the client was understood, whereby from Monday to Thursday meetings were held with him and interactions took place all the time, as a group, directly at the desk, now there are more detached relationships, fewer group interviews in which one can perceive the modus operandi of a colleague, because for security reasons, for example, the group participants are only two or three. In the negotiation part that there is in the consulting industry there are dynamics that can be learned and that can be used only if there is a face-to-face meeting with clients and colleagues, and through calls or meetings on Zoom, these dynamics surely do not work well.

Also, in this case, it emerged how the work-life balance of the employee becomes very complicated because while during the training week in presence the project stopped, now in the case of these online training, as they can also be done on-demand, nothing changes because the projects and the work going on. Moreover, since Zoom came along there are a lot more meetings, which is normal because before discussions took place when problems arose, whereas now meetings have to be planned at a time when everyone is available because people are not all in the same room anymore. Life is scrutinised by these meetings, and for a person who enters this world and still has to learn everything, it's even more difficult to try to squeeze the most out of him or her if that person is busy with an endless series of meetings.

4.2.4 BIG FOUR 1

Trainer (D.T)

The interviewee tells that at the beginning of the pandemic there was a real disruption. On the corporate side, the biggest difficulty was not related to the novelty of digital transformation, as this trend was already known and implemented by companies. The primary difficulty was the impact that the sudden reorganisation caused. The first event was indeed reorganising in uncertainty and bringing everything to digital. The challenge was to try to identify the objectives that were there in the face-to-face training, determine the competencies to be developed and understand how the same objectives could be conveyed online. The resulting problem, however, was that technologies and operating systems were not ready for this change either. For example, not all platforms had the option of breakout rooms, not all e-learning tools had tests at the end, and so on.

"For us, the backlash was big because we didn't have a particularly well-functioning technology, but fortunately now everyone has adapted to a very high level, and over time the online training solution has caught on and worked well."

Another obstacle was the lack of attention. In the classroom, one can certainly use tools to vary and attract people's attention. During online lessons, this cannot be done because the learner only sees a square speaking, while on the other side it is impossible to understand if the trainees are really listening as they often have the camera turned off for example. Lack of attention in the virtual classroom is difficult to manage, moreover, the time has to be well balanced because it is not possible to speak for more than 10/15 minutes, or the attention of the listeners will be completely lost in any case.

Trainee (D.t)

In general, especially at the beginning, the trainee found himself lost because, having worked only from home for the first two weeks, when he went to work in presence, he found a new world, very different from the university world, but in theory, he should have been already integrated. And not being present in the office, not knowing the people one works with and from whom the feedback comes from does not help, because for example, it is not clear in which key, negative or positive, to read those comments, not knowing the person who gives them.

"For example, it often happened that another analyst who had come in only three weeks before me gave me feedback on what I was doing. Maybe she did it constructively, but I misinterpreted it at first. Not having had direct interaction with her and not having formed a bond with this person I could not judge her words as well as I could."

The lack of social contact was prevalent. Having human interaction was considered important especially when this leads to not knowing colleagues at all. In this way, one cannot see how they deal with situations, how they work, how they make mistakes and how they remedy them, and therefore one does not learn from their experience. Seeing even the most senior person who has the same doubts, one can be more involved, and one also gains in personal conviction.
The same happens with the relationship between the supervisors and managers. It is surely more difficult to ask something if there is not so much confidence between people.

Another difficulty came from the amount of work and the number of courses to be taken online. One has to find a way to reconcile everything when the courses are alienating and do not contribute to an optimal working situation. It would have been useful in this respect to have had an introduction beforehand on which course could be the most relevant for each module, to also have direct interaction with someone, an experience to learn from.

4.2.5 Big Four 2

Trainer (E.T)

One of the biggest challenges was certainly finding a way to keep the focus high. In presence, it was already difficult, but remotely it becomes almost impossible. Within consultancies, people are very busy, and they have stimuli and distractions coming at them all the time. In addition, the general trend nowadays is that people have unlearnt how to listen, and as a result participants need to be much more engaged. Moreover, learning is very much linked to the place where it takes place. So always doing the training in one's own room flattens the experience, and the information does not remain in the memory. So the employee experience has to be revised because learning is also about emotions and senses.

The networking aspect has also been lost considerably. Courses in consulting companies are not only a way to develop skills but also to create a group and a sense of belonging, to be able to work well together and to offer the company's services at 360 degrees. To do that, everyone has to get to know the other people working in the company, and this is very difficult to achieve remotely. Finally, the redesign of the training itself was a challenge, as it had to be shorter but able to pass on the same content, it had to cover the same topics but differently, trivially with different slides and different words.

"What I learnt from the virtual lessons was that I have to give fewer concepts, but I have to make them interact more. So we had to think of new ways to engage but also different formats, how many days to go between training, what time slot would be best".

Trainee (E.t)

The issue of attention is important also from the point of view of the trainee. On the one hand, it's true that even when people are present, they get distracted and lose focus, but somehow, there is always a way to awaken the audience. With online training, everything passes into the hands of the learner, who is responsible for his or her own learning and must be able to build his or her learning environment. And this required awareness is not present in everyone.

"*Staying focused in your room while someone speaks from a computer for hours was the biggest difficulty, we were not used to it and the difference with face-to-face classes was immediately clear. In the beginning, it could be much more comfortable but then it turned out to be less effective, so it was a disadvantage for us trainees in the first place".*

Also, not being able to get to know the new colleagues who came in at that time, even when the pandemic had passed its most acute phase was a big downside. The company often organised dinners and meetings, which improved cohesion in the office from day one. In this new situation, however, since these events were no longer held, the shyest people were penalised.

4. 3 SOLUTIONS

4.3.1 BIG THREE 1

Trainer (A.T)

The most significant solutions developed by the company include limiting the duration of training. The amount of time that can be spent on online courses has been significantly reduced to make it easier for trainees to follow the lessons. As far as technical content and their online training are concerned, the solutions implemented are video training with subsequent evaluation through online tests, which can be used independently of the employee. It is clear that during this type of training there is a lack of sociability and confrontation with other people, but on technical topics, it was not considered too necessary. With regard to soft skills training, types of online training were developed using breakout rooms, which include group workshops in which interpersonal skills are stressed. The hybrid form is definitely the one that allows exploiting all the pros of the two types of training. Its flexibility allows choosing the best way to transfer knowledge according to skills and competencies' characteristics. If training in person is considered to be more functional, then it is organised in person; if it is not necessary otherwise, then it is much more effective and efficient to train from home in virtual mode.

"Personally, I would go for a hybrid model, that's what I hear from my colleagues as well, in the sense that in our company we are convinced that this is the best solution".

There are also great expectations for the future. Of course, everything is linked to technological development, which, if it has now made these solutions possible, probably has much more in store. In any case, the various options will certainly keep pace with current events and the new needs that will arise.

Trainee (A.t)

Concerning soft skills, according to the trainee's testimony, as soon as the onboarding weeks might have been carried out in presence. Special moments were organised, such as museum visits, dinners, and conviviality, to allow the group to form and get to know each other. In his personal experience, since the initial training was carried out online, these events had not been organized and the difference, at least for the first periods, had been important in terms of group unity. For hard skills, the tools used were online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, other interactive platforms with slides, texts and exercises and live business case simulations.

4.3.2 Big Three 2

Trainer (B.T)

When the company decided to put all its employees to work from home, it provided first of all practical support, to give benefits to the employee so that remote working would become easier. Although it was not known how long the situation would continue, there was already a feeling that it could become something stable, also because the processes of digitalization and remote working had already started, and the pandemic had only accelerated things. For this reason, the training also had to be changed. Now a series of tools have been implemented. For example, one allows the exchange of information on projects, that is, details on who did what, and who has to do what. It is a specific tool that is made available to employees. In addition, the same tools have remained, such as Zoom and Skype, which have helped and facilitated both recruiting and training. The courses have been restructured, so they may have been spread over several days but with little difference, fewer modules certainly, but a lot of training is compulsory and necessary and must be carried out before people enter the company so the transfer to the virtual was immediate, trying to make it as engaging and stimulating as possible.

Trainee (B.t)

A practice used to explain more general concepts is that of plenary sessions organized on a weekly basis in which seniors lecture the trainees. Another solution concerns the development of platforms that present various video lessons lasting a few hours, in which they explain subjects, give notions on particular topics, such as artificial intelligence or blockchain, agile working, and so on. When it comes to these types of courses, which give general knowledge, and overviews on broad topics, they succeed in their objective because they can be listened to after work, at home, and being very simple, direct, and immediate they manage to transfer specific knowledge. The independence given by the possibility to choose the moment of fruition is a very positive factor. On the other side, the best solution for onboarding and more specific training courses is definitely presence, because then you can get to know each other, network, and form a group. Courses such as these that are taught online have to be really well structured otherwise there is the risk of getting a bunch of boring, uninspiring activities that don't create the right engagement needed to work together.

"After a while, you feel the difference, you say I want to go with someone to have a lunch break, to drink coffee, of course, you need that part too, that aspect of sociality among colleagues that then leads you to grow and learn."

4.3.3 Big Three 3

Trainer (C.T)

What the respondent said about her consulting firm was that for the last two years the courses have been held online, so that they can be valid for all the organization's various international contexts. For this purpose, all the trainings were transferred to an online format and were completely redesigned, not in terms of the content to be told but in terms of the method. For example, a training that was to last two days was divided into four four-hour sessions, with breakout exercises and more interactive slides. Certainly what is clear to the interviewee is that it will no longer be possible to have trainings that last many hours, and therefore the need arises to be very good at giving less information but to transfer it in a more precise way and to be effective in how to tell them. Everything has to adapt to the new speed at which the world is going, what used to be done in eight hours has to be done in four, maybe by taking something away.

"I know it is something that is not easy for everyone to accept, but I am realising that you can never go back to the way things were done before, less is more might be the winning statement at the moment."

Once again, the use of video platforms for virtual training was immediately stressed. To ensure that the knowledge was conveyed in the best possible way, for the human skills part, they tried to build in a lot of interaction i.e. use few slides but have stimulating questions to make the presentation interactive, using the breakout rooms to discuss and come back with new ideas. Gradually, however, the training is trying to find again also its part in presence.

"Starting from June we will organise the first day and the last day of the week of training with the people in presence in the various offices and then instead the days in between which consist of more technical training are left online, because the primary objective is to learn the contents, while the other two days will be focused on more interactive activities, more group, networking, especially we will organize moments of interaction that are not during the training, but during coffee breaks, dinners so that they know each other since this is the objective of these other days."

Finally, it emerged that what could help further is technology development, for example, the theme of gamification is stressed since it could help to engage more through games. In this sense, certainly, the objective is to seek out partners on the market who are at the forefront of virtual games to try to be always very up to date on that point of view.

Trainee (C.t)

The first element highlighted by the trainee was the e-learning platforms developed by the company, which can also be used to get in touch with experienced specialists in certain fields to create some networks. There are also other trainings which are on-demand, some are trainings to be done when one has time, with multiple answers and tests, which are always part of the counsellor's training, and others are global sessions on a specific topic. For example, the next one on the trainee's list would be "working with clients". These courses all aim at providing generic and compliant basic knowledge and can be transmitted without too many problems on online platforms. The trainee also stresses the use of breakout rooms as very interesting and stimulating because having very large sessions, going from 150 people to 4 allows for better interaction.
Another interesting solution expressed is that of working by objectives. This is a very widely used procedure, especially remotely.

"You see yourself in the morning at 09.00 when you start your day, you do maybe a quarter of an hour so-called check-in session with people and then check out maybe at 17.00 and you use these sections of time to give progress, this certainly helps the organisation of the work."

In addition, some very useful tools emerged that were also applied in a session in which everyone was present, such as a tool that allows to do design thinking, to make for example workshops, thanks to

which everyone is connected to a virtual board on which everyone can enter their own idea, can comment on the others, and add feedback. According to the trainee, this was a solution that was able to compensate for the absence of actors in the workshop. As a further improvement for the future, a fairly advanced virtual reality tool has been highlighted, which allows hearing sounds and people much closer. Although not a perfect match to reality it is a better digital experience. As a general feeling, what the interviewee thinks is that some quite basic activities, not disruptive, can be deliberated remotely, and on-demand but when there are more interactive sessions, breakout rooms are fine but not the best solution. For the moment, getting to know each other and create a network online cannot replace a direct empathic relationship, and therefore the solution is to segment the training into these categories and decide what can be done in presence and what cannot.

4.3.4 BIG FOUR 1

Trainer (D.T)

During the design of the new training mode, the first thing the trainer and her team realised was that it was impossible to maintain the same course duration. This was also physiologically because subgroup work in the classroom takes up more time to be arranged than the immediate breakdown on the online platforms. The dead time in the classroom therefore disappears, but above all, in all the activities that are carried out, it is necessary to reduce as much as possible the theoretical frontal lessons with the facilitator speaking and the audience listening. The classroom becomes much more interactive, there are fewer explanations and more actions and what needs to be explained in a more basic way is transmitted asynchronously. To explain how a document, a tool, or a leadership model works, topics that do not require tutorial sessions, asynchronous training tools such as learning pills, podcasts, essays, articles, and videos are used. In the classroom, it is transmitted only what is needed to apply the knowledge in the daily context and to make it internalised so that it becomes habitual behaviour. What definitely remains in presence is classic outdoors, where there are experiential skills that would not be possible to bring into digital.

"Right now, we have received a tender for a soft skills training for a public institution and managers have come back overwhelmingly to want the outdoor in-person day with unconventional trading methods, but they have also asked us for many virtual days and want us to describe the blended approach that we will use to exploit synchronous and asynchronous days."

Another solution implemented is the Digital Academies, both for the development of consultants' digital skills, so that employees are not only directed to use digital tools but are pushed to be digital. This does not only mean knowing how to use Excel and Microsoft Teams but also problem solving,

change management and networking skills, even remotely. These up-skilling or re-skilling interventions aim to train new clear and emerging skills.

