



**Politecnico  
di Torino**

Politecnico di Torino

Master of Science in Management and Engineering  
Specialization in Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Master of Science Thesis

# **Working Time Flexibility as Organisational Innovation**

Structural Constraints and Role Differences in the Electricity Sector

Supervisor:

Prof. Matteo Tubiana

Candidate:

Simone Terranova

Academic Year

2025/2026



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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, modes of work organisation have undergone profound transformations, accelerated by digitalisation, the diffusion of collaborative technologies and, most significantly, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. The possibility of performing work activities in different locations and at different times compared to traditional models has challenged consolidated organisational arrangements, fuelling a broad and multifaceted debate on the future of work and on the most effective forms of coordination and human resource management.

Within this debate, working time and workplace flexibility have frequently been presented as levers of organisational modernisation. Instruments such as smart working, flexible working arrangements, compressed workweeks and experiments in working time reduction have often been interpreted as signals of a transition towards more agile, inclusive and sustainable models. At the same time, growing attention to employee wellbeing, work-life balance and gender equality has reinforced the idea that intervening in working time arrangements may generate joint benefits in terms of productivity, organisational attractiveness and quality of life.

However, the diffusion of flexible working practices does not necessarily imply a structural transformation of organisational models. In some contexts, such interventions have resulted in a profound revision of coordination mechanisms, control systems and performance evaluation processes; in others, they appear to have assumed a predominantly adaptive configuration, being layered onto pre-existing structures without altering their underlying logics. In this sense, a central theoretical and managerial question emerges: does modifying working time genuinely amount to introducing organisational innovation?

This thesis is situated within this debate and seeks to examine whether, and under what conditions, changes in working time arrangements may be configured as a form of organisational innovation. Particular attention is devoted to the temporal dimension of work, considered not merely as a quantitative variable measurable in hours, but as a structuring organisational device through which interdependencies are defined, responsibilities are allocated, coordination is ensured and forms of control are established.

The research focuses on the Italian electricity sector, a context characterised by high operational intensity, strong technical interdependence, strict service continuity

requirements and a significant presence of roles organised through shift systems. These characteristics make the sector particularly relevant for the proposed analysis: in highly critical operational environments, working time does not simply represent a managerial variable but constitutes a central component of organisational architecture. For this reason, the electricity sector can be interpreted as a “critical case”, in which tensions between stability requirements and attempts at transformation become especially visible.

The objective of this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to analytically reconstruct how working time and workplace flexibility are interpreted and practised within organisations in the electricity sector, highlighting differences between operational and non-operational roles. On the other hand, it seeks to assess whether such changes lead to a substantial redefinition of organisational mechanisms or whether they remain confined to incremental adjustments primarily oriented towards improving organisational climate and human resource management.

The adopted approach combines a critical review of the international literature on working time flexibility and organisational innovation with a qualitative empirical analysis based on semi-structured interviews conducted within companies operating in the electricity sector and, from a comparative perspective, in organisations active in other industries. This research design allows the empirical evidence to be systematically compared with the theoretical framework, identifying convergences, divergences and potential original contributions to the academic debate.

The thesis is structured into four chapters. The first chapter defines the conceptual framework of working time and workplace flexibility, examining their main configurations and organisational implications. The second chapter deepens the discussion on organisational innovation, questioning whether changes in working time arrangements can be considered a transformative lever. The third chapter presents the research design and outlines the methods adopted for data collection and analysis. The fourth chapter discusses the empirical findings, compares them with the existing literature and highlights the organisational implications that emerge from the analysis. The conclusions summarise the main results, discuss the study’s limitations and outline possible avenues for future research.

In a context where flexibility is often assumed to be synonymous with innovation, this thesis adopts a more cautious and problem-oriented analytical stance, empirically

examining whether the transformation of working time arrangements represents a genuine redefinition of organisational models or rather a recalibration of existing structures.

## PREFACE

This thesis adopts an analytical perspective rooted in organisational and innovation studies, interpreting working time and workplace flexibility not as a neutral set of managerial practices, but as a potential lever for organisational transformation.

