ERCIM NEWS

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Editorial Information

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, which is still impacting us, many research institutes have asked their employees to work from home. This presents challenges that need to be resolved. We asked ERCIM members how they have adapted to the pandemic and how the institutes and researchers have altered methodologies and processes. How do they stay in contact with colleagues? How are they introducing new colleagues, especially those from overseas, to the research organisations? How are institutes helping people who are working from home over longer periods? Which platforms do they use to communicate with their team? What is good practice for team building in these times? All institutes are facing these questions. In this section, contributions from CNR, CWI and W3C describe these particular challenges and how the institutes have responded to them.

This section was coordinated by Peter Kunz (ERCIM Office) and Annette Kik (CWI)

Smart Working at CNR-ISTI in the COVID-19 Era

by Roberto Scopigno and Daniela Giorgi (ISTI-CNR)

The CNR Institute for Information Science and Technologies describes its experience in adapting to smart working, which has dramatically changed the institute's modus operandi for most of the year 2020.

When the Coronavirus epidemic led to the abrupt closing of all its offices in March, CNR introduced the Covid-19 smart working regime. This was the most significant experiment on smart working ever done at CNR. Indeed, CNR had never accepted that much research activity could be done anywhere and at any time.

In spring, we operated under a remote-work-only regime. Then, after alternating between home and office working for a few months, in November we were back at home. Though what we have experienced has not been real smart working, but rather a forced situation in which we had no or limited choice about where (and how) to work, this experience has provided much food for thought: could the solutions we devised to run research groups remotely be continued after the emergency has ended? Can smart working be successful in complex research organisations such as CNR?

The past months have tested both our organisation and our resilience. Embarking on a well-planned smart working project would require months, if not years, to redesign policies, technologies, and behaviour. Instead, at the beginning of March, we were mostly unprepared: we had to implement a new organisation of work in just a few days. But we were fast to react. We were eager to keep Italy up and running. This included continuing to run existing projects as well as starting new activities designed in response to the epidemic.

Of course, there have been practical issues in moving our offices to our homes. The administrative staff used paper archives and desktop rather than portable computers. Often, home Internet connections were insufficient to serve the needs of entire families. Luckily, it was easy to solve the technical issues by bringing some of the office equipment home or buying new devices.

The major problems were organisational. With family homes of a small size, several people had to work in kitchens or living rooms, with many sources of distractions. Spring school closure forced many colleagues to divide themselves between their professional roles and activities as tutor/ technician/babysitter for children. An experience that either destroys or fortifies you forever is taking part in an international project meeting while dealing with interruptions from impatient kids.

The other side of the coin was that, since we all were in the same boat, we felt a sense of common fate, which created new bonds. We began to know each other's homes, as the backgrounds of virtual meetings showed kitchen furniture or toy shelves. We laughed when a colleague had to leave the virtual conference to let a yowling cat out of the room, and others laughed at us when we had embarrassing conversations with our families without muting our mikes. As weeks passed, we learned how to keep virtual meetings light, while still productive.

We found that virtual meetings can save time and money. We experimented with many different virtual platforms and bought professional accounts when needed. The (impossible) quest for the ideal platform has not been solved yet, but we are getting there.

Our annual meeting, which we call ISTI-Day, turned virtual as well. While in the past we had a full-day conference, this year we distributed the event across three weeks, one afternoon per week, to maximise attendance. The program featured both plenary talks for researchers to share their latest advances, and poster sessions for young researchers and PhD students. Keeping young researchers motivated and involved has always been a priority for us. This year we felt the need even more, as young people are likely to suffer from isolation from their lab environments.

Admittedly, we missed social contact and social life. But there is more to smart working than the reduction of social interaction. CNR-ISTI is organised in 12 large research groups, and much informal discussion and exchange of new ideas happen during coffee or lunch breaks. We missed these chances, which often turned into productive brainstorming. Despite many jokes circulating about Shakespeare writing plays and Newton discovering fundamental laws while being isolated during pandemics, we were well aware that social distancing could affect motivation, creativity, and productivity. We conducted an informal survey among ISTI lab heads to investigate if researchers were mostly working on established projects or if brand new ideas emerged during the epidemic period. The replies indicated a perceived decrease in our capacity to innovate during the stringent spring lockdown.