"We are working with an insurance company on an international academy to create experts in Smart Automation. The aim is to spread experts throughout the organisation to have pioneers within the organisation who can bring innovation."

Gamification also plays an important role in the company; it is often used as a new, stimulating, and engaging approach. Gamification comes in different ways, it can be intended as classroom games, quizzes, tournaments, or instant polling, which help to make the session interactive but also as a tool within the Learning Management System that allows to have internal plug-ins to determine the progress of the trainees and give them rewards. Gamification always starts with a basic strategy to do but then there are supporting platforms that help it to be very effective in engagement.

Overall, hybrid training remains the best solution. In terms of effectiveness, it has been found that even fully digital, if well designed, gives a very good result, because digital does not mean doing training badly, but simply doing it differently. So when the discussion is well-managed, as well as the reflections, the exercises and the activities that are proposed to the people, something remains, and online tools integrate the competencies and allow to focus on the core ones. But having said that, training is a relationship work. Because part of the success is also due to the kind of relationship you manage to establish with the person listening, so undoubtedly training in presence will always be better.

Trainee (D.t)

With regard to the instant feedback one needs on a daily basis, platforms such as Zoom and Skype have worked quite well, in the sense that they are tools that, if used well, manage to give the same immediacy that would be available if one were in the presence. Surely hybrid training is the best solution. Given the experience of the trainee who only went to work in presence after a few weeks, it was possible to see that in the office the memory of the things learned is clearer and more concrete.

"If I had started immediately with the hybrid, and not as in the first month and a half when I was at home, I would have had a path of growth, a little faster, I would have gained confidence more quickly because you see how others behave."

One tool implemented by the company was to provide a Welcome Guide to newcomers in which they could write down feedback about the training and what could be done differently.

4.3.5 BIG FOUR 2

Trainer (E.T)

Course redesign was at the heart of the company's strategy. They were reprogrammed in terms of duration, structure, modules, and topics. In addition, blended courses were built, consisting of a synchronous part and an asynchronous part to ensure that everyone starts from the same level and has the same knowledge. According to the interviewee, there will be no return to fully face-to-face training as the benefits of online have been enthusiastically received. The company's solution is therefore to use a blended format that includes physical parts and online courses.

"I am redesigning the negotiation courses. The theory is done virtual, the practice is done physically. On the other hand, there are other courses, such as personal effectiveness courses, that do not need the physical part, so we have designed an e-learning part on platforms and a part with a teacher."

Moreover, the function of the classroom has changed and consequently, its use has to be revised. Before courses lasted for several days, people could listen and learn. Now the classroom, whether online or physical, can no longer attract as much attention as it used to. The needs of the listeners have changed and especially the new generations do not have the attention span that they used to have. For example, the company adopts a method whereby a stimulus such as questions, games, etc. is inserted every 10 minutes. Moreover, theory can no longer be delivered through simple lessons and the classroom has become the place where people share, apply and practise. The theoretical part, instead, has to be done first by the learner with videos and papers. This has been done for a double reason. On the one hand, there is the convenience and effectiveness of self-learning, on the other hand, there is people's willingness to learn that has changed a lot, so there is the need to adapt accordingly. The role of the teacher has also changed. The instructor who talks for hours no longer works, so they have been trained to be able to engage the participants and leave space to build the experience for the audience. The trainer has now become a director, helping the trainees to connect the various phases and steps of the training and not to get lost.

Another way that has been put in place to try to stimulate the trainee is to make him/her the protagonist of his/her own choices regarding training. The decision on the learning path is left much more to the learner so that he/she becomes more active and responsible. The future of training is self-learning, people want to choose what to learn, and in which direction to direct their careers, so more and more companies have to provide a part of core competencies that are the same for everyone, and another variable part of non-core competencies that people build by choosing the training contents that interest them most.

"We did an analytics course for HR, but there were people in our team who had different levels, so we planned an entirely virtual course with virtual classroom moments where there was an e-learning part, and then there were slots where you could choose the course to follow individually according to your level. The important thing was that everyone did what was most useful for them."

Finally, social learning, i.e., taking the participant to the extreme and empowering him/her, is becoming increasingly popular. Companies are making sure that training is built together, in addition to providing the classroom and the course you offer a community of trainees who learn together and that can exchange feedback and experiences, and in this way, the learning is enriched through the experiences of others. Training is less and less structured in formal and passive contexts, but more and more diffuse, integrated with the life of the company, more and more left to the participant, and it uses advanced tools, close to the social world.

Trainee (E.t)

What the trainee finds useful is the new structure available. Courses are all online and are developed in micro-modules, i.e. microlearning, which employees can complete when they have time, on topics they can skip if they already know them, and at the end, the final test for evaluation is done and it requires a great performance to be passed. For what concerns online platforms, Learning Management Systems are widely used and useful tools for training purposes because they have catalogues with training paths, and record training, and progress. Thinking about the future, they could be further improved by adding the possibility to make suggestions, add catalogues, give feedback for each course, to create a specific training path for each one.

In addition, a very useful platform used by the company is that of badges. It is a system for the development and certification of competencies. There are three macro themes: technology, leadership, and business, within which there are various subjects. And the trainees can get a badge showing that they have become an expert in something. The badges are bronze, silver, gold, and platinum. In addition to providing training, the system allows a very wide choice of courses to obtain the same badge and also values experience because the more "valuable" the badge material is, the more the trainee has to prove that he/she has applied the training with a project for which he/she has applied those skills. In this case, the platform is perfectly balanced, there is theory and practice, the possibility of choosing courses and badges, the platform understands preferences and previous experience and formulates a specific path. Finally, the company has a lot of compulsory training, including a lot of e-learning on more or less specific basic topics. It has been realized that many trainees often already have a basic or in-depth knowledge of the subject, and so to avoid unnecessary time being wasted there is the possibility of taking the test immediately before the course to achieve that type of training.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the data described in the previous sections are compared with the literature review and the main findings are reported, together with a summary of the results obtained, following the structure of the coding table (see Appendix C). Finally, a framework is presented that summarises the main findings and focuses on the new training model highlighted in the interviews.

5.1 TRAINING

As far as training is concerned, respondents C.T and C.t refer to it by highlighting the distinction between informal and formal, in accordance with what is expressed in the literature by Jacobs & Park (2009) who define the former as a complementary part of "learning from experience", and the latter as a formal process established by organizations to teach individuals specific business knowledge. According to the interviewees, the difference is that some trainings are interactive, with exercises that involve physical movement, and some others include only theoretical concepts transmission, so the distinction between which procedures might operate online and which need to be updated is clear. As highlighted by respondent A.T, the discriminating factor is the interpersonal component since the opportunity to meet colleagues and customers is essential to feel more part of the company and for the knowledge to be better transferred. This distinction represented the starting point for the development of the themes relating to the "Training" aggregate and also the analysis of this section was carried out consistently with it by examining the informal training first and then the formal.

Another definition that is useful to mention is the one of Snell & Morris (2019) about soft and hard skills. Soft skills are not quantitative and rely on judgment and personal attributes, whereas hard skills are tangible and more formally taught qualities. Although these definitions were not clearly mentioned by the interviews, they are aligned on how these competencies should be transmitted. In the case of soft skills, classes are held with the student being in presence. Subjects such as communication, public speaking, interpersonal relationships, and team building are best transmitted when a person's entire body is visible and when there is eye contact while practising and instructing.
When dealing with hard and technical skills, the online format, with plenary sessions and break-out rooms or the use of e-learning platforms is still a valuable option. This is exactly the thinking of respondent C.T. who explains how after an initial moment of adjustment during the lockdown, the company started to compose a structure calibrated according to hard or soft content. Also, the corporate strategy of the trainer E.T. can be considered as an example since it is decided globally and indicates to

perform 70% of the technical training virtually and 30% physically. While at least 50% of the soft courses must be conducted face-to-face, thus confirming the importance of the social component when dealing with soft skills training. Therefore, what has been established in the work processes as a "new normal" has also influenced and been accepted in the training phase. As confirmed both by Gigauri (2021) in his model and by the words of interviewee D.T, this new way of training encompasses the concept of hybrid work and digital transformation, which will be further explored in the following sections. This respondent, in particular, referred to digitalization and hybrid work as two of the three layers (together with generational integration) that are influencing and changing organisations and leading to a rethinking of the way learning is carried out because first of all, it is people who have changed.

Considering the words of the interviewee E.T on how training is structured within the company they recall the Strategic Model of Training and Development proposed by Snell & Morris (2019), but to cope with the situation brought about by Covid-19, the training structure had to be completely changed. In particular, according to the interview, much focus has been placed on the need assessment phase, because right now there is the need to identify the objective of the training even more than before and then to look for the best way to convey it through new learning media during the second phase. The third implementation phase was also emphasised as it was the one that entailed the most work, having to review and modify all the training methods. In this way, learning has adapted to the "new normal", completely restructuring the training strategy, going from totally face-to-face training to digital, and understanding what forms to use, which means to use, and which concepts to transfer.

Finally, the reasoning of Delany (2021), who sustains that the "new normal" format needed and was supported by new tools which, given the global presence of the companies, were fortunately already partly present was confirmed by the answer given by respondents C.T and D.T who underline the presence of the technological assets in their companies even before the pandemic.

5.1.1 Informal training

Considering what has just been underlined about informal training, both literature and data collection agree on the fact that it is more connected with soft skills development as these particular characteristics are less linked to theoretical concepts and more to everyday practices.

According to respondent C.T, when people are altogether the result of the training is better and more visible, because of the impact of the socialisation factor in transmitting soft skills. That is why his company has always conducted onboarding in presence. This aligns with Gigauri (2021) who highlighted that as much breakout rooms are a reliable tool; they cannot replace the experience of having on-the-job training or mentoring and coaching in person. The former allows the employee to learn

thanks to the experience acquired under everyday working situations and the latter provides for a trainee to be supported by a more experienced person.

For this reason, from the data collection emerged that courses with a soft/human skills focus are held in presence, because, as interviewee B.t underlined, skills such as public speaking, team-building or team-leadership could not be shared in any other way. When in-person training was not possible, at least the online sessions were redesigned to be interactive and engaging, as interviewee C.T explain. According to her, those exercises that required physical movement could not necessarily be carried online because they were very interactive, so the courses were redesigned and readjusted trying to make them more engaging to attract attention. But despite this revision, when presence became possible again, the prevailing trend was to hold these types of training in person. As trainee C.t explains when there is people interaction, learning by working on a project, learning by doing or watching each other, although breakouts are useful, they cannot replace the experience of doing everything in person. In this case, the analysed literature didn't provide a clear answer. But it was evident from Jacobs & Park (2009) that informal training is a "learning by doing" process and these concepts are much easier to understand through learning by doing or direct vision of the object of study. Therefore, the importance of face-to-face training for these kinds of skills is consistent with the respondents' view that trying to transfer soft skills with online classes can succeed but will certainly require more effort and time.

5.1.2 Formal training

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, both from the data collection and from the research of Jacobs & Park (2009) formal training is more linked to hard/technical skills. For example, trainees A.t, C.t and D.t explain that notions concerning problem-solving techniques, feedback mechanisms, knowledge-leverage techniques and other basics were conveyed in plenary sessions during the first weeks of onboarding, i.e. in a formal type of training. Indeed, according to the interviewees' experience and the BCG Report, (2021) companies use a formal training structure that can include parts of the initial onboarding weeks, monthly or regular meetings, and self-study sessions during which they deal with concepts about the problem-solving methodologies, corporate culture, how the company works, what are the committees for promotions, what is the up or out path, Excel, PowerPoint, other tools, and instruments.

In this case, according to respondents B.T and E.T, the online solution succeeds in the hard skills and concepts transmission since they are more bureaucratic, standardised and require less interaction and also because, as respondent A.T said, the online format facilitates employee attendance. Moreover, according to interviewee B.t company's formal training offer is mostly well structured and assorted.

Indeed, trainee E.t said that if used to convey the appropriate skills, online training is even more effective because it has structural advantages that face-to-face training does not have, such as convenience and autonomy. Again, the proposed solution about Italian consulting firms was only found in the data collection.

Moreover, according to respondent B.T, through the platforms and other online tools, trainees are provided with toolkits containing notions about software, graphs and data analysis tools which are important instruments for the work of a consultant. Both for the respondents and the University of Minnesota report, (2016) this type of training is crucial for the employee's job growth and development, which is why companies provide all the tools for it to be effective and usually give trainees targets for completing certifications and modules. Also, respondent B.t underlined the push his superiors require towards online certifications, as the company needs to have employees trained in the best possible way.

Finally, as mentioned before, formal training is structured and organised by companies with sessions and modules since it focuses on or at least succeeds in conveying hard skills more accurately. Trainee C.t talks about the regular sessions scheduled every month he has to attend to learn some basic consultancies topics. She goes on to say that this training is standardised and bureaucratic, so as less interaction is needed, online transmission is equally effective. Also Snell & Morris, (2019) mentioned that formal training includes e-learning, virtual classrooms, microlearning, online courses, social media and so on. So, this preset and standardized process if well organised can succeed in the knowledge transfer.

Table 2 - Summary of Training analysis

Training	Definition	Concepts	Mentioned in the literature
Informal training	… is the one that suffers most from physical and psychological distance, lack of contact and network between colleagues and supervisors	Prevalence of soft/human skill Importance of interpersonal component Training in presence is the best option A learning by doing process	yes yes no yes
Formal training	… is the one that is best conveyed without a social context as it is more related to individual skills	Prevalence of hard/technical skills Training online is a valuable option Importance of taking certifications and toolkits A standardized and preset process	yes no yes yes

(Source: elaborated by the author)

5.2 CHALLENGES

According to the literature and the data collection, several challenges affected the transition period between face-to-face and remote training. Three macro-themes underlined by the author emerged most frequently. They bring together various concepts relating to the knowledge transfer process, social

aspect, and employee well-being. Both through data collection and literature review these themes were found and confirmed and therefore constitute the sub-sections of the challenges section.