In contemporary debate, interventions such as flexible working arrangements, compressed workweeks or hybrid work models are often portrayed as indicators of modernisation and innovation. However, the equivalence between formal change and organisational innovation cannot be taken for granted. Organisational innovation, in a substantive sense, implies a redefinition of coordination mechanisms, accountability structures, control systems and the underlying logics through which value is created and distributed within the organisation. Modifying working time arrangements does not, in itself, automatically generate such transformation.

From this standpoint, working time is conceptualised as a structuring organisational dimension. It should not be understood merely as a quantitative variable measured in hours worked, but as a device through which interdependencies are stabilised, activities are synchronised, responsibilities are allocated and expectations of availability are defined. Intervening in working time arrangements therefore potentially entails intervening in organisational architecture itself.

The thesis consequently adopts a problem-oriented stance: rather than assuming that temporal flexibility equates to innovation, it empirically investigates its conditions of applicability, structural constraints and concrete effects across different organisational roles. Particular attention is devoted to the distinction between operational and non-operational roles, based on the assumption that the possibility of redefining working time is not evenly distributed within organisations, but is strongly conditioned by the nature of tasks performed and the degree of technical interdependence.

The choice of the Italian electricity sector as the empirical context follows a theoretical rather than a statistical logic. The sector is characterised by strict operational constraints, service continuity requirements, high safety standards and a significant presence of shift-based work. In such a setting, working time plays a central role in ensuring system stability. For this reason, the electricity sector constitutes a particularly suitable setting in

which to examine whether, and to what extent, changes in working time arrangements can translate into genuine organisational transformation.

From a methodological perspective, the research adopts a qualitative exploratory approach based on semi-structured interviews and systematic comparison with the existing literature. The aim is not to produce statistical generalisations, but to reconstruct the organisational logics underlying flexible working practices and to understand the tensions between operational stability and pressures for change.

Finally, it is important to clarify that this thesis does not adopt a normative position either in favour of or against working time flexibilisation. Its purpose is not to evaluate such practices ideologically, but to critically examine their organisational scope. In a context in which flexibility is frequently celebrated as synonymous with progress, this study seeks to distinguish between incremental adaptation and structural innovation, empirically assessing whether and when transformations in working time arrangements lead to a substantive rethinking of organisational models.

# **Chapter 1 - Flexibility of time and place of work: conceptual framework**

## 1.1 Flexibility of work: definitions and dimensions

### 1.1.1 The flexibility of work in the contemporary organisational debate

In the contemporary organisational debate, work flexibility has gradually emerged as one of the central themes for interpreting changes in organisational models and ways of designing work. Attention to flexibility has developed in parallel with broader processes of organisational restructuring, linked to the increasing complexity of production contexts, the spread of digital technologies and the redefinition of the boundaries between work and non-work (Schwarzmüller et al., 2018).

In this context, flexibility is no longer seen solely as a contingent response to external needs, but as a structural component of the organisation of work. Numerous contributions highlight how flexibilisation practices affect the way in which work is coordinated, controlled and evaluated, influencing aspects such as workers' autonomy, expectations of availability and ways of exercising leadership. Flexibility thus takes on an organisational value that goes beyond the introduction of individual policies, becoming an integral part of work design (Schwarzmüller et al., 2018).

At the same time, part of the literature has highlighted the heterogeneous nature of practices linked to work flexibility. Under this label, very different organisational configurations are often described, which have in common more a logic of adaptation than shared operational characteristics. This heterogeneity makes the idea of a single model of flexibility problematic and suggests rather to interpret it as a set of distinct organisational frameworks, which produce different effects on workers' working conditions and experience (Aroles, 2019).

A further line of research has shown that the flexibility of work is closely related to the dynamics of power within organisations. Access to flexibility opportunities is often unevenly distributed between occupational groups, with significant differences depending on the role, occupational status and degree of autonomy associated with the tasks. In this perspective, flexibility is not a neutral resource, but it can help to strengthen existing organisational hierarchies, favoring some categories of workers more than others (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017).

