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The impact of telework on older adults' work-life balance in post-pandemic times. Evidence from teleworkers over 55 in Milan

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Abstract

Purpose – This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the impact of telework on the work-life balance of older workers (aged 55–65) in Italy's quaternary sector. Based on 24 in-depth interviews conducted in Milan in 2024, the research focuses on workers in information technology, media, research and development, and other knowledge-based services. Given the high telework feasibility in these desk-based professions, the study examines how remote work affects time management and caregiving responsibilities.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted a qualitative study based on 24 in-depth interviews carried out between November 2023 and May 2024 in Milan, Italy's hub for the quaternary sector. Eighteen narrative interviews were conducted with remote workers aged 55–62, and six semi-structured interviews were held with HR managers and union representatives. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo-14, with member checking and peer debriefing to enhance credibility.

Findings – The findings indicate that telework affects older workers' work-life balance in three key ways. First, similar to other age groups, older employees experience overwork and increased caregiving demands, though telework helps reduce commuting time. Second, they highly value remote work for managing "sandwich generation" responsibilities, balancing childcare and eldercare. Third, older workers uniquely use telework as a "quiet quitting" strategy to separate work from personal life, delaying early retirement. These insights highlight both commonalities and differences in telework experiences across age groups, emphasizing the need for tailored policies to support older employees in flexible work arrangements.

Originality/value – This study contributes to telework research by centering older workers, an often-overlooked demographic, in work-life balance discussions. It provides novel insights into how remote work facilitates caregiving, affects workload, and serves as a tool for delaying retirement. By focusing on Italy's quaternary sector, where remote work is increasingly prevalent, the study underscores the importance of age-sensitive policies that address older workers' specific needs. The findings challenge one-size-fits-all telework policies and highlight the necessity of flexible work arrangements that consider generational differences, ultimately informing labor policies that better support aging employees in digitalized work environments.

Keywords Older workers, Work-life balance, Telework, Quiet quitting, Sandwich generation

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Remote work is not a new phenomenon; since the Industrial Revolution, workers—especially women in industrial homeworking—have performed labour outside employers' premises

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(Felstead, 2022). The term "telework" gained prominence in the 1970s, evolving with technological advancements that enabled remote labour (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016). According to the ILO (2020), remote work refers to work conducted fully or partially outside the default workplace, while telework specifically denotes remote work performed using electronic devices. Despite teleworkers' relative privilege in education and income (Cetrulo *et al*., 2020; Shin and Takenoshita, 2023), their demographic has diversified, including more workers over 55 (López-Igual *et al*., 2020). Telework is seen as a potential solution for extending workforce participation beyond 65 (Arvola *et al*., 2017), though older workers may struggle with adapting to digital tools (Sharit *et al*., 2009).

Generally, the literature on telework has highlighted its positive effects on work-life balance (Sengupta *et al*., 2024; Azarbouyeh and Naini, 2014), while also noting its tendency to blur work-life boundaries, which can increase burnout (Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė *et al*., 2023). It has been argued that telework reinforces the "flexibility paradox" (Chung, 2022), namely the tendency of workers to overwork and self-exploit by working longer and harder when they have greater control over their work location and hours. This body of research has also emphasised the impact of telework in reinforcing gender inequalities, especially regarding caring for children (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Romens *et al*., 2024). However, these studies have not distinguished the experiences of workers according to their age and generational position. What impact does telework have on older workers' quality of life, particularly on how they balance work with other aspects of living?

In this paper, we contend that telework has a specific effect on the quality of life for people aged 55 and older, as it alters how they balance paid work with other aspects of life, which may include particular care responsibilities. Indeed, several older workers are concerned with the "sandwich generation" phenomenon (DeRigne and Ferrante, 2012; Burke, 2017), meaning that they carry dual caregiving duties for both ageing family members and children (and eventually grandchildren). The article concentrates on the Italian context, which offers a compelling case due to its ageing population, delayed adoption of telework, and familistic welfare model. In this respect, the ageing population represents a significant challenge of the 21st century, affecting the sustainability of pension systems and welfare services (Ciminelli *et al*., 2024), and this is particularly true in Italy, as it is the world's second-oldest country. Italy confronts notable demographic issues stemming from declining birth rates (Istat, 2023) and economic instability (Billari, 2023). With the retirement age rising to 67, employment among those over 55 is expected to reach 73.2% within 40 years (Bozzao, 2022), requiring policy adjustments to support ageing populations. Italy's familistic welfare model depends heavily on unpaid care work from family networks, especially women (Saraceno, 2016; Zamberletti *et al*., 2018). The young population faces a labour market crisis, which contributes to the cycle of poverty across generations (D'Agostino and Regoli, 2013). Many young people live with their parents and remain financially dependent even after leaving home (Hämäläinen and Tanskanen, 2021). This support across generations is particularly evident in Italy, where older adults continue to assist their adult children, impacting their retirement and work-life balance (van den Berg *et al*., 2021).