5.2.1 KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PROCESS

According to the literature review, knowledge is a very complex asset. The research of Balaz (2004) explains that it is the core element of consulting companies since they are knowledge-intensive service providers, and the data collection confirmed this complexity by highlighting many problems related to its transfer.

What emerged from the interviews regarding the failings in the knowledge transfer process, is that there is a lack of concentration and frequent loss of learners' attention which leads to a lower level of knowledge transmission. Trainers A.T, C.T D.T and E.T but also trainee E.t describe the conditions in which employees conduct the online training which does not allow them to take advantage of the help that would come from an in-person class, such as the interactions of a colleague or total concentration on the task at hand without being disturbed by other stimuli, and for this reason, the level of learning can be lowered. Respondent E.T emphasises the fact that there is a growing tendency to have unlearned how to listen, especially among the younger generation, and therefore training needs to be much more engaging. On the other side, trainees B.t and C.t underline the fact that during online sessions it is impossible to "catch up" on a concept because it is more unusual to ask the professor to repeat himself and this leads to less interaction. Moreover, the frenetic nature of the counsellor's work also contributes to this situation of lack of concentration, reducing the effectiveness of online training sessions. In this situation, the responsibility of the trainee plays an important role as it is he or she who decides whether and how much to learn from the training session. As underlined by trainer C.T and trainee E.t there is a sort of responsibility of the trainee who has to become autonomous. These concepts explained in the data collection prove what is said by the literature by Baruch (2000) who states that employees who work remotely are much more difficult to control and motivate and all the benefits that used to come from teamwork and the sharing of ideas are lost.

The trainers themselves realise how complex is to capture the attention of their audience, being faced with online classrooms and people with cameras all turned off and very few if any spontaneous interactions. Following this, interviews with trainers revealed the difficulty of interfacing with trainees remotely which causes frustration and demotivation thus decreasing the quality of the training. Trainer C.T explains that the lack of eye contact that is often created due to the cameras being turned off and the lack of interaction with an audience that is usually very silent make the lessons difficult to carry on. In this situation, according to trainers' experience, the skill of a good coach is to be flexible and

understand the needs of trainees and the best way to make them learn the concepts. Through physical contact, the signals from the audience are stronger and behind a computer, it is more difficult to understand what the class or team needs. What trainer C.T underlines is the fact that there is no possibility to understand the trainees' state of mind by looking at them because often they are with their cameras off and the coach cannot see them at all, he cannot perceive the level of their attention from behind a computer and consequently, there is no chance to modulate the lessons according to their needs. This concept is not present in the literature analysed.

Linked to these two problems, the interviews also reveal a concept that is not present in the researched literature, the memorability of teaching. Online training is less memorable because it takes place at home, in the room where one usually is, without the experiential journey that one lives with face-to-face training, characterised by unusual moments compared to the working day, new encounters and fun experiences. On the contrary, since more senses are involved, face-to-face teaching is more memorable, and concepts remain more imprinted because they are anchored in other memories, but this has been lost by moving online. According to interviewees C.T and E.T, humans react to stimuli, and so particular light, noise, scent, or emotion may stimulate the sensors that form more fixed memories in virtual training.

Moving on to the topic of technology the evidence found in Larsson & al, (2020) and in the words of the trainer, D.T suggests that the situation of companies from a technological point of view is sufficient to cope with the transition from face-to-face to remote. In fact, respondent D.T states that the digitalization process in consultancy firms has already started some time ago and the whole sector was in a good place when the pandemic broke out. On the other side, the data collection also reports that although consultancies were quite far ahead in the digital transformation process the speed with which the change took place caught organisations unprepared as they did not have all the right technological tools to deal with such a radically different situation, or if they did, employees' skills were not sufficient. For example, respondents D.T states that not all platforms had the option of breakout rooms, and not all e-learning tools had tests at the end, so there were a few more improvements that could have been made. If in the beginning, the appropriate technologies were lacking now there is still more that technology could offer. This is in agreement with Gigauri, (2021) who explains the need for companies to develop and acquire knowledge and experience in the technology field.

Another technology-related challenge emerged that was only emphasised by Larsson & Teigland (2020) concerning the risk that the increasing use of technology can bring concerning cyber-attacks and data leaks. In this case, probably, because the interviewees were asked about the problems concerning training, the topic was not considered as much as it would have been if we had talked about other aspects of consulting companies.

Finally, the relationship and the support that is given by superiors is also deteriorated by the lack of close contact which brings less support from them and confidence in them, something that Kulkarni, (2021) has also highlighted in the theoretical research saying that remote working makes it more difficult to clear concerns and acquire instructions when compared to face-to-face doubt clarifications and approvals. Moreover, following the literature, the knowledge transfer process is influenced by remote training since it represents a barrier to sharing knowledge involving the impossibility of directly talking and undertaking informal exchanges with directors and associates according to Nardi & Whittaker (2002). This aligns with the respondents who highlighted that the informal training moments that used to be carved out during the working time between trainees and superiors are also no longer provided. Trainee B.t, thinking back to the pre-pandemic period, explains that his mentor used to carve out moments every week to transmit to his newly arrived colleagues and him important concepts for their projects or consultancy work more generally, but he says that now, with changing routines and the absence of people in the office, these moments no longer occur. Also considering Nonaka (1995), the most effective ways to transfer knowledge are working every day together with a mentor, trying to imitate his actions, observing, and practising with him. But almost all trainees experience many difficulties in coordinating with their mentors as the agendas of both are full and difficult to combine and the moments when one looks and shares and gives feedback are separate and deferred in time, so the process of learning is longer. Trainees, such as respondent C.t, often find themselves alone even when they have to acquire toolkits and become familiar with the necessary tools. Not having an expert figure nearby to ask for explanations and to follow as an example certainly makes the process more difficult, especially for newcomers. Something that did not clearly emerge from the data collection that is instead present in the literature review in the research of Ferrari (2019) is the concept of reverse mentoring according to which it is the younger generation that teaches and passes on concepts related to technological skills to the older generation even though a similar concept was expressed by interviewee D.T who spoke of the need for more generational integration which could therefore also include the concept of reverse mentoring.

5.2.2 Social aspect

According to trainer A.T the fact that it was no longer possible to stand next to a person and watch them work or ask their advice penalised the training. This is also shown in the literature. Argote & al. (2003) say that physical and psychological distance must be reduced to have the opportunity to work together and learn from each other, learn by doing, and learn from observation. These considerations are in line with those of the interviewees who recount the difficulties they encounter in developing skills such as teamwork and team building through learning on-the-job when it is not possible to be close to the other person.

From the point of view of the social aspect, literature and interviewees unanimously consider it a fundamental aspect of learning. As explained by interviewees A.t and D.t the first difficulty they encountered once they returned to work in presence was that of getting settled in a place where they had never seen anyone live before, without having really socialised with anyone and as Tuomi (1999) explains knowledge creation is a social phenomenon, it is not something that an individual can do alone. For the interviewees, the confrontation between people is the basis of a job like counselling since the first learning passes through those moments of socialization, so the impossibility to stay in close and continuous contact with others creates obvious shortcomings related both to the lack of reference points, examples to follow, experiences to share and to the innate human need to fit into a social group. According to trainee B.T, working from home makes it more difficult to exchange information, whereas training in presence allows an exchange of experiences through socialisation. Moreover, always from the point of view of the trainers, respondent C.T says that one thing she does not find in forming trainees online is the opportunity to observe people, to hear and perceive the noises and feelings that employees usually transmit to her. On the other side, according to trainee D.t, the lack of sociality also leads to difficulty in receiving feedback. Not knowing and not dealing with colleagues daily, one cannot fully understand how to interpret their feedback or to extract "tacit" feedback by knowing their behaviour when faced with difficulties. Also, seeing even senior colleagues fail helps to gain self-confidence. The lack of these components, therefore, causes difficulty in the transmission of knowledge and in the training of the employee. For example, trainee B.t believes that in-person training has several consequences, starting with the opportunity to socialise with others. Spending social time with others creates a bond with colleagues that then leads to having the confidence and opportunity to ask about courses, projects, and activities. Online training stops the moment the session ends and leaves no room for anything else, also because everyone is tired and wants to do something else after hours of work and training. This is in line with the literature about consulting companies, as Testa (2004) states that they are considered to be one of the most human relations-based businesses and so without this relationship the mechanisms by which they work become more complicated.

From the point of view of the networking practices, Eraut (2004) mentions within its model working alongside others, group activities, tackling challenging tasks that need the support of someone experienced and working with clients as ways to learn. Perfectly in line with the model, the respondents independently identified all components. In the previous paragraph, the problem of lack of support was emphasized. Furthermore, respondents agreed that networking is one of the fundamental elements of counselling. Almost all respondents, such as trainers C.T, E.T and trainees B.t, C.t mentioned the impossibility of creating a personal network that was experienced during their time spent remotely as having eliminated face-to-face onboarding and in-office training, it is difficult for employees to get to know and network with their colleagues. In this way, not only the network with people from the same

office was limited, but also the very important one that was created at the company's global events. It does not only regard building a community of people but a sense of belonging with the company, according to trainer E.T.

Moreover, from the trainees' point of view, this situation of physical distance was also reflected in the difficulty of creating a sense of group within their teams and thus fostering a supportive working environment for knowledge sharing. According to Shearmur & al. (2020), lack of group feeling affects the performance and quality of employee training as they are linked to interactions with other individuals in the workplace. Since group training sessions are also carried out from home, the initial getting-to-know-you moment between colleagues does not take place and even when one returns to the office, a sense of belonging to the company or workgroup has not been created. This slows down the group training process and thus the achievement of efficiency. The answer given by the respondent confirmed McEvily & Reagans (2010) and Andrews & Smits (2019) thoughts about the fact that having a close relationship helps to transfer knowledge more easily because frequent communication and interaction establish emotional attachment and trust, which can lead to a desire to share knowledge, while without group works and team interactions there are no tacit knowledge and information sharing.

Another relevant aspect that emerged from the interviewees is the relationship with the client also mentioned by Larsson & Teigland (2020). They say that considering the physical distance during customer meetings, it is clear that a face-to-face relationship helps to form trust between people which will influence the success of the process and on the contrary, an online relationship will not foster it. According to respondent C.t, the client is clearly at the centre of consulting firms' business and the success of the collaboration depends 50% on the relationship between parties. There's no better way to learn how to manage the relationship with clients than from co-workers, who can show a variety of techniques and methods while doing negotiations and presentations. Having to perform these moments online often means that younger people are not even included in the meetings or cannot perceive the same teachings as the dynamics of the situations have changed.

One last concept that is specified by some interviews is the lack of organizational culture transmission. According to trainee B.T being away from older colleagues and more experienced superiors makes the process of transmitting corporate values much longer and more difficult. What the literature with Baruch (2000) says in this regard agrees with the interviewees' ideas. Without participation in events and work life in the workplace, being more detached from the dynamics of the company will also be less likely to develop the desired career path and to be part of the company for a long time.

5.2.3 EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

Employees' well-being was affected during the pandemic period, and this also influenced their ability to learn. Now it is no longer possible to listen to lectures for long hours, to understand difficult notions without some support, and there is also a general feeling of tiredness.

According to the interviewees work-life balance is another big problem that affects training as sometimes sessions or interviews with mentors and trainers are scheduled at inconvenient times or immediately after work. Furthermore, since Zoom and other platforms were introduced, there have been a lot more meetings. Previously, conversations took place when problems arose, however, now meetings must be scheduled when everyone is available because people are no longer all in the same room. As trainees B.t and C.t underline, now the day consists of one call after another. Even just asking for clarification becomes a complex process because calls are organized with people who are often very busy, and it is not possible to go to the other room and ask and solve the problem quickly. Trying to work and learn together at this pace can become very difficult for an employee. According to trainer B.T, the problem is that there is no break between work training and personal life, so disconnecting and not thinking about commitments becomes more difficult and this can lead to less concentration on training. Finally, trainee C.t emphasises that whereas previously during the training weeks one was dispensed from work, now with self-study and sessions organised for a few hours the two overlap and the time schedule becomes much tighter and more tiring to adhere to. The literature also underlines this aspect, in particular, Mustajab & al. (2020) explain that lack of work-life balance causes increased stress and decreased work motivation while limiting communication with co-workers.

Another important concept is the one regarding alienation. Trainers said that being alone at home instead of in a full classroom leads to a feeling of alienation since the new training processes bring very little in terms of social experience. Respondent C.T explains that the decrease in training effectiveness was strongly perceived, and the feeling was that at some point employees could no longer benefit from online courses without alternating with face-to-face courses. They were saturated and alienated and without the right balance between online and face-to-face, the training would be useless. This aligns with Mitchell & Novaes (2020) who highlight the fact that isolation causes a loss of focus and self-control thus decreasing the effectiveness of training. Being in the same place all the time for both work and training also resulted in a flattening of the training experience for the employee. Whereas before, the time of training was a break from routine and was welcomed as a novelty, being in the same room and under the same conditions at work does not make a difference and the employee's learning is affected. Trainee E.t explains that being in front of the computer for so many hours made everything much more difficult to understand. This is in line with Baruch (2000) who declares that working

remotely could create an autistic society made up of individuals who lose the sense of living with others and are completely isolated.

Connected to what trainers said about their frustration there is the concept of the difficulties in relating behind a computer highlighted by the trainees. This aspect was not emphasized by the literature. Trainees stated that they felt uncomfortable having to speak in plenary training sessions or during team meetings. For example, trainees A.t and B.t express the difficulty they felt in asking questions to a trainer with whom they had no connection and in front of people they didn't know. Having to turn on the camera and speak in front of people who often hardly know each other was not an incentive. A further difficulty that emerged from the interviews is that of transmitting more practical concepts via video calls, when there is a need to look closely at or touch something, explaining it from behind a screen becomes complex. Not knowing each other also makes it more difficult to speak in plenary sessions or to see each other for the first time, and the process of passing on knowledge is interrupted.