The organisational debate also highlighted how flexibility can have a profound effect on the design of working time. In many organisations, the adoption of flexible practices is accompanied by a redefinition of availability expectations, which can translate into an implicit extension of working time and an increasing permeability of the boundaries between professional and private sphere. These arrangements, often described as working *time regimes*, highlight that working time is not simply a quantitative variable, but a structural element of the organisation that reflects specific choices of coordination and control (Blagoev et al., 2018).

From an organisational perspective, such dynamics allow to read the flexibility of work as a lever through which organisations try to increase their capacity for adaptation, transferring some uncertainty to workers. Flexibility thus becomes a regulatory tool that affects the availability of time, the predictability of performance and the way in which people participate in work. In this sense, flexibility takes on meaning only in relation to the organisational framework within which it is exercised and the power relationships that define its use (Alessi, 2012).

In the contemporary debate, flexibility of work thus emerges as a central but not univocal concept used to interpret complex and sometimes contradictory organisational transformations. The plurality of approaches and perspectives that characterises this debate makes it necessary to clarify the concept of the term "flexibility" in order to understand its meanings and implications for work organisation.

### 1.1.2 Flexibility of work as an organisational concept

In the contemporary debate on work, flexibility is used as a broad interpretative category, the definition of which is anything but unambiguous. The term is used to describe different phenomena, ranging from the adaptation of schedules to the possibility of carrying out work in different places, to more general forms of organisational autonomy. This semantic extension has helped to make flexibility a central but at the same time ambiguous concept, often used without a clear reference to the organisational mechanisms that support it (Aroles, 2019; Kingma, 2019).

In the managerial and educational discourse, flexibility of work is generally presented in operational and functional terms. It is described as the possibility of adapting working hours, places and modes of performance to the needs of the organisation and workers, with the aim

of promoting a better work-life balance and increasing business efficiency (Factorial, 2026; Edenred, 2025). In this perspective, flexibility tends to be represented as an intrinsically positive feature and a predominantly technical or managerial choice.

However, such an approach risks oversimplifying the phenomenon. Organisational literature highlights how flexibility cannot be reduced to an isolated set of tools, but must be interpreted as a configuration that emerges from the ways in which work is regulated within organisations. From this point of view, flexibility is not simply the existence of organisational alternatives but the degree of control exercised over the conditions under which work is carried out, including the autonomy actually available to workers (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017).

The extensive use of the term "flexibility" has also helped to bring deeply diverse organisational practices under one label. In many cases, very different configurations are presented as equivalent while producing organisational effects and non-overlapping working conditions. This trend makes it problematic to treat flexibility as a unitary model, suggesting rather the need to consider it as a set of distinct systems, united by a logic of adaptation but characterised by different organisational mechanisms (Aroles, 2019).

Another element of complexity concerns the level of analysis to which flexibility is attributed. In some representations, it appears as an individual choice of the worker, linked to personal preferences or conciliation strategies. In others, flexibility emerges as a property of the organisation, embedded in the rules, management practices and availability expectations that govern daily work. This ambiguity helps to reinforce a vision of flexibility as a neutral and universally desirable concept, obscuring the role of the organisation in defining the boundaries within which flexibility is granted and practiced (Kingma, 2019).

From an organisational perspective, it is therefore more appropriate to interpret flexibility as a relational concept, the meaning of which depends on the arrangements within which it is applied. Flexibility is not an abstract quality of work, but a way in which the organisation structures, coordinates and governs work performance, affecting the availability of time and the conditions for carrying out the activity. In this sense, flexibility takes on meaning only in relation to the organisational rules and power relations that define its use (Alessi, 2012).

Taken together, these considerations suggest that the flexibility of work cannot be defined in a simple or one-dimensional way. On the contrary, it must be understood as a complex organisational concept, characterised by a plurality of meanings and modes of application.

Recognizing this complexity is a necessary step to avoid simplified readings of the phenomenon and to analyse more rigorously the ways in which flexibility affects the organisation of work.

### 1.1.3 The temporal and spatial dimensions as distinct organisational levers

Once the conceptually complex nature of work flexibility has been clarified, it is necessary to break down the phenomenon into its main analytical dimensions. In the contemporary organisational debate, two dimensions emerge as particularly relevant to understanding the transformations of work organisation: the temporal dimension and the spatial dimension. These dimensions represent fundamental coordinates through which work is structured, coordinated and governed within organisations, and can be the subject of separate interventions and not necessarily convergent (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017).