Additionally, Italy is known for its late adoption of telework, which grew from 500,000 workers in 2019 to 7 million during the pandemic, then stabilised at 2.8 million in hybrid work after the pandemic (Istat, 2024). Recent labour market data further emphasise the urgency of our inquiry. According toAge Platform Europe (2023), only 61.5% of Italians aged 50–64 are employed, well below the EU average of 68.8%. At the same time, Italy's quaternary sector—including information technology, media, research and development, and other knowledge-intensive services—now accounts for roughly one-third of national employment and is expected to expand as remote work models become ingrained.

Although we recognise that ageing is a social construct that is context-specific and subjective (Mortimer and Moen, 2016), our study focuses on a specific age group of workers, individuals aged 55–65 years (late Baby Boomers and Gen X), following established cohort frameworks (Mannheim, 1952; Howe and Strauss, 1992). This generational perspective helps us interpret how cohort-specific labour market experiences and values influence the adoption

of telework as both a work–life balance strategy and, potentially, a "quiet quitting" tactic. Our analysis is based on empirical data collected through in-depth interviews with stakeholders and teleworkers from the Milan quaternary sector in 2024. This economic sector includes information technology, media, research and development, and information- and knowledge-based services. It is especially relevant to analyse this phenomenon, as many jobs within this sector are desk-based and can be performed remotely (Hatayama *et al*., 2023).

Fieldwork was conducted in Milan, Italy's hub for the quaternary sector (Bigatti, 2022). The study adopted a qualitative approach, focusing on the experiences of senior teleworkers and their work-life balance. The article is organised into five sections. After the introduction (1), we outline the context and the debate surrounding the issue (2). The next section concentrates on the methods (3), followed by an analysis of the empirical material (4), and concludes with a discussion of the results and the authors' considerations regarding policy interventions and future research (5).

Telework and the changing balance between work and life: generational and gender perspectives

The recent surge in telework, driven by the pandemic, has dramatically transformed working conditions for millions in Italy. As schools and childcare facilities closed, the initial lockdown compelled workers capable of teleworking to perform their jobs from home, which significantly impacted women's employment (Goglio and Vercelli, 2022). Studies (e.g. Manzo and Minello, 2020) show that gender inequalities worsened during the pandemic, yet the focus has mainly been on younger and adult groups, often neglecting older active workers. The shift to home-based work has placed a significant burden on women, who often bear the brunt of balancing paid employment and caregiving responsibilities in a culture rooted in traditional roles (Goglio and Vercelli, 2022). Even when both partners worked from home, family chores frequently fell disproportionately on women (Del Boca, 2022). These issues reveal both temporal and spatial challenges in harmonising work with family life (Betti, 2022) and managing living environments (Piro, 2024). Economic disparities have resulted in unequal home-based work conditions, with less privileged workers often confined to smaller living spaces with limited resources compared to those in larger, better-equipped homes (Paone, 2022).

Working and living conditions have evolved since the pandemic, shifting from enforced teleworking to hybrid models that combine on-site and home work. Teleworking introduces new challenges and prompts questions. While some studies suggest that teleworking can lead to overwork and self-exploitation (Chung, 2022), many employees appreciate the flexibility it offers (Sewell and Taskin, 2015). Research focusing on the employer's viewpoint has mainly explored the organisational implications of remote work, particularly managerial strategies for monitoring and controlling employees working from home (Felstead *et al*., 2003). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the organisational consequences of remote work adoption (Wheatley *et al*., 2024), organisational readiness to confront the challenges posed by such changes (Carbonara *et al*., 2023; Steil and Barcia, 2000, Shah and Manna, 2020), the diversity of managerial strategies in telework management (Azizi *et al*., 2021), and the often positive and significant effects of teleworking on job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Alshibly and Alzubi, 2022). While these contributions offer valuable insights into the organisational dimensions of remote work, they often overlook the age-specific needs and experiences of older workers.