Another negative side of online training that emerged from the data collection and the literature review is the issue of computer fatigue and the impossibility of recovering between work and training. Whereas before, the two moments were separate, now they are overlapping and do not allow the employee to rest affecting the results of both training and working. Respondents B.T, C.T have cited the phenomenon of "Zoom fatigue", indicating it as one of the causes of training ineffectiveness as it leads to employees being demotivated and tired. The literature agrees with this concept that emerged from the interview. According to Shearmur & al. (2020), the employee is often under pressure and works non-stop, without socialising or having a break together with colleagues, and this leads to greater difficulties once work is over to start doing something else, such as training.

Finally, the difficulty of managing self-study is another concept emphasised by the interviewees that has also emerged in the literature as a challenge for distance learners. What the trainees A.t B.t C.t and D.t say is that the amount of online courses provided by the company that has to be tackled independently by respondents leaves little room for free time, so the self-study becomes a heavy activity especially if consultancy toolkits have to be learnt when one has just arrived and there are other tasks to complete. Without practicality and experience, it is complex to manage everything alone. This aligns with Kulkarni (2021) who talks about the fact that the increase in workload occurred due to the remote situation makes employees unable to manage their working and training hours efficiently in work from home circumstances. Moreover, according to trainee B.t, if the self-study concerns topics related to areas other than their initial background or more technical aspects, training problems emerged in a major way.

Table 3 - Summary of Challenges analysis

Challenges	Definition	Concepts	Mentioned in the literature
Knowledge transfer process	… is the activity required for skills and knowledge to be acquired, its actors are the trainers and trainees, and now technology also plays a key role	Lack of attention and concentration	yes
		Frustration and demotivation of the trainer	no
		Lack of memorability of teaching	no
		Appropriate technologies are lacking	yes
		Lack of continuous and direct support	yes
Social aspect	… is the aspect that surrounds the moment of training, allows knowledge to be transferred more easily and its absence can be an important barrier	Less sociability and interpersonal connection	yes
		Impossibility to build a network of people	yes
		Difficulty in team building	yes
		Relationship with client is lost	yes
		Lack of organizational culture transmission	yes
Employee well-being	… is the state of physical and mental health of the employee, (trainer or trainee) that determines his/her predisposition or difficulty in acquiring knowledge	Work-life balance management	yes
		Employees suffering from alienation	yes
		Difficulty in relating behind a computer	no
		Issue of computer fatigue	yes
		Difficulty in managing self-study	yes

(Source: elaborated by the author)

5.3 SOLUTIONS

Through data collection, the solutions that companies used to address the above-mentioned problems caused by the initial impossibility of face-to-face training emerged. The main themes that came up were, of course, that of digitalization, which was also conjugated in the theme of creating a digital mindset within the company and the individual employees, and finally the fundamental theme of redesigning training. A summary matrix containing the solutions described in this section linked to the challenges highlighted in the previous paragraphs for which they were developed can be found in Appendix D.

5.3.1 DIGITALIZATION

According to the literature review, in particular to Snow & al. (2017), digitalization can provide effectiveness and competitiveness to consultants thanks to the inclusion of digital techniques and methods in the way they work and are trained. The importance and impact that digitalization has within the organisation are evident also from respondents' interviews in which they reported several solutions used to cope with the problems caused by remote working implemented as a result of digitalization.

The first concept emphasised by many of the respondents and by the literature review is technological development. As highlighted by Davenport & al. (1998) technological advancement has resulted in

valuable instruments and infrastructures that speed up, improve, and simplify the process of knowledge transmission. This concept was also present in the data collection since interviewees believe that without the help of technology, it would not have been possible to continue working or training. Respondents A.t, B.T, and C.T underline the massive use of platforms such as Zoom or Skype and trainee D.t mentions the important functioning of those platforms in terms of the instant feedback one needs daily. In his opinion, the tools manage to give the same immediacy that one would have if one were present. Trainer A.T describes the online tools used by his companies as something that worked because, despite the lack of socialisation, some technical skills managed to be conveyed in the same way. This is because the speed that technological development achieved has made the solutions that companies have implemented possible, and the respondents' expectations for the future are high. This is something which Adisa & Adekoya (2021) also have underlined in their theoretical research, saying that digital technologies continue to advance in terms of both effectiveness and capacity, and in this way, they will bring remote working to the forefront. Technological development is one of the only four solutions adopted to overcome the problem of physical and social distance but from what emerged in the interviews it did not work completely. On the contrary, it seems to have contributed effectively to the problem of lack of memorability of teaching and appropriate technology and employee alienation and work-life balance.

Another solution proposed by both data collection and literature is workshops and seminars held online by superiors or specialised trainers to educate trainees through lectures or speeches. Trainee B.t speaks of weekly plenary sessions organised by the company where seniors were invited to give lectures. According to trainer C.T, this turned out to be very useful to make lectures that could be followed by various international sections within the company. Singer-Velush & al. (2020) also underlined video calls and videoconferences as the most popular mediums for remote training despite a strong preference for face-to-face encounters. In this sense, the solution extrapolated by the data collection to make up for the lack of interaction that would be necessary to transfer softer skills is to make workshops and seminars that are conducted online more engaging through the use of various tools such as breakout rooms, in which, given the small number of participants, trainees feel more comfortable and can talk and interact more easily. For example, trainer C.T mentions the use of engaging questions to stimulate discussion to have interactive presentations or trainer A.T explains that his company, for those types of training involving more human skills, adds breakouts to the regular online training sessions to encourage group interaction. The use of workshops and seminars was implemented mainly to fill the lack of direct support perceived by employees and to help them better manage their work-life balance and self-study by allowing them to follow the more theoretical and standardised lessons online.

Based on the answers collected, it can be said that most companies developed specific tools according to their needs that enabled trainees to learn and be evaluated or to facilitate their interaction with

colleagues. The answers given by the respondent confirmed the reasoning of Kulkarni (2021), that companies are taking advantage of technology as much as they can by developing the right tools for their needs. For example, trainer B.T mentions a tool that allows information on projects to be exchanged between participants, concerning each participant's tasks, those that were completed, by whom and when. Other examples of tools mentioned are a platform that presents several video lessons of varying lengths in which trend topics of interest to trainees are explained or a tool that gives the possibility to get in touch with specialists in the consultancy sector to create some networks or a system for design thinking, whereby people are connected to a virtual whiteboard on which everyone can enter their idea, comment on others, and add feedback. Respondent E.t mentions a platform used for competency development and certification which gives badges of different importance to those who demonstrate not only having completed the relevant training but also have put it into practice with concrete examples. Finally, respondent D.t underlines a tool developed by his company, the Welcome Guide, in which trainees could provide feedback about the training. The development of these specific tools helped companies to overcome the initial lack of adequate technology and employee support. The implementation of the tools was also the second method used to try to decrease the physical distance and the weight of the lack of social context during both formal and informal training, and if it worked for formal training, it did not completely achieve its purpose for informal training. Finally, they were a useful resource to better manage the self-study.

In addition, interviewees E.t and D.T emphasise that for what concerns technical content, training was implemented through the Learning Management Systems of the company, consisting, for example, of several videos with subsequent evaluation through online examinations, or interactive platforms with slides, texts, exercises and live business case simulations, catalogues with training paths, record training options, and progress. Respondents B.t and E.t believe that some of these tools work well, especially for courses that impart general knowledge, and are useful because they give independence and the possibility to choose when to use the course. The lack of sociability and confrontation with other people during this type of training is not considered influential as one is dealing with theoretical notions. Moreover, the respondents underlined the fact that there is also the possibility of taking the test before the course to verify if it is not necessary to follow it. According to trainee E.t, they can also be improved, because now is not possible to make suggestions, add catalogues or give feedback on the Learning Management System platforms and also Garcia-Ortega & Galan-Cubillo (2021) believe that companies should improve their online platforms, making it more user-friendly, interactive, and intuitive. The development of Learning Management Systems helped to fill the lack of appropriate technologies and to improve the condition of employees with regard to work-life balance, alienation, and self-study.

Finally, respondents C.T and D.T mention gamification as a very useful tool because it allows participants to be highly engaged, it is innovative and not yet fully exploited. That is why according to

them it is very important to look for partners on the market who specialise in this area so that they can always offer the latest innovations. Trainer D.T discusses gamification saying that it can take many forms, including classroom games, quizzes, tournaments, and immediate polls, all of which help to make the session more dynamic, as well as a tool within the Learning Management System for tracking and rewarding trainees. Respondent C.t also reasons for further advancement for the future of a highly developed virtual reality tool that is being developed in his company. Even if it does not perfectly correspond to reality, it succeeds in giving a better digital experience. This could be applied to remote group sessions as an additional innovative element that can capture attention and make knowledge transfer effective. These two aspects were not particularly addressed in the literature review carried out. The use of gamification and Virtual Reality could help to reduce employees' lack of concentration and memorability of teaching as well as alienation and the ability to relate through the computer by making online sessions more engaging and similar to reality.

5.3.2 Digital Mindset

To face such a transition, it is important to have the right means, but what must not be lacking is also the willingness and open attitude to use these means. For this to happen, a digital mindset must be created within the organization to understand what the company's digital transformation problems are and how to solve them. A digital mindset refers to the set of conceptions and beliefs that push for a normalisation of the digital component in everyday life. Especially for older generations, this thinking is not easy to establish. The goal will be that all employees will not only be directed towards the digital tool but will be pushed to be digital. Living, working, and training digitally means knowing how to exploit all the means and benefits that digital can provide, it means embracing the fact that digital can simplify and improve the way training is done.

First of all, the development of new skills is a fundamental step to ensure effective knowledge transfer also through remote training. According to the Ufficio Studi PWC (2020) report, employees must understand how to use various technologies, how to collaborate through virtual teams, and how to rearrange activities using digital communication tools. In this regard, a solution exposed by trainer D.T is that of Digital Academies. They are structured to increase the counsellor's more technical skills such as Excel and PowerPoint but also more behavioural skills such as problem-solving and network skills, both of which are fundamental for the development of the trainee. These up-skilling or re-skilling programmes are designed to teach new, distinct abilities that are necessary for employees to get the most out of the training and perform at their best at work. Finally, also the Human Resource department needs to improve its specific knowledge and skills. According to Gigauri (2021), they have to know how to deal with this new situation of crisis and how to establish a plan of the technologies to be used, approaches to be taken and processes to be adopted. The need to develop new skills is necessary to eliminate the trainer's frustration as he will be able to relate better to the tools and the trainees. It will

also improve the trainee's approach to new technologies and the relationship with the computer and self-study.

According to interviewee E.T, the ability to learn has changed over time, at this moment in history everyone has become more aware of their lives and wants to make their own choices. Training must also move in this direction not to fall flat and still be effective. For this reason, to stimulate the trainee, it is necessary to make him or her the protagonist of the choices regarding his or her training. The company, therefore, provides basic packages that will be submitted to everyone indifferently, but then different possibilities open up, the choice of which is left to employees according to their preferences and interests. In this way, they will be stimulated, and they will be more active and responsible since people nowadays desire to pick which path their careers will go. This is in line with what Kulkarni (2021) explains in his research about the importance of making employees autonomous. The development of a personal path made of self-directed choices is important for the impact of the training to be greater due to the increased affinity with the learner and to improve his or her work-life balance by making autonomous and responsible decisions.

Across the data collected, interviewees D.T and E.T agree on the changing function of the classroom during the training sessions. The classroom is no longer the place where one listens to someone speak and learns passively also because the needs of the listeners have evolved, and new generations, in particular, have a lower level of attention. What was previously taught in class takes place via recorded video lessons. The classroom is now the place in which people share, apply and practise. There it is transmitted only what needs human connection or what is required to apply knowledge in a daily setting. In this way, employees can internalise new knowledge so that it becomes a habitual behaviour, and the participation of the trainees is active, in the first person. This understanding of the classroom was not found in the analysed literature. The new way of conceiving the classroom creates new stimuli that help the trainee's concentration and the trainer's demotivation and generates the necessary conditions for the teaching to remain more memorable.

In accordance with this, trainer E.T explains how the role of the teacher also needs to be reviewed. The figure of the trainer who talks for hours without interaction can no longer exist. Now the purpose of face-to-face teaching is to make the trainees participate so that they can live and build their training experience, an experience that will then be memorable because it is lived by them. The trainer will have to know how to guide them along this path. Since training is now made up of more phases, more methods and more tools, this figure takes the place of the director who helps employees to link it all together. Delany (2021) agrees with this concept adding that working groups should be properly built, with the support of a competent trainer who can maintain a high level of focus, recreate a working place within the virtual world, and lead the sessions and work with the participants' complete confidence.

The new role attributed to the trainer will serve to help them to better manage teaching without being demotivated but also help the trainee not to lose concentration, to get more support and make him or her feel more comfortable during online sessions.

One last concept that emerged from the data collection is social learning. It assumes that man is a social being and understands the importance and effectiveness of group learning. This has been highlighted also by Adisa & Adekoya (2021) who said that social and personal resources, such as having a sense of purpose and meaning, being able to build an interpersonal collaboration with co-workers and having a network of people are important to perform well. This is why, according to respondent E.T, companies make sure that there is an integrated training offer that provides not only the tools to learn but also a community of trainees who can support, help and advice each other so that these practices are themselves part of the training process and enrich everyone's experience. Social learning tries to push people beyond their limits, trying to empower them. Social learning is an important tool that can help the trainees feel more supported by their peers and improve the alienated condition they find themself in by doing online training. Furthermore, this is the fourth tool implemented to solve the problems generated by the lack of the social aspect in the training process, but again a digital solution seems to not completely replace the face-to-face solution.

5.3.3 Training redesign

Finally, after dealing with the change of means and mindsets another occurring theme is the need to reorganise the training to reshape it based on the new tools available and the difficulties that had been encountered. Trainers B.T and E.T confirm this need with confidence because from the very beginning there was an awareness that the situation brought about by Covid-19 might be temporary but would have permanent consequences. This is in line with Gigauri (2021) who explains that technological development alone is not sufficient to achieve the same level of knowledge transmission as it was when training was done in presence. It is important also to redesign the staff training, taking advantage of new technologies to mitigate the difficulties to transfer knowledge with experience and socialization.

