Modern Times of Living (Loving) and Working: What Has Happened to Them?

Riccardo Sartori[a], Alessandro Mancini[a], Andrea Ceschi[a]

Abstract

The article is intended to be a reflection on modern times of living and working in the age of the smartphone and new technologies in general. Is there still, today, a clear distinction between living time and working time? Or has the smartphone, which we take as the most common and widely used representative of new technologies, made the boundaries between what were once clearly distinct living and working times increasingly blurred and *con-fused*? Smartphones contain all kinds of apps, from those useful or even necessary for life and work, to those for playing games, having fun and meeting people; and it is with us morning, afternoon, evening and night; weekdays and holidays; when we are well and when we are ill; when we are alone and when we are with friends. Losing it (or not being connected) is unthinkable for us and generates what is called nomophobia (NO MObile PHone PhoBIA). Another well-known fear related to new technologies in general and the smartphone in particular goes by the name of FOMO, short for "Fear Of Missing Out", which is a worried feeling that you may miss events (both offline and, more importantly, online) that other people seem to take part in and thus run the risk of being excluded, forgotten, left out and substituted. Can all this be without consequences of various kinds? In this article, we focus on the consequences this has on our modern times of living (loving) and working.

Keywords: life time; work time; love and work; new technologies; smartphone.

1. Introduction

Work is busy time, not free time. Moreover, as it is well represented by the *JD-R Model* by Bakker and Demerouti (2007) – where JD stands for *Job Demands*

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and R stands for *Resources* – workplaces demand on us, which exhaust our personal and professional resources in an attempt to meet them. Life time, unlike work time, should be freer and serve to recover resources exhausted by job demands (Bennett et al., 2018). Is this still the case?

That work is effort, commitment and exertion is something that was taken for granted all too casually in rationalistic models such as the *Scientific Management* by Frederick Taylor (1911), which, in fact, did not care much about alleviating these aspects, deeming them unavoidable (Martini & Sartori, 2024). When the fact that work is drudgery is taken for granted, it follows that it is not considered legitimate to ask work to be satisfying as well but, at the same time, it is assumed that life time, i.e., that which is not work, should be time for recovery and rest.

Even today, work is thought to be effort, commitment and exertion, but at the same time the idea has taken hold that work and the environment in which it is carried out should positively and not negatively affect the sense of personal satisfaction and well-being.

It is no coincidence that Legislative Decree 81/2008, the *Consolidated Law on Health and Safety in the Workplace*, in the wake of the path begun with Legislative Decree 626/1994 on *Safety in the Workplace*, implements, on a regulatory level, a shift from physical integrity to the psychophysical integrity of people at work, from the protection of health as the absence of illness to the protection of health as well-being at work.

The World Health Organization (WHO) itself defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. An important implication of this definition is that mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities and is related to factors such as satisfaction or, conversely, dissatisfaction, overload of demands, stress, etc.

It is rather well known the phrase of Sigmund Freud, known to all as the father of psychoanalysis, that people's mental health can be measured by their ability to love and work, meaning that the two terms of the question should be in substantial harmony with each other, not that one prevails over the other.

In this sense, *work-life balance* represents a philosophy that has emerged from the 1970s onward as the affirmation of the idea that work cannot occupy all our time (Waworuntu et al., 2022) but should instead leave us free enough to devote ourselves to our interests, cultivate relationships and recover resources depleted by job demands (Ceschi et al., 2017).

Otherwise, we risk feeling perpetually tired, frustrated and irritable; and developing both physical and mental pathology (Prati, 2024). In practice, there should be a substantial balance between the time occupied by work and the free time we set aside for living, loving and caring for ourselves and our loved ones, whether friends or relatives (Charkhabi et al., 2016). Again, is this still the case?

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The question that inspires this article is: Does separation between work time and life time still and truly exist today? Or have the so-called new technologies, the smartphone first and foremost, invaded our space and time to the point that there is *con-fusion* between work time (dedicated to performance) and life time (dedicated to cultivating self and caring for others)? Here are some thoughts on the matter.