Scholars investigating this topic have highlighted the significant potential of teleworking to promote the employment of older workers, owing to several key factors. These include increased flexibility—particularly regarding working hours—the capacity to better accommodate the physical and personal needs of older employees (such as reducing the stress linked to commuting), and the decreased exposure to age-related discrimination, as performance outcomes tend to be valued more than physical presence or appearance (Patrickson, 2002; Sharit *et al*., 2009). As such, home-based work has been recognised as a potentially effective approach

to tackling the demographic challenges caused by an ageing workforce. However, persistent managerial biases about older workers persist, especially regarding their digital literacy and willingness to adopt new work practices (Loretto and White, 2006; Sharit *et al*., 2009; Taylor and Walker, 1998). These assumptions are frequently challenged by empirical research, which consistently shows that older workers often outperform their younger counterparts in remote work settings, particularly in terms of reliability, consistency, and autonomy (Martin *et al*., 2021; Sharit *et al*., 2009; Taylor and Walker, 1998).

Additionally, the pandemic has worsened work-life imbalance issues, prompting workers to question the role of work in their lives and contributing to "quiet quitting" (Öztürk *et al*., 2023; Johnson, 2023). The term describes when employees limit their work efforts to the minimum required, refusing overtime or tasks not specified in their contract (Alfes *et al*., 2022). Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that excessive supervisory control in remote settings can trigger "counterproductive work behaviour", such as employees deliberately ignoring managerial communications or engaging in passive resistance (Liang *et al*., 2024). We can thus question to what extent telework, while seemingly encouraging overwork, may also be—or already be—used as a quiet quitting strategy.

According to the literature, the practice of quiet quitting varies significantly across different generations of workers. A study by Hamilton *et al*. (2023) highlights differences in how various generational groups have adjusted their working hours following the pandemic. Notably, Generation Z and Millennials have experienced the most substantial decreases in hours worked, indicating a clear trend towards quiet quitting among younger employees. In contrast, Generation X and Baby Boomers have shown more moderate changes, with Baby Boomers even suggesting a potential return to pre-pandemic working hours. Therefore, individuals aged 55–65 years or older are expected to be less impacted by the quiet quitting phenomenon. Some authors argue that implementing human resource management practices that promote flexibility and work-life balance, such as teleworking, is an effective strategy for retaining highly employable older employees (Martin *et al*., 2021). However, there is a lack of studies exploring this issue, particularly regarding how telework might be utilised (or not) by older workers as a quiet quitting strategy. More broadly, a current analysis of work-life balance requires shifting focus and integrating gender and class perspectives with a generational outlook: a more senior workforce faces different burdens and responsibilities, especially in a familistic system like Italy's, where care for both young children and older adults is often a family network responsibility. As noted, many senior workers are affected by the "sandwich generation" phenomenon, being "squeezed in the middle" between caring for older parents and children (and eventually grandchildren). This dual role often leads to significant financial, emotional, and physical strain as they aim to balance the needs of both older and younger family members (Hämäläinen and Tanskanen, 2021). The sandwich generation faces a major challenge, since they are not yet of retirement age, which complicates managing caregiving duties alongside professional commitments. What role does telework play in helping them manage these responsibilities?

Method

The study involved 24 participants interviewed between November 2023 and May 2024. It included 18 narrative interviews with individuals aged 55 to 62 working in the quaternary sector (see Table 1) and six semi-structured interviews with gatekeepers, including three HR managers and three union representatives from their respective companies. The gatekeepers were not included in the demographic analysis and are not shown in Table 1.

The average age of the remote workers interviewed is 59. Thirteen participants live with a partner, one has a non-cohabiting partner, and four women reported not having a partner. Regarding children, thirteen interviewees have at least one child living with them. The ages of their children range from 13 to 32 years, and four workers have at least one underage child. None of the interviewees are grandparents. Seven participants report having caregiving responsibilities related to their older parents or in-laws, while four indicate they have at least

Table 1. Teleworking research participants

Fictitious name	Age	Job	Gender	Children
Emanuela	62	Sales/marketing	F	No
Rosanna	62	Project manager	F	1 child (14 y.o)
Sergio	62	General manager	M	3 children (32, 29, 26 y.o)
Riccardo	61	Complaints office	M	2 children (13, 14 y.o)
Mario	60	Business analyst	M	2 children (23, 27 y.o)
Pietro	60	Digital services maintenance	M	2 children (28, 23 y.o)
Silvia	60	Sales director	F	1 child (32 y.o)
Giorgio	59	Information security manager	M	3 children
Cosimo	59	CEO	M	3 children (27, 25, 18 y.o)
Davide	58	Project analyst/web designer	M	No
Enza	58	Complaints office	F	No
Alberto	58	Temporary CFO	M	2 children (25, 27 y.o)
Remo	57	Web developer	M	No
Alessandra	57	Supply chain coordinator	F	2 children (24, 25 y.o)
Francesca	57	Business consultant	F	2 children (19, 14 y.o)
Monica	56	Sales manager	F	2 children (13, 16 y.o)
Olga	55	Liquidation officer	F	2 children (22, 26 y.o)
Mariasole	55	HR	F	No