Respondents D.T and E.T mention the structure used by their company which consists of two different ways of teaching and learning. For what concerns explaining the functioning of the company's tools, models, and processes, asynchronous training tools such as educational pills, podcasts, essays, articles, and videos are used. Synchronous transmission is suitable when there are experiential skills that can only be learned by living a situation because they are impossible to transfer through digital means. Moreover, trainer E.T explains that the synchronous and asynchronous components were developed to ensure that everyone starts at the same level and has the same information. The possibility to choose

between these two types of learning helps employees to manage their time schedule and self-study better. This distinction was not found in the analysed literature.

What follows from this differentiation is the hybrid form of training. As previously mentioned, according to the respondents, there will be no return to fully face-to-face training because the advantages of online training have been widely embraced. So, the companies' approach is to create a hybrid format that incorporates both physical and online components. Most of the respondents, such as A.T, C.T, and D.t, show a positive attitude towards this solution because it is the one that allows them to exploit all the advantages of both training styles. Its adaptability makes it possible to choose the optimal method for transferring knowledge according to the characteristics of the talents and skills to be transferred. For example, trainer A.T says that hybrid work gives the possibility to choose face-to-face training if it is more functional but if it is not necessary, virtual training is used, which is convenient and effective. In agreement with this, trainer C.T describes a new onboarding process that features online training days in which technical and theoretical concepts are conveyed and face-to-face training days in which team working, networking, and socialising are stressed. In general, face-to-face training remains the preferred solution for now. This can be understood from various interviews. Respondent B.t states that the best solution for onboarding and courses very much focused on soft skills is to have face-to-face sessions in which people can know colleagues and create a group. According to this, trainee D.t says that if it had been possible to do onboarding with a hybrid solution, he would have known at least someone in the company after the first month and his growth path would have been faster. In agreement with this, trainee A.t notes that as soon as it was possible, the onboarding weeks were held in presence, not so much because of the nature of the notions that were being taught but because of the importance of the moment as a chance to get to know and create relationships with colleagues and superiors. Convivial moments such as visits to museums, lunches and group activities are organised and are important for creating unity within the group. For example trainer D.T describes the outdoor days organised by his company with the very aim of forming a united group and increasing complicity. This aligns with Garcia-Ortega & Galan-Cubillo (2021), which suggest increasing the number of face-to-face sessions, especially in the first period, since it is fundamental to help the growth of relationships and the closeness between actors. On the other hand, the general feeling coming from the data collection, especially from the words of trainer D.T, is that digital solutions, if correctly planned, produce excellent results because digital does not indicate poor training, but rather a new approach. But despite the steps that can be taken during online sessions it is clear that a direct empathic relationship cannot be replaced, and for this reason, the solution given by respondent C.t is to segment the training into categories and decide what can be done in presence and what cannot. This is the concept of "new normal" and hybrid working underlined also in the literature by Delany (2021) and Hirsch (2021). Hybrid training is the solution chosen by all trainers that effectively improves employee well-being and

lack of social aspects as it includes an in-person training part that solves the problems of lack of relationships, networking, and difficulties in organising and coping with online training.

Another focus was on the course redesign and in this sense, the empirical findings emphasised that limiting training time is one of the most significant changes implemented by companies. The interview with trainer E.T reveals that course redesign was at the heart of the company's strategy. The objective, in this case, is to make it easier for learners to follow the lectures, organize their private lives and be able to listen to the proposed sessions until the end. To ensure that the training sessions could be enjoyed without over-fatiguing the trainees, for example, sessions that used to be held over a few days in a row are separated into several appointments of shorter duration and many more breaks are scheduled during lessons. Trainers A.T and D.T agree that the learning phase can no longer be as time-consuming as it used to be because the trainees' needs, and attention spans have changed. For this reason, concepts that used to be transferred over many hours are reduced and transmitted more precisely and effectively also limiting as much as possible the theoretical frontal lessons with the facilitator speaking and the audience listening. This was also physiologically because subgroup work in the classroom takes up more time than the immediate breakdown on the online platforms. It was decided to reduce the duration of the lessons to address the lack of concentration, the work-life balance, and the problem of computer fatigue. This concept of shorter course duration was not emphasised in the analysed literature.

Following this, modules and content are reorganized according to the different needs of the employees. So, modules are reduced, and contents are revised and modified, trying to capture what is important for skills development. As described by trainer C.T, training that was to last two days was divided into four four-hour sessions, with breakout exercises and more interactive slides as nowadays there is less and less time to do everything, commitments are multiplied, and training has to adapt accordingly. Moreover, online courses are delivered through micro-modules, i.e., microlearning concerning theoretical topics, which trainees can complete independently. Trainee E.t finds them very useful and easy to use. This is in line with Ferrari (2019) who includes microlearning as a valid method to address the demand to occupy workers' time as little as possible teaching them. There are also, according to both literature and data collection, workshops and seminars that are built to be interactive and engaging and in presence, sessions are scheduled more frequently. But first of all, according to trainer D.T in all the activities that are carried out it is necessary to reduce as much as possible the theoretical frontal lessons with the facilitator speaking and the audience listening. Only respondent B.T states that the course contents have undergone few changes because there are some notions and skills that must necessarily be learnt and there is no way to reduce or eliminate them. The reorganisation of contents and the structure of the training made it possible to work on the participants' concentration, while also trying to improve the amount of self-study and the computer fatigue aspect.

Moreover, an aspect that is as valid online as it is in presence is the need to engage the trainees more to make the training stick and be effective. From this point of view, the trainers described that to ensure that knowledge was conveyed in the best possible way, they tried to create a lot of interaction, i.e., using few slides but with stimulating questions. For example, trainee B.t says that if courses are necessarily to be done remotely then they must be very well structured and made interesting and engaging otherwise there is the risk of losing employees. More specifically Garcia-Ortega & Galan-Cubillo (2021) mentioned that there is the need to create teaching and learning tactics that encourage online engagement and interaction between students, such as cooperation, problem-solving and role-playing, to promote more informed and motivating learning, as demonstrated in the face-to-face context. Techniques for creating more engaging teaching have been useful in capturing the attention of the trainees with more memorable training that can also chase away their feeling of alienation but also of the trainers themselves who find themselves more stimulated with new training methods.

Finally, it is now possible to compare the training practices underlined by Snell & Morris (2019) and Hunter (1999) described in Figures 5 and 6 with what emerged from the interviews.
Given what has been pointed out above about the methods implemented by the consulting companies that emerged from the data collection, two concepts were not mentioned by the respondents. In particular the methods of Behaviour Modelling and Special Job Assignment. The first method concerning showing trainees how to behave in various situations was probably not highlighted due to the characteristics of consultancy companies where this is done daily since it represents an intrinsic part of the work. The second, on the other hand, was probably not mentioned as it implies a sometimes even geographical job rotation which is therefore severely limited at this time.

On the other side, there are some concepts that this research and the data collection brought to light. The first is breakout rooms as a tool to increase participation, engagement, and interaction of participants during online sessions. This tool has become very widely used and was mentioned by all respondents. The second element is that of Virtual Reality, highlighted by some of the respondents as a possible additional tool to increase the ability to transfer knowledge at a distance.

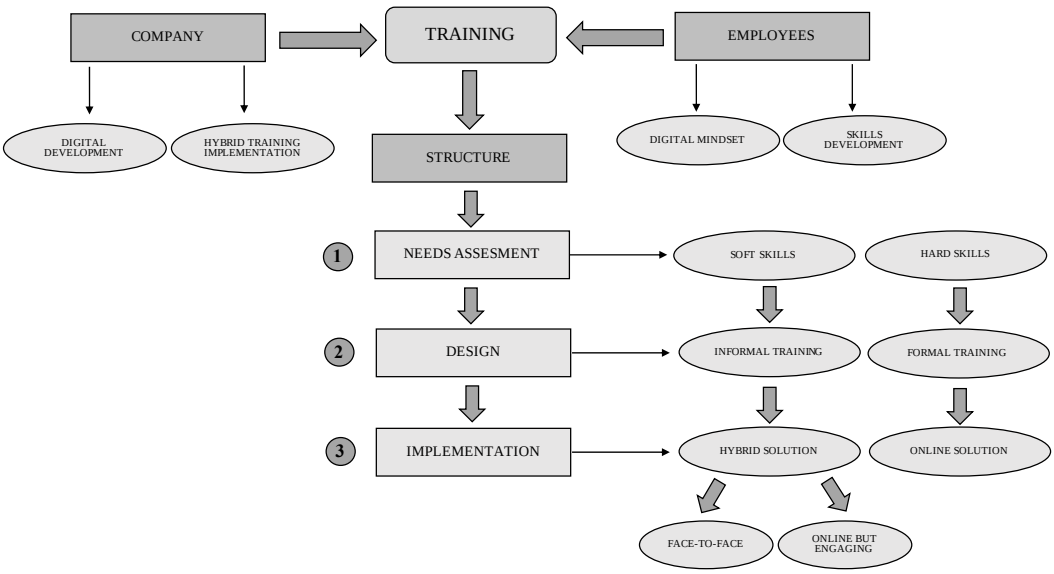
Table 4 - Summary of Solutions analysis

Solutions	Definition	Concepts	Mentioned in the literature
Digitalization	... is the company's ability to quickly adapt existing technologies to the training needs of its employees	Exploitation of technological development	yes
		Provision of online workshops/seminars	yes
		Use of specific tools by companies	yes
		Development of Learning Management System	yes
		Implementation of gamification and Virtual Reality	no
Digital Mindset	... is a mindset that permeates company with regard to the approach to be taken to technology, development and new ways of doing digital training	Need for new skills development	yes
		Importance of developing a personal path	yes
		New perception of the classroom	no
		Revision of the role of the trainer	yes
		Social learning trend	yes
Training redesign	... is the rethinking of training in all its parts to make it adapt to new needs, technologies, challenges and mindsets and make it efficient and effective	Asynchronous and synchronous learning	no
		Hybrid training as the "new normal"	yes
		Reduction of the duration of online classes	no
		Reorganization of contents and modules	yes
		Engagement practices development	yes

(Source: elaborated by the author)

5.4 FRAMEWORK

Figure 10 - New training model



(Source: elaborated by the author)

After comparing the literature review with data collection, a new training model implemented by consultancy companies emerged, based on the Strategic Model of Training and Development by Snell & Morris (2019) and it is summarised in Figure 10. Training is therefore first and foremost driven by

the company, which must implement digital development policies to be able to exploit the full potential of new technologies and must enhance and structure hybrid working practices to benefit from the positive aspects of both training methods, face-to-face and online. Secondly, employees also contribute to the creation of the new training. This can happen on the one hand, by developing an all-around digital way of thinking. So, trainees have to learn to be autonomous and responsible for their training and trainers have to change their approach and become guides in the learners' journey. On the other hand, there is also the indispensable issue of digital skills development without which there would be a strong barrier to training. Finally, the structure of the training is rethought and reshaped. Now it is even more necessary to establish the goal of the training and what skills are to be transmitted. The design is developed accordingly to transmit the knowledge being trained as well as possible. Soft skills are transferred by a more informal type of training, while hard skills are increasingly conveyed by formal, in particular asynchronous, training. Finally, the implementation of the training is based on certain variables such as availability to move, or the degree of importance of the interpersonal component. In the case of technical skills, the online form is preferred. In the case of skills particularly linked to the social/emotional/experiential component, face-to-face training is the most suitable, or if this is necessarily carried out online, it is structured with engaging activities that make up for the lack of human contact.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents the main findings of the research by answering the research questions initially posed. To do it, the aim of the study is first recalled. Then, the two research questions are analysed and answered according to the results underlined in the previous sections. Subsequently, the implications of the research and possible future research based on the limitations of this study are expressed.

6.1 RESTATING THE RESEARCH AIM

The context in which this research was conducted is that of Italian consulting companies during the period relating to and following the Covid-19 pandemic. Starting from this premise, this study researched the challenges that consulting firms faced in the training process of their trainees and in the transfer of knowledge between trainees and trainers when this had to take place remotely. In this respect, the key role of socialisation and working together side by side was emphasised from the very beginning. The subsequent investigation aimed to identify the solutions implemented by the companies to enable the training process to continue with the same quality and effectiveness despite the previously identified challenges. The context, in this case, is that of today's reality, in which training courses can be conducted both in-person and online, and the work and the connected training are similarly conducted with a hybrid model. The purpose of this research is, therefore, to answer the research questions and to highlight the model that was developed by the consulting companies during the lock-down period and then continued to be followed now in the "new normal".

6.2 ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Two research questions were formulated to achieve the aim of the research:

RQ (1): "What are the key challenges in the process of training remote workers online?"
RQ (2): "How can the same level of knowledge transfer by training be achieved with the tools of remote working?"

To answer these questions, the most relevant literature related to the topic was analysed, while data on the testimonies of trainees and trainers of some Italian consulting companies were collected by conducting interviews with them. In particular, the aggregate concerning "Challenges" was useful to answer the first research question while those concerning "Training" and "Solutions" were used to

answer the second research question. The answers that emerged were compared and the relevant findings are reported in the sections below.

6.2.1 THE KEY CHALLENGES IN THE PROCESS OF TRAINING REMOTE WORKERS ONLINE

Based on the recurring information found in the empirical findings and the literature review, the challenges that emerged can be gathered into three main themes.