The time dimension concerns the way in which working time is organised, distributed and regulated. It includes aspects such as duration of service, timing, predictability of working time and availability expectations associated with the tasks. Action on this dimension implies a redefinition of the rules governing the coordination of activities, the distribution of workloads and the criteria for evaluating performance. In this sense, working time is not a simple quantitative variable, but a structural element of the organisation, through which forms of control and coordination are exercised (Blagoev et al., 2018; Alessi, 2012).

The spatial dimension, on the other hand, concerns the place where work is carried out and the degree of separation between work and traditional organisational space. Interventions on this dimension mainly affect the modes of communication, coordination processes and forms of supervision, changing the relationship between physical presence, work visibility and management control. Spatial flexibility tends to be associated with digitisation and virtualisation processes, which allow a reorganisation of workspaces without necessarily questioning the underlying time rules (Kingma, 2019).

One central element emerging from the literature is that the two dimensions do not necessarily advance in a coordinated way. In many organisational configurations, spatial flexibility is introduced without a corresponding revision of working time, producing arrangements in which work can be carried out in different places, but it continues to be organised according to rigid schedules and extended availability expectations. This asymmetry highlights how time and place represent distinct organisational levers, requiring

different managerial skills and organisational solutions (Kingma, 2019; Iannotta & Meret, 2021).

From the point of view of leadership and organisational design, the distinction between the two dimensions is particularly important. Intervention in the workplace mainly requires a rethinking of the methods of coordination and communication, while intervention on working time implies a deeper revision of the rules of operation of the organisation. The literature highlights how effective management of flexibility requires coherence and integration between the different organisational levers, avoiding configurations in which spatial transformations are not accompanied by an adequate rethinking of temporal logics (Iannotta & Meret, 2021).

The distinction between time and space also has important implications for subjective work experience. Interventions on time and place have different effects on perceived autonomy, control of work and the possibility of reconciliation between professional and private sphere. While spatial flexibility tends to affect mainly the day-to-day organisation of activities, temporal flexibility has a more direct impact on the predictability of work and the availability of personal time, becoming a particularly sensitive lever on the organisational level (Agile work: organisational forms and subjectivity of the worker, 2021).

In this perspective, the breakdown of the flexibility of work into temporal and spatial dimensions does not respond to a purely classificatory need, but represents an analytical passage necessary to understand the variety of existing organisational arrangements. Recognizing that time and place are distinct levers allows a more rigorous analysis of organisational choices and avoids simplified representations of flexibility as a unitary phenomenon.

Size	Subject of the intervention	Main organisational implications
<b>Time flexibility</b>	Duration, location and predictability of working time	Redefinition of coordination rules, time control, workload management
<b>Spatial flexibility</b>	Place of performance	Reorganisation of communication, supervision and coordination processes

**Table 1.1.3:** Time vs. spatial flexibility

#### 1.1.4 Organisational implications of work flexibility

Breaking down the flexibility of work into temporal and spatial dimensions allows us to highlight a number of organisational implications which go beyond the mere introduction of flexible practices. Seen from this perspective, flexibility does not appear as a uniformly accessible resource but as an organisational lever whose application is conditioned by structural constraints, activity characteristics and role configurations.

A first important element concerns differentiated access to flexibility opportunities. Numerous studies show that the possibility of benefiting from flexible forms of work organisation is unevenly distributed within organisations, varying according to the role played, the level of autonomy associated with the tasks and the degree of control exercised over the work process. In this sense, flexibility tends to be a selective resource, more easily accessible to roles characterised by high decision autonomy than those strongly constrained by operational and coordination needs (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017; Blagoev et al., 2018).

This inequality in access to flexibility is not due solely to individual preferences or contingent management choices, but reflects deeper organisational constraints. The nature of the activities carried out, the need to ensure business continuity and the presence of safety and reliability requirements limit the possibility of intervening on the fundamental coordinates of the work. In such contexts, flexibility is strictly dependent on the structure of the production process and the coordination arrangements required by the organisation.