Source(s): Authors' elaboration

one dependent, non-self-sufficient parent. On average, participants have 25 years of experience in their current jobs, and most ($N = 15$) telework at least three days a week. Among the 18 narrative interviewees, thirteen hold managerial responsibilities (e.g. project managers, team leaders, or general managers), reflecting the high level of professional seniority common in the quaternary sector. Regarding education, nine hold a university degree, and another nine possess a high school diploma. For more details, see Table 1.

The research employed an interpretive, narrative design. Narrative inquiry, based on the belief that individuals make sense of their lives through storytelling (Andrews *et al.*, 2009), was chosen as it offers a method for examining and understanding personal experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004). An interview framework was developed to elicit narratives, focusing on four main dimensions: the impact of telework during the emergency phase and post-pandemic, the intersection of telework and caregiving responsibilities, participants' relationships with digital technology, and their support networks within and outside their families.

The interviews were transcribed in full and anonymised. The empirical data were analysed using thematic analysis, focusing on the language used by participants to express their experiences with remote work and digital technology. Data categorisation was carried out based on emerging patterns, using NVivo-14 software for coding. The researcher who conducted the interviews performed the initial coding independently, after which the other members of the research group reviewed the codes to ensure credibility and intersubjectivity. To improve the trustworthiness and interpretative depth of the analysis, we carried out member checking by sharing preliminary themes and interpretations with a subset of participants for validation and feedback. Reflexive journaling by the lead researcher and peer debriefing sessions among the research team were conducted throughout the analysis to reduce bias and ensure transparency. Through this process, thematic elements within the data were identified, connections explored, and their prevalence assessed.

Results

In the following section, we explore three topics that emerged during interviews and illustrate how telework affects the work-life balance of older workers: (1) the aspects of telework's

impact on older workers' work-life balance that mirror findings related to other age groups, (2) how telework helps manage the specific caregiving responsibilities of older teleworkers affected by the "sandwich generation" phenomenon, and (3) the particular ways in which telework interacts with perceptions of working longevity and patterns of "quiet quitting".

Teleworking impact on work-life balance across age groups

Most interviewees embraced the new hybrid work policies, which combined teleworking and on-site work. In Italy's quaternary sector, this usually meant working remotely for two-thirds of the weekly hours and on-site for one-third. Davide, a 58-year-old web designer, states:

> Let's see it as a great chance to balance work and personal life. As I mentioned before, I feel discomfort due to commuting difficulties at my age. The change can be overwhelming, especially when I have to use public transport in the morning.

In line with research focusing on other age groups (Maheshwari *et al*., 2024), results indicate that senior workers value telework for the time saved from commuting (Patrickson, 2002). Davide notes that commuting can be burdensome for his age group, while Emanuela, a 62-year-old marketing specialist, appreciates having fewer office days, which reduces the commuting strain and helps her feel more in control of her time.

> [Hybrid work] is a very efficient blend, almost perfect, because it removes the daily routine of commuting to the office, doing repetitive tasks, and losing time—starting from getting ready in the morning to appear presentable, interacting with colleagues, and commuting itself. In my case, the journey isn't very long but still exists, involving driving, etc. So, the chance to stay at home and almost enjoy it, having already spent two days working remotely and looking forward to going to the office on the third day . . .

Emanuela values the hybrid work model for its productivity, flexibility, and comfort, considering office days as a choice that improves her work-life balance. These outcomes align with the findings reported in the existing literature (Patrickson, 2002; Sharit *et al*., 2009). Similarly, Francesca, a 57-year-old business consultant and mother of two children (19 and 14 years old), mentions that working from home several days a week has lessened her weekend household chores.

> I might start the washing machine, let it finish, and then hang the laundry. While this may seem minor, it's not always easy for a worker to focus on these tasks daily. Furthermore, the stress of trying to fit everything in over the weekend can be overwhelming. I believe that maintaining a good balance is essential.

Finally, Riccardo, a 61-year-old claims adjuster with two young children, shares how telework has enabled him to regain his time.

> If one day the management were to say, "Enough with telework", I must admit that considering the solidarity fund [for early retirement] would become quite significant. I would carefully review the details of the upcoming offers to gauge their viability.