2.   Life, love and work in modern times: which connections?

Love and work are universally considered as two central life domains in men and women's lives of every time and are described as the focus of identity exploration in emerging adulthood (Mayseless & Keren, 2014). Indeed, loving and working are such ancient activities that we human beings should enjoy an established background in both fields. Instead, despite this, they still remain activities that are both simple and complex, perhaps partly because of the changes that love and work have undergone over time and still undergo these days (Sartori et al., 2018; Scalco et al., 2018).

Loving, for example, does not mean merely and simply desiring, possessing, controlling or dominating another person, just as it does not mean becoming dependent on or even obsessed with them. Psychopathology has investigated, identified and defined the different forms that emotional dependence can take in the lives of us adult human beings, and none of them outlines a healthy and mature way of loving. Before psychopathology, literature and cinema took care of that with its figures of love-obsessed people, such as Heathcliff (man) in *Wuthering Heights* (Emily Brontë's 1847 novel) or Alex Forrest (woman) in *Fatal Attraction* (1987 film directed by Adrian Lyne), to name only two and not to discriminate by gender (Carvalho Silva et al., 2024). Loving, then, can become pathological, toxic, and destructive, both to oneself and to others.

Working, on the other hand, does not mean merely and simply lending one's labor. Even just naming the aforementioned Taylor, that of Taylorism, brings to mind the least desirable things people can imagine for themselves as workers and employees. It is no coincidence that, linguistically, we have moved from the ancient and devaluing expression "labor force" to the more modern and valorizing expression "human resources", via the simpler and still used "personnel". The latter designation has, in our opinion, at least the merit of reminding us that workers and employees remain *persons* (people) even at work and are not just roles. Human resources, after all, is an expression coined by a certain Raymond Miles in 1965 to remind companies that people at work are

also resources to be invested in with a view to both individual and organizational development, not just expenditures, losses and payroll exits (Sartori et al., 2022).

One can love one's job; but no one loves a job that demeans him or her, does not give him or her satisfaction and fuels negative emotional states such as frustration, anger, anxiety or depression (Sartori & Ceschi, 2013).

The attitudes people may take toward their work vary between two opposites so defined: defensive attitude and proactive attitude (Abun, 2021).

We take a *defensive attitude* toward our work whenever it becomes a source of discomfort, distress and dissatisfaction (we defend ourselves, for example, by putting ourselves on sick leave or by absenteeism, whether real – extended coffee breaks – or virtual – surfing the Internet from the workplace for non-work-related content, a phenomenon known as *cyberloafing*).

Instead, we take a *proactive attitude*, of libidinal investment the psychoanalysts would say, whenever we enjoy our work and it is a source of well-being and satisfaction (we are proactive, for example, when we willingly take on extra effort or help a colleague in something that is not our responsibility) (Costantini & Sartori, 2018).

Continuing in a job toward which we have now taken an almost constant defensive attitude means exposing ourselves to psychosocial risks such as stress, mobbing and burnout. Conversely, taking on a role and occupying a position toward which we have developed as productive a proactive attitude as ever means feeling motivated, satisfied and engaged (Costantini et al., 2017; Costantini et al., 2019; Tomietto et al., 2019).

Work engagement, which is a positive state of mind toward one's work, characterized by three dimensions – vigor, dedication and absorption – is considered the opposite of burnout, which is a chronic state of work-related stress also characterized by three dimensions – emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Demerouti et al., 2021).

It might be easy to think that, if my job is a source of more discomfort than well-being, stimulating in me an almost constant defensive attitude and exposing me to psychosocial risks such as burnout, I will leave it. But just as it does not seem easy to leave a partner who neglects or even abuses us, we do not observe a high and linear correlation between having an unsatisfactory job and leaving it. "Turnover" and "turnover intention" are two different variables and not as highly correlated as one might expect (Sartori et al., 2023). If only because leaving a job, even an unsatisfactory one, means actively giving up the only certain benefit associated with any legally formalized job: salary.