First of all, from the point of view of the knowledge transfer process, the problems relating to the trainees' lack of attention and concentration caused by the unsupervised condition in which they find themselves were highlighted. The autonomy guaranteed by the recorded video lectures and the opportunity to follow the lectures remotely, however, also increase the possible distractions caused by the trainee's surroundings, which are not present during the in-presence lectures, such as other disturbing elements deriving from telephones, computers, or people. In addition, the supervisor, in this case, cannot be aware of the class's level of attention, as he or she cannot perceive it on the other side of a screen, and this increases his or her demotivation and frustration, resulting in a poorer transfer of knowledge. By losing some of its fundamental elements, such as the relationship with colleagues and professors, presence in the classroom or office, eye contact and external stimuli, online training becomes also less memorable and the concepts it conveys fail to stick. Another problem highlighted is the lack of the right technological means to carry out the training. Even though companies were not unprepared, the tools available were not ready and complete to carry out the process optimally. Finally, another recurring point is that the lack of close contact deteriorates the relationship with superiors and colleagues. Remote working is seen as a barrier to the growth of relationships, mutual confidence, and consequently the transfer of knowledge in general.

The second theme is the social context that is lacking during remote training. That of socialisation is a problem shared by literature and interviewees. Not only that, but some also consider it to be one of the reasons why online training cannot, as yet, completely replace face-to-face training as it, at least for now, lacks those feelings and situations of sociability that allow certain factors, such as network, trust, group feeling, to be created. Knowledge itself is formed through interaction between a group of people, but because of the physical barriers that working remotely creates, this process no longer happens so simply. The challenges related to this issue that emerged are the lack of constant support, the difficulty in networking in the community, the inability to work in a close-knit group, the lack of familiarity with the customer process and the lack of transmission of the corporate culture. These critical issues are related to the lack of interaction during the training process, since never having seen one's colleagues except by video call, not having the same experiences together and not sharing moments even different

from those of work means that a relationship between trainees is not created and therefore the knowledge transfer process is hindered.

Finally, the third theme that was emphasised and emerged from the analysis is that of employee well-being. Other challenges that the consulting companies had to face that prevented the online training from working effectively are related to the employee's situation. They have undergone a disruption to their work routine, and this has had an impact on their physical and mental health that cannot be ignored. The new daily routine of an employee working at home involves never changing location, sometimes room, a great amount of self-study to be carried out, never taking one's eyes off the computer, continuous availability without a break and consequently fatigue. All this is accompanied by the resulting sense of alienation and the inability to find support from colleagues and supervisors because they are in the same situation. In this way, the moments that were previously dedicated to training lose their peculiarity and lightness and also become monotonous and alienating. Furthermore, it was confirmed by all interviewees that intervening or interacting with others via computer is much more difficult than when the same activities were done in the presence, also due to a question related to the lack of confidence and shame of speaking in front of everyone. In such a context, knowledge transfer is undoubtedly penalised.

Therefore, to answer the research question regarding the challenges that the consulting companies had to face during the process of employee training in the online mode using the literature and data collection, it can be stated that these are represented first of all by the difficulties encountered during the process in which knowledge is received and transmitted, such as the problems arising from the trainee's inattention, the trainer's demotivation, the moment of training that has lost its meaning, the inappropriate technologies and the relationships between these elements that do not create an ideal environment for the transmission of knowledge. Secondly, there are the difficulties related to the social context and the socialisation between the subjects of the knowledge exchange that should assist the process but when they are not created, they go against it, such as the impossibility of building a network, a bond of trust and confidence with colleagues, company, and customers. Finally, there are the difficulties linked to the psycho-physical state in which the employee finds himself when working remotely, such as the trouble of relating behind the computer, alienation, fatigue, and lack of work-life balance. All these challenges diminish the effectiveness of the knowledge transfer process and thus the training of the trainee.

6.2.2 THE WAY TO ACHIEVE THE SAME LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER BY TRAINING

The second research question aims to underline the processes and ways in which Italian consulting companies, despite the challenges of remote working, have tried to achieve the same level of knowledge transfer training their employees as the normal level achieved with face-to-face training.

First of all, it is necessary to underline a useful difference to point out the solutions highlighted by the respondents and the literature. After having previously defined informal and formal training according to the literature, the importance of this distinction also emerged from the data collection as it is linked to the different approaches consulting companies have chosen and had towards the types of training.

In particular, if we consider informal training the one related to soft/human skills and formal training the one related to technical/hard skills, the first evidence suggested a solution in which courses or activities functional to the achievement of the former are preferably carried out in presence so as to foster collaboration and interpersonal exchange, while the solutions chosen for the second are in most cases online allowing for greater flexibility and autonomy. This difference occurs because of the diverging characteristics of the above-mentioned skills. In fact, the soft ones are more related to learning by doing, to training in the field, while the hard ones are more standardised skills that, according to the interviewees, are also effectively transmitted online.

Going into more detail, three main themes also emerged within which the types of solutions proposed fall. The first theme relates to digitalization as this has been a key driver of the new training model developed by companies. First of all, therefore, the level of development of new technologies has enabled companies to simplify the process of transmitting knowledge and to have the right means and infrastructure to continue training. The possibilities provided by technology have led to the development of seminars and workshops held online, with large plenary sessions made more interactive through the use of various tools such as breakout rooms and learners divided into small groups so that they feel more comfortable. In addition, the exploitation of technology by companies was massive and fundamental, tools and software were developed specifically for each company to meet the training needs of their employees. Learning Management Systems were also important in structuring the training model. Most of the formal training was left to them, and the flexibility provided to employees made them appreciated and sought after. Finally, gamification and virtual reality were also mentioned as possible solutions to be implemented to increase the engagement and dynamism of participants.

The second theme that emerged from the interviews and was found in the literature review is that of the digital mindset that was sought to be established in individuals as well as within the entire company. The concept here is that of the importance of approach as in addition to means. If digitalization and the

technological improvements that have been put in place to facilitate the training process have been reported as the first solution, then the need arises to obtain an environment and a mindset that favour the correct use of these and indeed their continuous improvement. For this to happen, companies first and foremost aim to develop the digital skills of their employees through specially designed programmes, and at the same time make them more actively involved by giving them responsibility for their training choices. Moreover, to make training more interactive and captivating, and to take full advantage of moments of relationship with others, the class is now seen as a moment of exchange and dialogue, just as the trainer is no longer the one who talks for hours but a moderator and director who guides the trainees on their self-chosen training path. Finally, the trend embraced by the companies is that of social learning, i.e., ensuring a community of trainees who can work alongside and support each other during the training process to try to create more networks and relationships.

Finally, the third theme concerns training redesign, since after acquiring the right technologies and developing the right mindset to incorporate them in training moments, it is necessary to rethink the process itself to make it compatible with the new tools and the new attitude of employees. In this sense, two methods are taken into consideration, the synchronous and the asynchronous, respectively for the transmission of more experiential skills and theoretical skills. Furthermore, the hybrid form is certainly highlighted as the suitable format for training as it allows the benefits of remote and face-to-face training to be exploited. Thus, when there is a need to help employees network or group with colleagues or to transmit human skills, face-to-face training is chosen, while more formal and technical concepts are transmitted via online training. In addition, training must also be redesigned in its substance, which is why companies are trying to streamline courses, cut hours, modules, and topics so that training can reach employees in a light but precise manner. Finally, to try to solve the problem of engagement, companies try to exploit the available means to offer stimulating and engaging training by reformulating explanation strategies.

Therefore, to answer the second research question, it is possible to use the recurring opinion of the interviewees. Firstly, the company must equip itself with the technological means to be able to bridge the gaps that online training inevitably entails represented by the physical distance between trainer and trainee. Secondly, it must set up the right environment and direct its employees to be digital besides using digital tools. Finally, the training process itself must be revised and modified according to the new needs and tools created by exploiting hybrid work in the best possible way. In this sense, the balance should be found in a situation where the basic, non-disruptive activities related to technical and theoretical training are deliberated remotely, while the more interactive sessions, focused on activities aimed at networking and group feeling, simulation of real situations and transmission of human skills, should be conducted in presence. If this is not possible, sessions should include new, remodelled, engaging and technologically advanced formats.

In conclusion, according to the interviewees, with the solutions previously underlined, the same level of knowledge transfer has been reached. But one aspect that cannot be replaced according to many of them, something that is also specified by the literature, is the socialization impact, which is almost completely lost with remote training. Despite the various interventions to make the activities as similar as possible to face-to-face ones, when the human and interpersonal component is high and so it is through interaction between people that knowledge is formed and concepts are transmitted, there is, as yet, no way to have exactly the same production and transfer process online and training results will be different. This is why hybrid training is seen as the best solution and this is why according to the tables in Appendix D there are few solutions implemented to address social context issues compared to those developed for the other challenges. Training is the result of a successful relationship between trainer and trainee. Because part of its success is determined by the type of relationship developed with the individual listening, face-to-face training is always preferable, but because of the direction the way of working and living is taking nowadays, training will also have to adapt accordingly. Therefore, those who make the best of remote training, and face-to-face training will be able to offer a practical, flexible, effective, and up-to-date solution.

6.3 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

What emerges from the study as practical implication relates to the new method by which training is conceived, developed, and exercised. Companies should start by investigating the objective of the training, i.e., what skills or concepts they want to transmit to the trainees, and the goals they want to achieve through their strategy. At this point, they need to understand which design should be used to transmit the chosen skills in the most appropriate way. Then, the method, online or in-presence, synchronous or asynchronous, engaging, or standardised, must be selected considering what works best for that objective. Once the right method has been developed, its implementation has a double implication. Firstly, employees need to be prepared for the change, so good trainers must be trained to understand the different needs of the trainees and the best way to convey the information, and, trainees must be aware of and inclined toward digital training. Secondly, the company must develop the right technological tools and hybrid working solutions to be able to sustain this new training model.

6.4 THEORETICAL IMPLICATION

This research contributes to the existing literature on knowledge training in consulting firms. The research focused on the problems arising from the remote working mode and how these affected the

conduct of the training and its effectiveness. Moving forward, it investigated the solutions implemented by companies by combining the experiences of trainers and trainees from strategic and non-strategic consulting companies and highlighted the practices and strategies developed by these. The data collection highlighted some concepts that should be considered among the main challenges and solutions of the training process within Italian consulting firms, such as, on the one hand, the lack of interpersonal relationships and sociability, the difficulty in exploiting the computer tool, the alienation resulting from monotony, the physical and emotional separation from teammates and the company, on the other hand, the development of the latest technological avant-garde, the digital training of the employee, the revision of the training concept and structure, the exploitation of hybrid training.
Despite this, the current limitations restrict the contribution of this research but still provide insights for future research.

6.5 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This research has certain limitations that will be expressed here. First of all, the literature review was carried out before and during the execution of the interviews and this may have caused a bias in the search for articles related and useful to the data already collected. Consequently, this may have affected the analysis and conclusions drawn from the data collection. Furthermore, as no systematic literature review was performed, it is not possible to know for sure whether finding other frameworks or models would have led the analysis to a different conclusion. For example, there could be other factors such as socio-cultural factors, employee character traits, organisational and structural differences of the companies that could be of interest to the research.

A second issue is related to the concept of knowledge transfer. As previously pointed out in the introduction, this research aims to investigate the difficulties encountered in knowledge transfer as a training process between employees, superiors, or colleagues. Hence, the conclusions reached in this research are not generalisable to the transfer of knowledge taking place within consulting companies in general.

Finally, there are limitations arising from the qualitative method used. The choice of interviewing only some of the Italian consulting companies does not allow the results to be generalised to the entire sector panorama with certainty, even considering the relatively small size of the sample. Furthermore, as far as conducting interviews was concerned, these were done with individuals telling their opinion and experience. The extreme subjectivity of the situation could therefore result in an inaccurate or untruthful description of the actual practices and behaviour.

6.6 FUTURE RESEARCH

Considering the limitations of the research and the fact that this topic is still little explored in the existing literature, the way is open for future investigations. First of all, it would be useful to apply a quantitative method to this research to get less subjective data and to achieve a much higher sampling that could increase the generalisability of the research, trying to investigate the relationships between skills and solutions and the degree of effectiveness of different types of training. Of course, another qualitative research would also improve and complete the picture provided so far.

Secondly, it might be interesting to investigate the same topic by considering other industries other than consultancy as well as other geographical sampling to compare results to find similarities and differences. Furthermore, separating the study and focusing on one of the two types of training, formal and informal, would allow one to obtain even more specific information about both.

Moreover, the newly developed training model did not analyse evaluation, the last phase of the Strategic Model of Training and Development by Snell & Morris (2019). In this sense, it might be interesting to complete the model and investigate this last phase.

Finally, other patterns and models could be considered from the literature review, as well as other factors that can influence training, so as to obtain another perspective through which to analyse the issue.