In this excerpt, Riccardo expresses concern about the potential end of telework, which might lead him to consider early retirement. Many interviewees have noted that flexibility and reclaiming time are significant advantages of telework. This raises questions about the applicability of Chung's flexibility paradox (2022) to older workers. For instance, Mario, a 60-year-old business analyst with adult children, claims that working from home increases his productivity, as eliminating commute time allows him to work longer hours.

> Let's say COVID-19 was a major turning point that compelled us to work from home. Since then, I have done so quite willingly because productivity has increased. You often work well past regular hours because you're at home, and you think, "I don't have to worry about the weather or commuting time," so you end up dedicating more time than before.

As highlighted for other age groups, Mario's experience underscores that telework flexibility can lead to excessive working hours, as the blurred lines between work and home make it difficult for employees to disconnect (Chung, 2022; Golden, 2009). The belief that saved commuting time allows for more work often results in longer hours rather than increased productivity. Nevertheless, participants in our study generally view this additional workload positively, as it enhances their sense of autonomy and flexibility, aligning with Chung's findings (Pacetti *et al*., 2023). Pietro, a 60-year-old digital services technician with two adult children, shares a similar perspective, noting that the presence of colleagues in the office can be distracting and time-consuming:

> When working from home, I start at 8:30 a.m. and finish at 8:30 p.m. In the office, my commute takes about an hour, sometimes up to an hour and fifteen minutes if I leave at 8 a.m. I aim to leave the office early enough to get home by 8 p.m. Due to frequent interruptions from colleagues, I estimate my efficiency at around 60 percent.

As with other age groups, telework also appears to have a dual-edged nature for older workers. It enhances productivity and personal freedom but also raises the risk of overworking due to the lack of boundaries provided by office environments (Chung, 2022). Employees might work longer hours, yet this flexibility can improve well-being and job satisfaction (Sewell and Taskin, 2015; Alshibly and Alzubi, 2022). Interviewees recognised that the time usually spent commuting is often redirected to work, as Riccardo noted:

> I try to remain mindful of this; I don't want to spend too much time on the company. I mean, I am more comfortable with the flexible hours, but fundamentally, I try not to overdo it.

Francesca, on the other hand, explains why she chose to become a consultant and adopted flexible working hours long before teleworking became widespread, emphasising that the guarantee of flexibility was a key factor in her decision.

> I ended up doing this job because, when I was young, I couldn't accept the idea of working all day. After all, you do end up working all day. You get home in the evening, have dinner, and then, if you manage to stay awake for a few hours, you collapse into bed, and the next day is the same. I couldn't accept that this kind of life would produce people who were not happy with their work. If most of your hours are spent doing something you're not satisfied with, what kind of life is that?

The latter excerpt expresses deep dissatisfaction with the traditional work structure, where long hours at the office leave little room for personal time, resulting in a cycle of exhaustion and unhappiness. This sentiment echoes a common critique of the conventional 9-to-5 work model (Rathee and Sharma, 2024), which consumes most of the waking hours, leaving scant time for personal fulfilment or relaxation. Francesca's rejection of this lifestyle highlights the importance of finding a work arrangement that balances both professional satisfaction and personal well-being. After highlighting some commonalities regarding how older workers and other age groups perceive the impact of telework on their work-life balance, we propose to focus on how this entanglement specifically affects the experience of workers over 55.

Sandwich generation and teleworking

As previously mentioned, older workers often have specific caregiving responsibilities, possibly due to the "sandwich generation" phenomenon, which refers to the obligation to care for both their elderly parents and their children. In our sample, most research participants reported having caregiving duties, including caring for young children ($N = 4$) and older parents ($N = 8$). The majority of interviewees expressed that the ability to work remotely was extremely helpful in managing these responsibilities. Enza, a 58-year-old claims adjuster, explains that she cares for her non-self-sufficient parents every day. Additionally, she occasionally looks after her nephew, who has been diagnosed with autism. Enza considers herself both her parents' caregiver and a very involved aunt. When discussing the challenge of

balancing her caregiving responsibilities with her work duties, she mentions that if she had not been able to telework, she likely would have had to quit her job to take care of her parents:

> Then, in June 2020, the issue with my parents arose, and from that moment, I found myself taking care of them . . . I only come home to sleep and sometimes to work because when I know they're not well, I transfer my computer to their house . . . Thank goodness for remote work! Otherwise, there would have been more days absent than at work.

Similarly, Riccardo, who has two children in secondary school, explains how teleworking facilitates parenting:

> You prepare lunch, which saves on babysitting and gives you more time with your children—something I consider essential. Now that I am older, I value this more; it allows you to do things you couldn't do when working in an office [. . .] My spouse and I both work in the quaternary sector, so we take turns with our office days to suit our daughters' needs and to avoid working from the same kitchen table at home.