The organisational implications of flexibility are particularly evident when considering the differences between interventions on the time dimension and interventions on the spatial dimension. As has emerged in the literature, spatial flexibility tends to be perceived as more easily implementable, since it mainly affects the modes of communication and supervision, without necessarily calling into question the temporal structure of work. On the contrary, time flexibility requires a deeper revision of the organisation's operating rules, affecting the scheduling of activities, workload management and coordination mechanisms (Blagoev et al., 2018; Alessi, 2012).

This difference helps to explain why many organisations adopt configurations characterised by a greater spatial than temporal openness. These arrangements reflect a logic of partial adaptation, in which some dimensions of work are made flexible while others remain rigidly regulated. The literature on leadership and organisational design highlights how this lack of integration between the different levers of flexibility can generate organisational tensions,

requiring a high degree of coherence and managerial skills to avoid counterproductive effects (Iannotta & Meret, 2021).

An additional organisational implication concerns the impact of flexibility on subjective work experience. The ways in which time and place of work are regulated have a different impact on the perception of autonomy, control and predictability of performance. In particular, time-related interventions directly affect the ability of workers to plan their time, while those on the spatial dimension tend to have a greater impact on the day-to-day organisation of activities and management of working relationships.

This difference reinforces the idea that the two dimensions are not interchangeable and produce distinct organisational and subjective effects (Agile work: organisational forms and subjectivity of the worker, 2021).

Taken as a whole, these considerations suggest that work flexibility cannot be analysed solely in terms of potential benefits or desirable organisational solutions. On the contrary, it must be interpreted as a set of organisational choices reflecting structural constraints, power relations and coordination capacities. It is essential to understand these implications in order to analyse in an empirically sound way the conditions of applicability of work flexibility in contexts characterised by high organisational and operational complexity.

## 1.2 The main forms of flexibility in working time

### 1.2.1 Reduction of working time: definitions and approaches

In the debate on working time, the reduction of hours is one of the main ways through which the temporal dimension of work performance is intervened. This expression generally refers to a reduction in hours worked compared with a reference standard, which may relate to the daily, weekly or annual duration of work. The reduction of working hours differs from other forms of temporal flexibility in that it directly affects the total amount of time devoted to work, being a structural intervention on working time rather than a simple reorganisation (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017).

The literature shows that the reduction of working hours does not constitute a homogeneous phenomenon, but includes different approaches for objectives, methods of implementation and organisational implications. In some contexts, reduction is conceived as an instrument of labour policy aimed at the redistribution of working hours and the stabilisation of

employment. In other cases, it is introduced at the organisational level as a response to demands for sustainable workloads, well-being of workers or adaptation to technological and production changes. This plurality of approaches shows how the reduction in working hours cannot be interpreted as a single measure, but as a family of interventions that assume different meanings depending on the institutional and organisational context (Piasna et al., 2024). A central element in the discussion on working time reduction is the distinction between formal and actual reduction of hours worked. The literature points out that a reduction in contractual hours does not automatically lead to a corresponding reduction in actual hours worked. In the absence of a reorganisation of activities and workloads, the reduction of working hours may in fact result in a compression of the time available, with possible effects of work intensification. This aspect highlights how the reduction of working hours should be analysed not only in terms of regulations, but also in relation to the organisational practices that accompany its implementation (Golden, 2012; Pencavel, 2014).

Within the different declensions of the reduction in hours, an increasing attention has been paid to the short working week. This approach involves a reduction in the number of working days per week, generally from five to four, and is often presented as a way of redistributing working time rather than simply reducing total hours. From an analytical point of view, the short week is fully part of the forms of reduction in working hours, as it affects the amount of work time, while also changing its distribution throughout the week (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017).

Literature and institutional debate show that the short working week can take on very different configurations. In some cases, it is proposed as a labour policy measure aimed at improving the well-being and quality of life of workers; In others, it is experienced as an organisational choice, aimed at making workloads more sustainable or encouraging greater efficiency of production processes. This heterogeneity confirms that the short week does not represent a standardised model, but a specific declination of the reduction of hours, whose application strongly depends on the modes of regulation and the institutional context in which it is inserted (ETUI, 2017; Piasna et al., 2024).