REFERENCES

Adisa, T.A., Ogbonnaya, C., Adekoya, O.D., 2021, "Remote working and employee engagement: a qualitative study of British workers during the pandemic", *Information Technology & People*

Aguinis, H., Kraiger, K., 2009, "Benefits of training and development for individuals and teams, organizations, and society" *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60, 451-474

Agung, Anak Agung Gde., 2015, "Knowledge Management System Readiness Analysis (Case Study at Human Resource Consulting Company)", *Proceedings of 2014 2nd International Conference on Technology, Informatics, Management, Engineering and Environment*

Alavi, M. E. Leidner, D., 2016, "Knowledge management and knowledge management systems: conceptual foundations and research issue." *Management Information Systems Research Center,* University of Minnesota Stable 25 (1): 107–36

Ambos, T. Ambos, B., 2009, "The impact of distance on knowledge transfer effectiveness in multinational corporations", *Journal of International Management*

Andrews, M., Smits S., 2019, "Using Tacit Knowledge Exchanges to Improve Teamwork." *ISM Journal of International Business* 3 (1): 15-23

Area Centro Studi, 2021, "Lo smart working in numeri." *Assolombarda Report*

Argote, L., McEvily B., Reagans, R., 2003, "Managing Knowledge in Organizations: An Integrative Framework and Review of Emerging Themes." *Management Science* 49 (4): 571–82

Baruch, Y., 2000, "Teleworking: Benefits and Pitfalls as Perceived by Professionals and Managers." *New Technology, Work and Employment* 15 (1): 34–49

Baska, M., 2020, "Home working set to double post coronavirus crisis, survey finds." *People Management*, July

BCG Report, 2021, "Il nostro impegno in Italia"

Becker, G., 1993, "Human capital", Chicago, IL: *University of Chicago Press*

Bell, E., Bryman, A., Harley, B., 2019, "Business research methods" *Oxford University*

Bloomberg, J., 2018, "Digitization, Digitalization, And Digital Transformation: Confuse Them at Your Peril", *Forbes*

Carucci, R.A., Tetenbaum, T.J., 2000, "The Value-Creating Consultant: How to Build and Sustain Lasting Client Relationships", *AMACOM*, New York, NY

Choudhury, P., Larson, B.Z., C. Foroughi, 2019, "Is It Time to Let Employees Work from Anywhere?" *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*

Christensen, C.M., Wang, D., Van Bever, D.C.M., 2013, "Consulting on the cusp of disruption", *Harvard Business Review*, 91(10), pp. 106–114

Churchill, F., 2021, "Number of promotions halved during Covid, research suggests." *People Management*, February

Davenport, T., Prusak, L., and Webber, A., 1998, "Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know." *Choice Reviews Online* 35 (09): 35-5167-35–5167

Delany, K., 2021, "What Challenges Will Organisations Face Transitioning for the First Time to the New Normal of Remote Working?" *Human Resource Development International*

Deloitte, 2014, "Building your Digital DNA", Report

Deloitte, 2017, "Rewriting the rules for the digital age", Report

Dickmann, M., Graubner, M., Richter, A., 2006, "The role of Human Resource Management in consulting firms". In M. Domsch M., E. Hristozova E., (Eds.), *Human Resource Management in consulting firms* (pp. 53-84). Berlin, New York: Springer.

Domsch, M., Hristozova, E., 2006, "The role of Human Resource Management in consulting firms". In Domsch, M., Hristozova, E. (Eds.), *Human Resource Management in consulting firms* (pp. 3-24). Berlin, New York: Springer

Donnelly, R., Johns J., 2021, "Recontextualising remote working and its HRM in the digital economy: An integrated framework for theory and practice", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32:1, 84-105

Dunford, M., 2000, "Key challenges in the search for the effective management of knowledge in management consulting firms", *Journal of Knowledge Management*

Eraut, M., 2004, “Informal Learning in the Workplace.” *Studies in Continuing Education* 26 (2): 247–73

Ferguson M., 2002, “The Rise of Management Consulting in Britain”, *Ashgate*

Ferrari, S., 2019, “Mediamorfosi dell’e-learning” in Rivoltella, P., Rossi, P., “*Tecnologie per l'educazione”*, Pearson Italia, Torino: 95-109

Gajendran, R.S., D.A. Harrison, 2007, “The Good, the Bad, and the Unknown About Telecommuting: MetaAnalysis of Psychological Mediators and Individual Consequences.” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92 (6): 1524 –1541

Garcia-Ortega, B.; Galan-Cubillo, J., 2021, “How to improve students’ experience in blending learning? Evidence from the perceptions of students in a Postgraduate Master’s Degree”, *WPOM-Working Papers on Operations Management*, 12 (2), 1-15)

Gartner, 2020, “Gartner Global CFO Survey” *Gartner Inc.*

Gibb D., Wilkins A., 1991, “Better Stories, not Better Constructs, to Generate Better Theory: A Rejoinder to Eisenhardt”, *Academy of Management Review*

Gigauri, I., 2020, “Influence of Covid-19 Crisis on Human Resource Management and Companies’ Response: The Expert Study”, *International Journal of Management Science and Business Administration*, 6(6), 15-24

Gigauri, I., 2020, “Effect of Covid-19 on Human Resource Management from the perspective of digitalization and work-life balance”, *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Economy*

Golden, T.D., 2006, “The role of relationships in understanding telecommuter satisfaction”, *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 27: 319 – 340

Grant, C.A., Wallace, L.M., P. Spurgeon, 2013, “An exploration of the psychological factors affecting remote e-worker's job effectiveness, well-being and work-life balance”, *Employee Relations* 35 (5): 527-546

Graubner M., Richter A., 2003, “Managing Tomorrow’s Consulting Firm”, *Consulting to Management* 14 (3) pp.43-50

Hirsch M., 2021, “Sustaining corporate culture in a world of hybrid work” *Journal of Business Strategy*, 42 (5): 358-361

Hunter, R. H., 1999, “The ‘New HR’ and the New HR Consultant: Developing Human Resource Consultants at Andersen Consulting.” *Human Resource Management* 38 (2): 147–53

Jacobs, R. L., Park, Y., 2009, “A proposed conceptual framework of workplace learning: Implications for theory development and research in human resource development”, *Human Resource Development Review*, 8, 133-150

Joia, L.A., Lemos, B., 2010), “Relevant factors for tacit knowledge transfer within organisations”, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 14 No. 3

Kalleberg, A.L., 2001, “Organising flexibility: the flexible firm in a new century” *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 39 (4): 479-504

Kipping M., 2002, “Trapped in Their Wave: The Evolution of Management Consultancies”, In Clark T., Fincham R. (eds) “*Critical Consulting. New Perspectives on the Management Advice Industry*”, Blackwell, Oxford, pp 28-49

Kröll, C., Nüesch, S., J.N. Foege, 2021, “Flexible Work Practices and Organizational Attractiveness in Germany: The Mediating Role of Anticipated Organizational Support.” *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 32 (3): 543-572

Kubr, M., 2002, “Management Consulting: A Guide to the Profession”, 4th ed., *International Labour Office*, Geneva

Kulkarni, P., 2021, “A Review of Remote Working/ Work from Home Culture: Pros and Cons”, *IMED*, Vol. 12, No. 1

Larsson, A., Andersson, N.; Markowski, P., Nilsson, M., Mayor, I., "Consulting in the digital era? The role of tomorrow's management consultants" in Larsson A., and Teigland, R., 2020, "*The Digital Transformation of Labor"*. Routledge, 254-279

Lewis, S., C.L. Cooper, 2005, "Work-Life Integration*", Chichester*: *Wiley*.

Lorelli, S., Norris, J., 2017, "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*

Lorsch, J.W., Thierney, T.J., 2002, "Aligning the Stars: How to Succeed when Professionals Drive Performance", *Harvard Business School Press*, Boston, MA

Maestripieri, L., 2016, "Forme plurali di professionalizzazione: storie di consulenti in Italia." *La Sociologia Del Lavoro*, no. January

Maister, D.H., 1982, "Balancing the professional service firm", *Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 15-29

Marx, G., 1997, "Of Methods and Manners for Aspiring Sociologists: 37 Moral Imperatives." *American Sociologist*

Mas-Machuca, M., & Martinez Costa, C., 2012, "A Study of Knowledge Culture in the Consulting Industry", *Ind. Manag. Data Syst*. 112 (2011): 24-41

McEvily, B., Reagans, R., 2010, "Network Structure and Knowledge Transfer: The Effects of Cohesion and Range", *Administrative Science Quarterly* 48 (2): 240–67

Mitchell, V., Novaes, L., 2020, "The pros and cons of working from home: Newspapers illustrators' views on remote work during the pandemic of Covid-19 in Brazil", *International Journal for Innovation Education and Research*, Vol 8, No. 12

Mustajab D., Bauw A., Rasyid A., Irawan A., Akbar MA, Hamid MA., 2020, "Working from home phenomenon as an effort to prevent COVID-19 attacks and its impacts on work productivity". *Int J Appl Bus*; 4:13–21.

Nadler, L., & Wiggs, G. D., 1989, "Managing human resource development". San Francisco, *CA: Jossey-Bass.*

Narayandas, D., Hebbar, V., Liangliang, L., 2020, "Lessons from Chinese Companies' Response to Covid- 19", *Harvard Business Review*, n. 28 of July

Nardi, B., S. Whittaker, 2002, "The role of face-to-face communication in distributed work." In (Eds.), "*Distributed work: New ways of working across distance using technology*" Edited by Hinds and Kiesler, 83–110. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Nonaka, I., Takeuchi, H., 1995, "The knowledge creating company: how Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation". *New York: Oxford University Press*

Office for National Statistics, 2021, "Homeworking hours, rewards, and opportunities in the UK: 2011 to 2020". *UK: ONS*

Ortega, J., 2009, "Why do employers give discretion? Family versus performance concerns." *Industrial Relations* 48 (1): 1–24

Osservatorio Sul Management Consulting in Italia, 2018, "Rapporto Annuale 2017/2018", *Assoconsult*

Osservatorio sullo Smart Working del Politecnico di Milano, 2021, "Smart Working in Italia: dati, numeri e trend post-pandemia"

Powell MJ., Brock DM., Hinings CR., 1999, "The Changing Professional Organization". In: Brock D., Powell M., Hinings CR. (eds) "*Restructuring the Professional Organization"* Routledge, London New York, pp 1-19

PwC, Ufficio studi, 2020, "Smart Working"

PwC, 2021, "Upskilling Hopes and Fears", *PricewaterhouseCoopers*

Richter, A., Dickmann, M., and Graubner, M., 2008, "Patterns of Human Resource Management in Consulting Firms." *Personnel Review* 37 (2): 184–202

Rose T., Hinings CR., 1999, "Global Clients' Demands Driving Change in Global Business Advisory Firms". In: Brock D., Powell M., Hinings CR. (eds) "*Restructuring the Professional Organizatio"*. Routledge, London New York, pp 41-67

Sarvary, M., 1999, "Knowledge management and competition in the consulting industry", *California Management Review*, Vol. 41 No. 2, pp. 95-107

Schubert, P., Lincke, D., Schmid, B. 1998, "A Global Knowledge Medium as a Virtual Community: The NetAcademy Concept" in "*Proceedings of the Fourth Americas Conference on Information Systems*", Hoadley, E., Benbasat, I., (eds.), Baltimore, MD, August 1998, pp. 618-620.

Shearmur, R., Parra-Lokhorst, M., Wycliffe-Jones, A., 2020, "The exaggerated reports of offices' demise: the strength of weak workplace ties", *McGill School of Urban Planning*

Singer-Velush, N., Sherman, K., Anderson, E., 2020, "Microsoft Analyzed Data on Its Newly Remote Workforce", *Harvard Business Review*, n. 30 of July 30

Snell, A., Morris, S., 2019, "Managing Human Resources." *Cengage Learning, Boston*

Snow, C.C., Fjeldstad, Ø.D., Langer, A.M., 2017, "Designing the digital organization", *Journal of Organization Design*, 6(1).

Svensson, P., 2010, "Doing Value: Exclusion and Inclusion in Management Consultant-Client Interactions", *Lund Institute of Economic Research Working Paper Series* 2010/3.

Szulanski, G., 2000, "The Process of Knowledge Transfer: A Diachronic Analysis of Stickiness." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 82 (1): 9–27.

Testa G., 2004, "Il management strategico delle società di consulenza", *Franco Angeli S.r.l.*

Tuomi, I., 1999, "Data is more than knowledge: Implications of the reversed knowledge hierarchy for knowledge management and organizational memory", *Journal of Management Information Systems*

Ulrich, D., A. Yeung, 2019, "Agility: the new response to dynamic change", *Strategic HR Review* 18 (4): 161-167

University of Minnesota, 2016, "Human Resource Management", *Libraries Publishing*, Minneapolis

Vinten, G., 2010, "Training in Small- and Enterprises", *Industrial and Commercial Training*,32 (1): 9–14

Von Nordenflycht M., 2010, "What Is a Professional Service Firm? Toward a Theory and Taxonomy of Knowledge-Intensive Firms", *The Academy of Management Review*

Wilkinson JW., 1995, "What Is Management Consulting?" In: Barcus SW., Wilkinson JW (eds): *"Handbook of Management Consulting Services"*, 2nd edn. McGraw-Hill, New York et al., pp 13-116.

Wright, A.D., 2017, "In focus: IBM extends remote work ban." *SHRM online*

Yang, J. L., 2009, "Love your job? Then save it!", *Fortune* 159 (2): 64–65

APPENDIX

A. BIG THREE AND BIG FOUR DATA

year	2021	2021
	Revenues (bi)	N. employees
BCG	11	21.000
Bain	5,8	13.000
McKinsey	10,5	37.818
Deloitte	50,2	345.000
EY	40	312.250
PwC	45,14	295.371
KPMG	32,13	236.000

(Source: Statista)

B. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide – Trainers/HR managers

First of all, ask if it is possible to record the session, giving all the information regarding anonymity and the possibility of not answering questions as interviews are carried out on a free-will basis. Before starting with the questions, explain the context of this study.

Your Job

1. What position do you hold within the company? Explain what your daily tasks are.
2. Can you identify a set of competencies, through which the company's strategic objectives can be achieved? Among these is it possible to distinguish between core and non-core ones?
3. What do you think is the most suitable way to transmit core and non-core competencies in terms of face-to-face or remote modes?

Challenges of Remote Working

4. What are the differences that come into your mind you experienced training people during the lockdown compared to when you did it in presence?
5. What are the difficulties you have encountered in training employees online?
6. Is there anything you used to do in presence that you couldn't do at all by training online?

Solutions to Remote Working

7. What were the main tools and practices implemented for remote training?
8. Which of these do you think worked well or with the same results as the face-to-face training, if you have experienced it?
9. If you were told to choose one option that you would have to maintain always throughout your life, would you choose remote training, face-to-face training, or both? Why? If both, maybe some skills can be taught more effectively remotely and some others that need to be taught in the workplace. Can you underline some of them?
10. What would you change or do to further improve the process?
11. Is there a testing mechanism within the company at the end of the training phase?

Interview Guide - Trainees

First of all, ask if it is possible to record the session, giving all the information regarding anonymity and the possibility of not answering questions as interviews are carried out on a free-will basis. Before starting with the questions, explain the context of the work of this study.