Monica, a 56-year-old sales manager with two young children and a non-self-sufficient father, shares her experience of negotiating a different percentage of telework.

> I work in the office only one day a week because I have considerable family responsibilities. I have two young children, and I am also a carer for my father. Being at home allows me to manage the needs of both my children and my father, which I cannot do while I am in the office.

Many employees extend their working hours while working from home, yet they take more breaks and Step away from the screen comfortably. Remo, a 57-year-old web manager, notes:

> My mother is nearly ninety years old, so I can check on her and provide support if needed. Overall, I feel much freer and better off. For instance, I have a dog, and if I need to take him out at 12:30, I can easily do so. If I were in the office, that wouldn't be possible.

Remo finds that working from home boosts focus by reducing distractions, but this often results in longer hours and less social interaction. Despite the extra hours, he values the flexibility to take breaks for personal duties, such as caring for his mother or taking his dog for a walk. This balance enhances his overall well-being by effectively blending work and personal life (Mahler, 2012).

The interview excerpts highlight the significant effects of telework on individuals with caring responsibilities in different scenarios. Enza discusses how telework allows her to care for her ailing parents while maintaining job performance. Riccardo shares that working from home enables him and his wife to spend more time with their children and save on babysitting costs, although it places additional caring duties on parents. Monica describes her flexible arrangement, with only one day on-site, which supports her in managing care for both her children and her elderly father as a divorced parent. Beyond the practical aspect of managing time and saving money by not paying for private care services, the interviews revealed an intriguing perspective from experienced employees with 20–25 years of service. They expressed a desire to focus more on their families and personal well-being, feeling that they have already dedicated their prime years to their careers and are now seeking a change in priorities. For instance, Rosanna, a 62-year-old project manager, describes the delicate balance between caring for her teenage daughter and her elderly mother and work, explicitly talking about a shift in priorities she attributes to her age.

> My current priorities are my family, especially my daughter, who is entering adolescence. I also care for my 91-year-old mother, who is alone and has health issues. While work remains important to me, I am beginning to shift my focus to these personal responsibilities. Honestly, if teleworking were no longer an option, I would consider early retirement.

The quote reflects the shifting priorities of older employees, with Rosanna emphasising her current commitments: caring for her 14-year-old daughter and older mother, highlighting the

difficulties of managing both generational needs simultaneously. She presents a balanced view of work, recognising its importance while also considering the possibility of retiring early if telework arrangements were no longer available. This demonstrates the significant impact that flexible working arrangements, such as telework, have on individuals balancing caregiving responsibilities in later stages of their careers (Clar-Novak, 2024).

Work longevity and quiet quitting patterns

Our fieldwork highlights that telework is being used as a form of quiet quitting, particularly by senior and pre-senior workers, contrasting the studies that suggest these workers are less involved in this practice (Hamilton *et al*., 2023). In our research, quiet quitting is especially evident in respondents' renewed focus on personal fulfilment and well-being over work. This shift reflects a broader cultural change where workers increasingly prioritise work-life balance and individual satisfaction rather than traditional measures of productivity and long hours. Therefore, understanding the nuanced generational differences is essential to fully grasp the impact and consequences of quiet quitting in today's labour landscape. In Italy, where the retirement age has been progressively increased to 67 years in the quaternary sector at the time of the research, many older workers found themselves working longer than previous generations, as Rosanna notes when comparing her generation's situation to her father's earlier retirement.

> I want to enjoy my time a bit more. At sixty-two, it's about time. I remember my father when he retired; he was probably six or seven years younger than I am now, and so . . . of course, those were different times . . . But the truth is, when my parents were my age, they were enjoying life. They were always out and about, travelling and doing things, while we still feel somewhat stuck here.

The extended working period caused by delayed retirement can increase fatigue and lead to a tendency towards quiet quitting as individuals focus on reclaiming personal time and family life. This change in priorities, particularly among older workers (Choi *et al*., 2018), emphasises the need for policies that support their well-being and encourage a balanced approach to work as retirement nears (Stynen *et al*., 2017). The sentiment of a sixty-two-year-old interviewee wishing for more personal time reflects this broader trend for improved work-life balance. Among our interviewees, Francesca, a business consultant, discussed work longevity, stating:

> To maintain the skills of individuals aged 55 and over until retirement, it's essential to explore new approaches. Incentives for a 55-year-old differ considerably from those for younger workers. While a 30-year-old seeks career progression and recognition, a 55-year-old often values the prestige they have gained and concentrates on self-fulfilment and mentoring others. Understanding these differences is vital for motivation in the workplace.