On the other hand, it might be equally easy to think that work engagement, being a "positive state of mind", has only appreciable and desirable effects on workers and employees, and does not carry with it those risks of fatigue and

exhaustion inherent in the concepts of stress and burnout. It is worth mention-
ing here that, instead, work engagement shares at least the dimension of absorp-
tion with workaholism, which is a compulsion to work excessively hard and
long hours, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The dimensions of work engagement and workaholism.
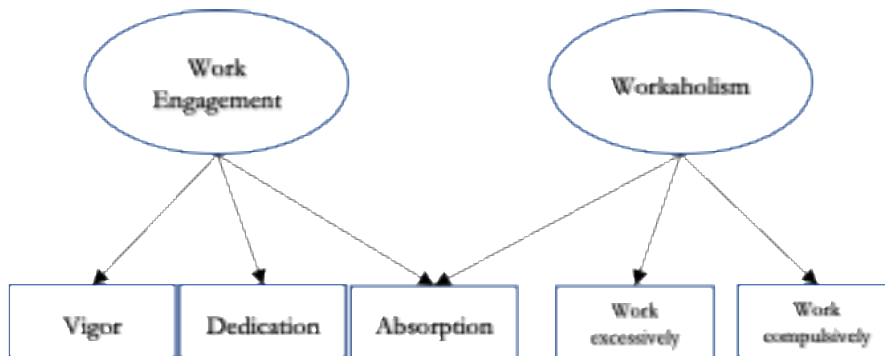
Even working, therefore, can become pathological, toxic and destructive,
both to oneself and to others (Taris & de Jonge, 2024).

But what we particularly want to draw readers' attention to is that life and
work in our modern times, especially since the appearance of the so-called
smartphone, have accelerated to such an extent that we are more exposed to
the risks of fatigue, exhaustion and, above all, *con-fusion* between life and work.

Here is an example.

3. An example of life, love and work in modern times: the case of An-drew

In order to make the previous theoretical part more anchored in reality, we
report below the case of an Italian college graduate who came to the consulta-
tion of us work and organizational psychologists because of a state of fatigue
and a sense of overwhelmingness experienced since he enthusiastically accepted
a job with a company that had attracted him greatly since his college days.

Having graduated with a degree in management, he immediately applied at
this company, was hired shortly afterwards, but the initial enthusiasm was soon
succeeded by a state of prostration resulting from being always connected to
work, both mentally and concretely via smartphone.

This should be considered as a case study, an example of how the speed of task execution promised and ensured by the smartphone and the possibility it offers of being always connected in real time can easily become a trap in which the free time of life may dangerously and increasingly become time occupied by work.

> Andrew is 28 years old. Within about a year of being hired by a company he considers successful, he is always talking to his friends and girlfriend about his job, how demanding it is, how strange and different the clients he has to deal with are, and how much he has to face every day, every week, every month, partly because of his bosses, who he says dump a whole range of tasks and responsibilities on him. Even when he is out to dinner with his girlfriend, he never fails to look at his mobile phone and immediately reply to emails and messages that reach him even in the evenings and at night, on Saturdays and Sundays, as well as on holidays. To the protests and complaints of those around him, he replies that he cannot help but behave this way, that work is taking a lot out of him, including mentally, and that if he did not immediately reply to the emails and messages he always receives from bosses and clients, everything would pile up and he would no longer know how to handle the workload. "I'm so overburdened", he says, "that I'm thinking of putting myself on sick leave, but then I would feel guilty! And I wouldn't want to give the impression that I can't be trusted and that it is better for the company to invest in someone else instead of me..."

This case, like others we can all think of, is an example of workaholism, which actually differs from work engagement at least in that in the case of work engagement people work with pleasure and satisfaction, while in the case of workaholism they do not (Lee et al., 2022).

But what is most important for our discourse is that this is also an example of the "normal" acceleration of modern life; and of the risk, not always recognized by us human beings, even though we all run it, that the constant presence among us of ever more powerful and faster means (the smartphone above all) with which to carry out our work and non-work activities, means giving rise to a race and a competition to always be there and never be absent. A constant challenge to be constantly available and on call, to never be excluded from anything (or out, on the sidelines and outdated) and to always remain high-performing: day and night, at work, at home and on holiday, in health and in sickness. Till death do us disconnect…

FOMO, short for "Fear Of Missing Out" is a worried feeling that you may miss events (both offline and, more importantly, online) that other people seem to take part in and thus run the risk of being excluded, forgotten, left out and

substituted. Similar to FOMO is nomophobia, or "NO MObile PHone PhoBIA", which is when people experience fear or anxiety about losing their mobile phone or not having connectivity.