Your Job

1. What position do you hold within the company? What are your daily tasks?
2. Is this your first job position? How long have you been working in this company?
3. Is the company's strategy clear to you? Do you know which core competencies need to be developed to contribute to the achievement of the company's objectives? What are the non-core competencies that you can think of? I would like you to keep this distinction in mind during the rest of the interview.

Challenges of Remote Working

4. What are the difficulties you have encountered doing the training phase online?
5. Is there anything that did not work in the online training process?
6. If you have experienced the training phase also in presence, what are the differences you have noted being trained during lockdown compared to when you were doing it in presence? Was the face-to-face experience carried out in the same company? If not, was it still consultancy or something else?

Solutions to Remote Working

7. What were the main tools and practices you used for remote training?
8. Which of these do you think worked well and, if you have experienced it, with the same results as the face-to-face training?
9. If you were told to choose one option that you would have to maintain always throughout your life, would you choose remote training, face-to-face training, or both? Why?
10. What changes would be needed to further improve the process?
11. Is there a testing mechanism within the company at the end of the training phases?

C. TABLES OF THE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

First order concepts	Second order themes	Aggregates
Prevalence of soft/human skill Importance of interpersonal component Training in presence is the best option A learning by doing process	**Informal training**	**Training**
Prevalence of hard/technical skills Importance of acquiring certifications and toolkits Training online is a valuable option A standardized and preset process	**Formal training**	
Lack of attention and concentration Frustration and demotivation of the trainer Lack of memorability of teaching Appropriate technologies are lacking Lack of continuous and direct support	**Knowledge transfer process**	**Challenges**
Less sociability and interpersonal connection Impossibility to build a network of people Difficulty in team building Relationship with client is lost Lack of organizational culture transmission	**Social aspect**	
Work-life balance management Employees suffering from alienation Difficulty in relating behind a computer Issue of computer fatigue Difficulty in managing self-study	**Employee well-being**	
Exploitation of technological development Provision of online workshops/seminars Use of specific tools by companies Development of Learning Management System Implementation of gamification and Virtual Reality	**Digitalization**	**Solutions**
Need for new skills development Importance of developing a personal path New perception of the classroom Revision of the role of the trainer Social learning trend	**Digital mindset**	
Asynchronous and synchronous learning Hybrid training as the "new normal" Reduction of the duration of online classes Reorganization of contents and modules Engagement practices development	**Training redesign**	

D. COMPARING TABLE – CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

			Solutions		
			Digitalization	**Digital Mindset**	**Training redesign**
Challenges	**Knowledge transfer process**	Lack of attention and concentration	- Implementation of gamification and Virtual Reality	- New perception of the classroom - Revision of the role of the trainer - Importance of developing a personal path	- Reduction of the duration of online classes - Reorganization of contents and modules - Engagement practices development
		Frustration and demotivation of the trainer	-	- Need for new skills development - New perception of the classroom - Revision of the role of the trainer	- Engagement practices development
		Lack of memorability of teaching	- Exploitation of technological development - Implementation of gamification and Virtual Reality	- New perception of the classroom	- Engagement practices development
		Appropriate technologies are lacking	- Exploitation of technological development - Use of specific tools created by companyes - Development of Learning Management System	- Need for new skills development	-
		Lack of continuous and direct support	- Provision of Online workshop/seminars - Use of specific tools by companies	- Revision of the role of the trainer - Social learning trend	-
	Social aspect	Less sociability and interpersonal connection	- Exploitation of technological development	- Social learning trend	- Hybrid training as the "new normal"
		Impossibility to build a network of people	- Exploitation of technological development - Use of specific tools by companies	- Social learning trend	- Hybrid training as the "new normal"
		Difficulty in team building	- Exploitation of technological development - Use of specific tools by companies	- Social learning trend	- Hybrid training as the "new normal"
		Relationship with client is lost	- Exploitation of technological development - Use of specific tools by companies	-	- Hybrid training as the "new normal"
		Lack of organizational culture transmission	- Exploitation of technological development - Use of specific tools by companies	-	- Hybrid training as the "new normal"
	Employee well-being	Work-life balance management	- Exploitation of technological development - Provision of online workshops/seminars - Development of Learning Management System	- Importance of developing a personal path	- Asynchronous and synchronous learning - Hybrid training as the "new normal" - Reduction of the duration of online classes
		Employees suffering from alienation	- Exploitation of technological development - Implementation of gamification and Virtual Reality	- Social learning trend	- Hybrid training as the "new normal" - Engagement practices development
		Difficulty in relating behind a computer	- Development of Learning Management System - Implementation of gamification and Virtual Reality	- Need for new skills development - Revision of the role of the trainer	- Hybrid training as the "new normal"
		Issue of computer fatigue	-	-	- Hybrid training as the "new normal" - Reduction of the duration of online classes - Reorganization of contents and modules
		Difficulty in managing self-study	- Provision of online workshops/seminars - Use of specific tools by companies - Development of Learning Management System	- Need for new skills development	- Asynchronous and synchronous learning - Hybrid training as the "new normal" - Reorganization of contents and modules

E. QUOTATION TABLES

1) TRAINING

	Training		
	Code	**Example quote**	**Interviewee**
Informal training	Prevalence of soft/human skill	"Soft skills, on the other hand, are transmitted in many ways, either while we do not realise it when talking to a superior or watching a colleague at work, or with types of training that are out of the ordinary, very interactive and engaging"	B.t
	Importance of interpersonal component	"I have to say that this new normal is working well and we like it, so we are bringing back in-person courses, for example, that people take when they just join the company, so when there is an interpersonal component that plays an important role, and therefore meeting colleagues rather than having a chat over coffee to feel more part of the company"	A.T
	Training in presence is the best option	"If we are going to talk about soft skills I think of our public speaking courses rather than anything related to communication then being in attendance seeing how a person moves from head to toe when simulating a speech in public then it is very different, in this case surely going back to training done in person can have an added value"	A.T
	A learning by doing process	"From the point of view of, let's say, learning by doing, it can be said that certainly a full elbow-to-elbow experience is unbeatable, [...] learning by doing is difficult to transmit online because it is anchored to the physical presence of the person and transmits to you that knowledge related to soft skills that could not be learned otherwise."	C.t
Formal training	Prevalence of hard/technical skills	"Formal training for certain concepts works best, especially if the topics are learning how to use Excel, company procedures, and other basic, theoretical notions."	E.t
	Importance of acquiring certifications and toolkits	"In the consulting business there are a set of skills and tools that have to be learnt, a sort of business toolkit, and in that case those notions have been transmitted online through the use of platforms, presentations, and other tools."	B.T
	Training online is a valuable option	"I think that technical skills can also be effectively conveyed through virtual trainings that can be used independently by a group of people and in the same way virtual classrooms also allow the transfer of more technical content"	D.t
	A standardized and preset process	"One can go and see the whole panorama of training that one can do and there are some courses that are actually a bit more bureaucratic, some that are a bit more let's say standard that one might also need less interaction, these one can easily go remotely in my opinion there is no big price to pay "	C.t

2) CHALLENGES

	Challenges		
	Code	**Example quote**	**Interviewee**
Knowledge transfer process	Lack of attention and concentration	"Losing concentration by listening to a lecture in front of the computer is much easier because there is a lot of extra stimulation that does not come during face-to-face lectures, and at the same time it is more difficult to regain attention because it is something that depends only on yourself, you cannot be helped by a colleague or the teacher."	A.T
	Frustration and demotivation of the trainer	"We as trainers experience terrible times, we find ourselves talking practically alone, often even when we ask to turn on the cameras no one does it, it is really demotivating and this leads you to teach worse which affects those few who do want to interact and are with the cameras on."	C.T
	Lack of memorability of teaching	"Maybe the fact is that face-to-face training is more memorable, the things you do in the classroom stick with you more because you link them to stimuli, a light, a sound, a person, that remind you of that particular concept. It is as if memory sensors are activated that help you learn better."	C.T
	Appropriate technologies are lacking	"The real problem is that the change happened overnight, so sure we all had zoom and skype but we didn't know how to use breakout rooms or how to schedule calls with 150 people. The tools had to adapt very quickly and it was very complicated in the beginning."	D.T
	Lack of continuous and direct support	"Before the pandemic, every Friday my newly arrived colleagues and I would meet with our supervisor in a room for a few hours and he would teach us each week a new concept that we could use for our projects or that was important to know in order to do our work as consultants better, now those moments do not exist anymore."	B.t
Social aspect	Less sociability and interpersonal connection	"As far as learning by doing is concerned, this is very much penalised because it depends on the relationship one establishes with the mentor or colleague and the possibility of doing the activities together with them, online this process is longer because the moments in which one observes, recreates the action and the feedback are separated in time".	C.t
	Impossibility to build a network of people	"Before the pandemic, no one would ever do online training, they would travel by plane all over the world because those were the times when employees built their network, which is fundamental for a consultant and his organisation. Today building a network by doing online training and working from home is really difficult."	C.T
	Difficulty in team building	"The training sessions we had were not only aimed at giving us skills. They were also aimed at getting us to do a lot of activities together with our team, so we would have more contact, get to know each other better and then also work better. It would have created a sense of group that would have allowed us to feel like a team even while we were working, and this is much more difficult to achieve online."	E.T
	Relationship with client is lost	"Before Covid we were Monday to Thursday at the clients, we talked to him and the newcomers could understand how to behave, what phrases were best to say, and how to establish a relationship with him, which is the most important thing for the success of the project. Now with Teams meetings these characteristics don't come out so easily anymore and the transfer of knowledge is less."	C.t
	Lack of organizational culture transmission	"There has been a great loss from the point of view of organisational culture, corporate values are transmitted through people and bring them together even more, I used to know all employees before the pandemic because I was the first point of contact, now I don't know people, I mean I know their names, but I can't match their faces."	B.T
Employee wellbeing	Work-life balance management	"Before when we had onboarding or training weeks our work would stop, we would take those days off and concentrate on training. Now we have to study at home at the end of the day or in our free time, the courses are in the middle of the week but the work goes on in the meantime."	C.t
	Employees suffering from alienation	"The hours spent in front of the computer never pass, you are always in the same place, with yourself and no one else, and you have to listen to things that, even if you are interested in something, you don't want to hear about because of this general state of malaise you are in from the moment you wake up."	E.t
	Difficulty in relating behind a computer	"Because we didn't go to the office and get to know each other, or have online sessions set up for so many departments with people we had never seen, it was much more difficult to ask questions and talk, everyone was very ashamed and when we had our moments to ask questions, no one talked."	B.t
	Issue of computer fatigue	"Staying all those hours in front of the computer is tiring. Because in addition to training, work is also done from the computer so we are talking about many hours a day. The condition in which both trainees and trainers find themselves is a continuous general tiredness due to the excessive use of computers. "	B.T
	Difficulty in managing self-study	"The study load we have to cope with alone is a lot, and it also has to be spread over the working day, and I often do it after work when I get home, but in this way I am tired and don't learn much."	A.t

3) SOLUTIONS

	Solutions		
	Code	**Example quote**	**Interviewee**
Digitalization	Exploitation of technological development	"Thanks to platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams we were able to communicate, continue working and see each other even when we were locked in the house, without their help it would have been impossible to carry out any kind of project or work."	A.t
	Provision of online workshops/seminars	"To impart theoretical knowledge, weekly seminars and workshops are often organised where seniors lecture on general topics, hot topics of the moment or notions of counselling."	B.t
	Use of specific tools by companies	"In this sense, the tools developed by our company helped us to simplify work that would have been very difficult to do remotely, for example, we had a tool that allowed us to have all the information of a project together, everyone's tasks, the tasks carried out and everything else."	B.T
	Development of Learning Management System	"Our company's Learning Management System platform is well-functioning, it allows you to store all your achievements and to select courses according to your preferences. it is a convenient tool that I can use whenever I want and it succeeds in conveying the knowledge I want to learn."	E.t
	Implementation of gamification and Virtual Reality	"Gamification is the future, my company is implementing it but for now what I can say is that despite the advances we are still far from reaching reality."	D.T
Digital mindset	Need for new skills development	"There is the need to develop new skills, for this reason we implementd the Digital Academies, they are programmes designed for companies to develop both soft and hard skills ranging from the use of excel and teams to networking and problem solving."	D.T
	Importance of developing a personal path	"The future is based on self-learning. The individual now wants to be the protagonist and decide on his future, only then will his choices be conscious choices and his goals be his own. That is why he will achieve them to the core."	E.T
	New perception of the classroom	"The classroom has now changed its function, it is no longer the place where you go to listen to someone speak but the place where you act, where you have experiences and constructive moments. In this way, training becomes an experience that sticks and works."	D.T
	Revision of the role of the trainer	"The trainer must be a director, a guide, through the complex path of training. He/she must be able to steer the trainees between online, in-presence, synchronous and asynchronous training and tie it all together to achieve complete knowledge transfer."	E.T
	Social learning trend	"Learning nowadays has to be social. There is indeed a trend emerging, the social learning trend, which is designed to bring trainees alongside other trainees so that they do not feel lonely and have a more complete experience."	E.T
Training redesign	Asynchronous and synchronous learning	"We have implemented a blended learning mode in which we alternate between synchronous and asynchronous training according to the needs and functionality of the type."	D.T
	Hybrid training as the "new normal"	"The solution is the hybrid model, because only with that can you give the trainees a solid structure. They acquire the preliminary and theoretical knowledge at their own time and on their own schedule and then the practical knowledge is passed on interactively or in person on specific days."	A.T
	Reduction of the duration of online classes	"The first thing we realised was that we had to limit the duration of the online courses because people could no longer stay at the computer for hours and so to facilitate learning we reduced all the courses or separated them in time."	A.T
	Reorganization of contents and modules	"Courses have to be completely reorganised, rethought. Content must be reduced to what is really important, otherwise time is wasted and you are ineffective. The world is moving faster and everything has to adapt, including training."	C.T
	Engagement practices development	"Online courses cannot remain the same as they were before, there is an absolute need to make them interactive, engaging, with advanced technological tools that make trainees experience an active and participative session."	B.t