Francesca's insights closely reflect Italy's current demographic and economic challenges. As the country faces low birth rates and an ageing population (Istat, 2023; Agnese *et al*., 2024), increasing the retirement age to 67 requires finding effective ways to retain and motivate older workers. She emphasises the importance of tailoring incentives and welfare benefits to suit the specific needs of employees aged 55 and over.

Some interviewees ($N = 6$) indicated a shift in their priorities after long careers, opting for temporary roles to maintain professional engagement and flexibility. For example, Alberto, a 58-year-old former temporary chief financial officer (CFO) with adult children, moved from a stable position to self-employment, accepting contracts lasting between 3 and 9 months to assist companies with restructuring. He shared insights about his decision:

> Then, my personal life intersected with my professional one. My children graduated and began working, so I also wanted to find something that interested me more, that I enjoyed more, and that demanded slightly less effort. Now, I am quite pleased with this solution. It is delivering the desired results.

Alberto's decision to move from a secure CFO role to a temporary one reflects older professionals' desire to balance personal fulfilment with career goals. In a cultural context where adult children often stay at home until they find stability around age 30 (Cuzzocrea, 2024), this shift demonstrates a trend towards adaptable career paths that suit changing family situations and personal satisfaction.

The following excerpt is from an interview with Silvia, a 60-year-old sales director who chose to leave her stable position as a general manager to look after her elderly parents. She then began working as a freelancer, taking on short-term contracts similar to Alberto's, to gain greater flexibility in caring for her parents.

> I am an only child and a widow. I had to care for my parents after a serious accident my father had in September, which caused many complications for him, now ninety-two. My mother also developed serious health issues as a result. I chose to prioritise my family and decided to devote myself to their care.

The preceding quotes indicate that individuals aged 55 and over, including pre-senior teleworkers, might choose flexible employment as an alternative to early retirement or sudden exits from the workforce. Although these roles may involve a decrease in salary and limited career progression, they better align with the necessity to prioritise personal well-being and to meet caregiving responsibilities for ageing parents.

Discussion and conclusions

This study examines the impact of telework on the work-life balance of older workers, an important issue given the simultaneous rise of an ageing workforce and the increasing prevalence of telework. As these trends continue to evolve, understanding their intersection becomes ever more relevant for policy and organisational practice. Italy, which has long had one of the lowest birth rates in the EU (Istat, 2023), is experiencing the impacts of a declining birth rate and an ageing population on its labour force and the financial sustainability of its pension systems (Agnese *et al.*, 2024). To address these interconnected challenges, the country is increasing the retirement age from 65 to 67. In parallel, the specific structure of the Italian familistic welfare system, combined with the ongoing rise in the retirement age, has positioned Baby Boomers as the "sandwich generation" (DeRigne and Ferrante, 2012; Burke, 2017), caught between the dual caregiving responsibilities for their older relatives, who are often non-self-sufficient, and their children, who are delaying their departure from the family home. While the "sandwich generation" traditionally refers to this dual caregiving role regardless of work status, the rising retirement age means that those in this group must now balance these caregiving responsibilities with longer years in employment. Teleworking may, therefore, influence the work-life balance of older individuals by reshaping how they manage the increasing challenge of combining paid work with caregiving and other aspects of their lives.

Our fieldwork highlights three main issues concerning the spread of telework among older workers and how it affects their work-life balance. First, we emphasise the similarities with other age groups, as our interviewees value telework, and one of the most appreciated aspects is the opportunity it provides to save on commuting time. However, like younger workers and as stressed in the literature (Chung, 2022), persons over 55 are not exempt from the risk of overwork and self-exploitation when working remotely. They also perceive that they improve their "productivity" when teleworking, although this increase is often linked to a rise in the number of hours spent working.

Second, we have highlighted specific aspects of the impact of telework on this age group's work-life balance: older workers feel that telework helps them manage their caring responsibilities by allowing them to look after children and older parents. This point is highly valued by our interviewees, who appreciate the chance to spend time with family members. However, from a broader perspective, it must be recognised that this use of telework could also lead to a re-familiarisation of care work, meaning that, although families might save money by

not paying for private services, unpaid care work increasingly falls on them and on individuals who find it difficult to balance paid work with caring duties, rather than having care more evenly distributed within the community through public systems services. These findings align with previous research on teleworking parents (Hardwick and Salaff, 1997; Parker *et al*., 2023; Romens *et al*., 2024), emphasising that families use telework to make up for limited care policies, which often reinforce the existing division of care responsibilities within families (Recchi *et al*., 2025). When telework is used to help individuals care for their children, older parents, grandchildren, and other non-self-sufficient individuals, it effectively shifts the responsibility burden from public policies to company welfare policies or organisational structures. This is concerning, especially as telework opportunities are often restricted to certain groups of workers, creating significant inequality. Furthermore, this approach may reinforce the traditional social division of care work (Romens *et al*., 2024), which in Italy mainly falls on women, whether they are working or not, but also on persons aged 55 and older (both men and women, according to our sample) (Zamberletti *et al*., 2018).