Another important aspect concerns the relationship between working time reduction and work organisation. Reducing the total time spent on work implies, in many cases, a review of organisational processes, coordination arrangements and performance expectations. In the absence of such interventions, the reduction of working hours is likely to produce ambivalent

effects, increasing the time pressure and transferring part of the adaptation burden on the workers. This element emerges with particular clarity in the contributions that analyse the reduction of hours in relation to productivity and labor intensity, highlighting how the effects of the reduction depend to a large extent on the organisational conditions in which it is implemented (Pencavel, 2014; Cette et al., 2023).

In the more recent debate, the reduction of working time is also discussed in relation to structural changes in production systems such as automation and the evolution of labour demand. In this perspective, the reduction of working time is interpreted as a possible organisational and institutional response to long-term changes, although it does not constitute a universally applicable or uncritical solution. Considering the reduction of time as a specific form of temporal flexibility allows to analyse its potentialities and limits, keeping the plan of the amount of working time distinct from that of its placement and distribution (Boppart & Krusell, 2016; Cette et al., 2023).

### 1.2.2 Modulation and flexibility of working time

In addition to the reduction of the total number of hours worked, another central mode of intervention on working time is represented by the modulation and flexibilisation of schedules. Unlike the reduction of hours, these forms of flexibility do not primarily affect the total number of hours worked, but their placement, distribution and variability over time. In this sense, the adjustment of working hours is a set of interventions that act on the temporal structure of work performance, maintaining unchanged, at least formally, the overall duration of work (Chung & Tijdens, 2013).

The literature identifies several forms of flexible working hours, including flexible inbound and outbound hours, staggered time slots, the use of the hours bank and the possibility to adapt the daily or weekly schedule according to organisational or individual needs. These practices share the objective of introducing greater adaptability in the management of working time, reducing the rigidity of traditional time schedules without necessarily calling into question the overall duration of the performance (Chung & van der Lippe, 2018).

From an organisational point of view, the modulation of working hours is a particularly widespread form of flexibility, as it allows organisations to intervene in working time with relatively little impact on production processes. Compared to the reduction of working hours, these interventions require a less profound reorganisation of activities and are often more

compatible with contexts characterised by continuous coordination needs or constraints related to shift coverage. This helps to explain the greater spread of flexitime practices compared to forms of structural reduction of working time (Chung & Tijdens, 2013).

However, the literature shows that flexibility of working hours is not without its critical implications. In particular, the introduction of greater variability in the allocation of working time may result in a reduction in the predictability of working hours, with significant effects on the ability to plan non-working time. In the absence of adequate regulation mechanisms, time flexibility can therefore shift some of the organisational uncertainty to workers, increasing the complexity of personal time management (Golden, 2012).

Another aspect discussed in the literature concerns the relationship between flexibility of working hours and effective autonomy for workers. Although such practices are often presented as tools of empowerment, several studies show that the degree of control exercised over working hours remains strongly influenced by organisational needs. The possibility of adapting the timetable is often tied to specific time windows or subordinated to performance and availability criteria, limiting the real autonomy compared to that formally foreseen (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017).

Recent contributions of an application nature underline that the resodulation of working hours is increasingly being interpreted as a tool for rethinking the relationship between working time and value produced. In this perspective, the focus shifts from the mere presence of time to the quality of time worked, with the aim of making the organisation more adaptable without intervening on the total amount of hours. These approaches, however, point to the need for a wider rethinking of organisational models, so that flexibility in working hours does not only result in an asymmetric redistribution of time constraints (Assolombarda, 2025).

On the whole, the resodulation and flexibilisation of working time are forms of temporal flexibility which act mainly on the distribution of time rather than its quantity. These practices allow organisations to introduce scope for adaptation without substantially changing the duration of work, but they have organisational and distributional implications which largely depend on how they are regulated and the context in which they are applied.