One is reminded of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, a denunciatory film released in 1936 about the side effects suffered by people as a consequence of the uncritical and standardized application of Taylor's principles to management in factories and industries. Are we still in those modern times? The times of today, which have theoretically sifted through such deplorable philosophies of management as Taylorism and Fordism, highlighting their inadequacy from the point of view of people's psychological functioning mechanisms, coining expressions such as human resources, created precisely to safeguard people at work from phenomena such as alienation, slavery, dissatisfaction, exploitation and demotivation, and developing more humane and complex models of work organization that put the human being at the center of production and service delivery activities: ultimately, are these modern times of today really so different from the *Modern Times* shown by Chaplin?

Yes and no.

Yes, because of the different and greater awareness one has today of issues such as ill-health and well-being at work (the so-called *organizational health*); yes, because in Chaplin's time there was a clear difference between the "executioner", i.e. the slave-owning and exploitative "master", and the "victim", i.e. the exploited "slave", reduced to a cog and subjected to the rhythms of the machine (today things are a bit more blurred, as Figure 1 would suggest); yes, because today workers and employees can enjoy greater protection, rights and freedom. At least on paper.

No, especially because the illusion of being in control of one's life, also thanks to a medium such as the smartphone which, with its countless apps, allows us to communicate and work remotely with anyone, both orally and in writing, read and answer e-mails from anywhere stationary (home) or on the move (train), enter a bank to make and receive payments even without physically going to the branch, write texts, make calculations, sign documents, etc., makes us not only masters but also slaves to ourselves, with the risk of reducing ourselves to cogs, at the same time maintaining the illusion of being able to dispose of our time, managing our activities, being only masters and not also slaves, making decisions (Ceschi et al., 2017).

We believe we embody the concept of work engagement even when we have instead become already workaholics. We believe we are managing our work-life balance even when we have instead allowed our work time to erode, encroach upon and engulf our personal, friendship, family and general relational life times (Costantini et al., 2019).

4. Conclusions: how to live and love work in our modern times

Satisfactory work is meaningful work (Tommasi et al., 2020). For it to be so, work cannot be all-consuming, just as any other activity, including rest (too much rest, for example, easily turns into boredom). Balance is the watchword. Balance and diversity. Balance between life and work, offline and online, commitment and rest... and between all the different activities we as human beings can be involved in and can choose to do (Costantini et al., 2022).

Let us therefore be careful to love and work with *juicio* (prudently), to paraphrase the expression that Alessandro Manzoni in *I Promessi Sposi* puts in the mouth of the Grand Chancellor of Milan, Antonio Ferrer, who addresses the coachman as the carriage passes surrounded by the people in turmoil over the famine that has arisen because of the plague: "*Adelante, Pedro, con juicio, si puedes*" (Go ahead, Pedro, with judgment, if you can).

Specifically, let us love our work with *juicio*, if we can, not excessively and compulsively. More specifically, let us love our smartphones and all those means that information technology and digitalization has placed at our disposal with that *juicio* that should make us realize that – and here we are even paraphrasing the Bible – there is a time to work and a time to rest, a time to engage and deploy resources – hence consume them – and a time to disengage and recover those resources; a time to be alone or connected at a distance and a time to be in company and together in presence.

As you can see, nothing new under the sun if even the Bible basically recommends having and finding balance in things. *Est modus in rebus* (there is a way in things), said the Latins or, better, Horace, meaning that it is wise and convenient to do everything in moderation, in the right measure, giving oneself a limit. Disconnecting means not being reachable all the time, overcoming the fear of not being there and being cut off, excluded and on the margins, and counteracting the urge to be seen and to be always present and performing.

We close with a quote from Bertrand Russell: "One of the symptoms of a nervous breakdown is the belief that one's work is tremendously important. If I were a doctor, I would prescribe a holiday to all patients who consider their work important".

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