The third theme emerging from our findings is perhaps the most unexpected, as it contradicts existing literature. Hamilton *et al*. (2023) argue that the phenomenon of "quiet quitting" has been mainly confined to younger groups in the UK, with Generation X and Baby Boomers showing only slight changes in work engagement. However, in our Milan-based sample of quaternary-sector teleworkers during and immediately after the COVID-19 period, older workers also report adopting strategies aimed at restoring balance in their lives and resisting work intrusions. These behaviours seem to come not only from sandwich-generation caregiving duties but also from a wider re-evaluation of priorities that emphasises non-professional life. Therefore, "quiet quitting" might be particularly relevant for highly skilled workers aged 50 and above. Additionally, in line with Martin *et al*. (2021), these employees often perceive limited external employability and value work-life balance more than career progression. As a result, they respond more favourably to HR practices that enhance flexibility—such as teleworking, flexible schedules, and work-life initiatives. While their overall intention to leave is generally lower, pre-senior workers are more sensitive to organisational support and flexible HR policies than their younger colleagues. It is important to note that these findings are context-specific: they reflect employees in Milan's knowledge-intensive services at a time when remote work had recently increased. Hamilton and colleagues' longitudinal analysis of UK working-hour trends from 2007 to 2022 shows how the pandemic intensified existing shifts towards flexible—and sometimes boundary-erosive—work practices. Our findings align with this broader trend of intensification, but they also show that older workers use telework strategically as a "quiet quitting" tactic rather than just as a perk of flexibility.

The role of telework in this context remains ambiguous. Consistent with Chung's (2022) "flexibility paradox", our respondents confirm that remote work can both improve well-being (through saved commuting time and greater control) and increase the risk of overwork and self-exploitation. Importantly, they also view telework as a way to keep work within defined boundaries—or even as an alternative to early retirement—highlighting that older teleworkers are neither immune to overwork nor to employing quiet-quitting strategies. As Europe's workforce ages and statutory retirement ages increase, our findings from this specific Milanese setting point to the urgent need for inclusive policies and organisational support that harness telework's benefits while protecting older workers' well-being.

To put our findings into a broader perspective, it is important to consider the specificities of our sample. Although our respondents were selected solely based on age and access to telework, they are all workers with positions of responsibility, successful careers, and high levels of education. It is no coincidence that issues such as the challenge of digital training or the need to become familiar with IT tools did not arise during the interviews. However, these factors must be taken into account when assessing the generalisability of our findings and considering their policy implications (Sala *et al*., 2022). Furthermore, in our research, we did not observe a significant imbalance in care duties between men and women, likely for two

reasons: firstly, all our participants were aged 55 and above, and none had newborns or toddlers—the stages of parenthood where the disparity in caregiving responsibilities between mothers and fathers is generally most pronounced (Hertz *et al*., 2021); and secondly, the caregiving tasks in our sample were mainly centred on supporting older parents, which appeared to be more evenly distributed across genders.

In conclusion, our study makes an original contribution by focusing on telework among older workers—late Baby Boomers and Generation X—in a Southern European, familistic welfare context that has been overlooked in the literature. By applying a generational perspective to Milan's quaternary sector, we demonstrate that older teleworkers not only manage the "flexibility paradox" but also strategically employ "quiet quitting" to protect non-professional life, challenging the idea that this phenomenon is limited to younger cohorts. From a macro-social policy perspective, Italy's rising retirement age, persistently low employment rate for those aged 50–64 (61.5% compared to the 68.8% EU average), and heavy dependence on family-based elder care highlight the need for systemic supports—such as telework subsidies, elder-care credits, and digital-training initiatives—to sustain older workers' participation and well-being.

Finally, while telework can replace some in-person care services, it also risks worsening inequalities between those who can telework and those who cannot, and it may unintentionally raise unpaid care burdens on older workers. Future research should investigate different sectors and regional policy environments to identify which combinations of macro-social policies and managerial strategies best promote inclusive, sustainable telework models for an ageing workforce.

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