Our lab heads had to look for different ways to maintain relations with and among the lab members, as well as upholding the sense of belonging to the group – from formal teams on yet another platform to informal digital chats or virtual happy hours through video conferencing tools. Dealing with the sense of isolation has been very important: it is essential that the reduced visibility of smart workers does not result in missed opportunities.

A downside was a perception of reduced delineation between work and non-work time, with the risk of lower quality down-time. As the epidemic emergency period is now getting longer, learning how to switch-off is growing in importance.

Finally, to evaluate our countermeasures to the emergency situation, we will have to analyse our research production in the coming months. This analysis will need to take into account gender issues, to check whether the need to balance family care with research had a different impact on women than men, and to help us proceed towards full gender equality.

Overall, we look at the experience from a glass-half-full perspective. Without a doubt, we see smart working as an opportunity for the future, not as an ordeal to endure.

Please contact:
Roberto Scopigno, Director, and Daniela Giorgi, Visual Computing Lab, CNR-ISTI
direttore@isti.cnr.it, daniela.giorgi@isti.cnr.it

Home Office –
A Curse or a Blessing?

by Manuela Kos (AIT Austrian Institute of Technology)

Together through distance, but virtually. The unexpected disruption called COVID-19 came upon Europe at a rapid pace. Companies and their employees had to adjust to the situation in the best possible way and to embrace new routines. We explain how this was achieved by the AIT Austrian Institute of Technology.

In March of this year we were really thrown in the deep end. One day, employees were going into work as usual; the next, everyone was discouraged from attending the office unless absolutely necessary, e.g. to sustain a minimum presence of administration staff on site, or work in labs. At this time COVID-19 was still unknown territory for society.

The restrictions on social and work gatherings didn't only affected our institute: they had more far-reaching consequences than initially anticipated. Trade, cultural and leisure facilities and schools were affected, and some families faced the challenge of working from home. The situation was further intensified by home schooling, home cooking, home cleaning, home playing, etc. This was particularly challenging for families with several children, necessitating an

Figure 1: Keeping 1.5m distance is required also in the office.

unprecedented level of multitasking. At the AIT, and especially at the Center for Digital Safety & Security, we were well-equipped to embrace this challenge. Over 95% of our employees have laptops and were able to continue their work without interruption. Special consideration was given to employees with childcare obligations, who were supported through various models, both by colleagues and the company. After a short "acclimatisation phase" to this new situation we managed to do this well, in my view. Several factors contributed to the success of this process:

• Stay connected: The informal "coffee chats" from the office kitchen were held virtually. Lots of informal exchange occurs in this kind of setting: The final status of a project is discussed; quick updates about deliverables are passed on; and briefings for the next meeting are discussed. Of course we also used these meetings for informal social conversation.

• Come with us: New colleagues, who had already had the challenge of changing jobs in this particularly volatile time, were virtually taken along. We endeavoured to hold the meetings with a camera so that new colleagues had not only the voice but also a visual impression of their colleagues. We also held mixed meetings when circumstances allowed: one part of the group physical and the other part virtual. Tours of our institute have also helped to familiarise new colleagues with the new environment. "Pop-up telcos" were also established, replacing the idea of visiting our own office and encouraging informal exchange.

• Multi-channel presence: Various media offer different services. The pandemic forced us to break out of our established routine and enter new territory. This has created a variety of new opportunities. I would say that many of us now know and use more than just one conference tool. In this respect, too, we have learned and changed very quickly. Zoom, Go to Meeting, Webex and Skype for Business are now part of everyday life and will continue to accompany us into the future. Microsoft Teams have proven to be particularly useful. By creating teams and subgroups, information can be exchanged quickly and very easily. This also plays a major role in the social aspect, since almost no physical exchange was possible.

• Stay relaxed, practice acceptance: A key factor for me was not to lose my nerves. All over the globe you could see funny pictures of crashed video calls, and this is something we experienced too. The motto has to be: "Stay cool. Do what you can and try to be as good as possible in the situation". Cooking lunch during a telco or sitting in front