### 1.2.3 Working time and productivity

The relationship between working time and productivity is one of the central issues in the debate on time flexibility. The relationship between the number of hours worked and output is not linear or uniform, but depends on a variety of organisational, institutional and sectoral factors. Many contributions point out that an increase in working hours does not automatically translate into a proportional increase in productivity, questioning the assumption that a greater amount of working time is itself synonymous with higher performance (Pencavel, 2014).

The economic literature has shown that, above a certain threshold, the extension of working time can produce diminishing returns, linked to phenomena such as fatigue, reduction in concentration and increase in errors. Analyses based on historical and comparative data indicate that hourly productivity tends to decrease as working hours increase, suggesting the existence of structural limits to the effectiveness of working time extension as a production strategy (Pencavel, 2014; Lepinteur, 2016).

At the same time, macroeconomic studies stress how the relationship between working time and productivity must be interpreted in the context of long-term changes in production systems. Technological evolution and automation have changed the composition of work, reducing the incidence of manual work and increasing the weight of cognitive-intensive activities. In this context, productivity is increasingly less dependent on the extension of working time and more linked to the quality of organisation, skills and capital intensity employed (Boppart & Krusell, 2016).

A further strand of research shows how the reduction in working time can be compatible with stable or increasing levels of productivity, provided that it is accompanied by a reorganisation of production processes. In such cases, the reduction of working hours can encourage a more efficient use of available time, encouraging a better allocation of resources and a reduction of organisational inefficiencies. However, the literature points out that these effects are not automatic and depend to a large extent on how the reduction of working hours is implemented (Cette et al., 2023).

The debate also highlights the danger of confusing the effects of shorter working hours with those of more intensive work. In the absence of adequate rethinking of loads and coordination arrangements, a reduction in working hours can result in an increase in labour intensity, with ambiguous effects on workers' productivity and well-being. This aspect

highlights the need to distinguish between apparent productivity, linked to an increase in output per hour worked, and sustainable productivity in the medium-long term (Golden, 2012).

Some recent contributions stress that the link between working time and productivity is mediated by organisational factors such as autonomy, predictability of schedules and quality of coordination. In this sense, time flexibility may affect productivity not so much through a mechanical reduction of the hours worked as through an improvement in the organisational conditions governing the use of working time. However, even in this case, the literature shows that these effects are strongly context-dependent and not generalizable automatically (Lu et al., 2023; Medina-Garrido et al., 2023).

Overall, the literature suggests that the relationship between working time and productivity is complex and strongly influenced by the characteristics of work organisation. Reducing or modulating working time does not in itself guarantee an increase in productivity, but may create the conditions for a different allocation of time and resources. To analyse this relationship in a rigorous way, it is therefore necessary to consider working time not as a mere quantitative variable, but as a structural element of the organisation. The impact on productivity depends on how it is regulated and integrated into production processes.

#### 1.2.4 Benefits and criticalities of time flexibility

Flexible working time is often associated with a number of potential benefits, both for workers and organisations. In the theoretical and practical debate, these benefits are generally linked to the possibility of adapting the duration or distribution of working time to individual and organisational needs, promoting more sustainable workloads and better work-life balance. In this perspective, temporal flexibility is presented as a lever capable of improving workers' well-being and, indirectly, the quality of work performance (Chung & van der Lippe, 2018).

One benefit frequently mentioned concerns the increase in perceived autonomy in the management of working time. The ability to influence the length or placement of working hours can contribute to greater personal time planning capability and a reduction in work-life conflicts. However, the literature shows that these positive effects are not automatic and depend to a large extent on how flexibility is implemented and the degree of control actually exercised by workers over their own time (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017).

From an organisational point of view, time flexibility is often associated with potential benefits in terms of adaptability and workload management. In some contexts, the ability to modulate working time enables organisations to respond more effectively to changing demand or operational needs, reducing rigidities and inefficiencies. In this sense, time flexibility is interpreted as a regulatory tool that can contribute to a more efficient allocation of time resources, provided it is accompanied by appropriate coordination mechanisms (ETUI, 2017).

Alongside these potential benefits, however, the literature highlights a number of critical issues associated with flexible working time. A first problem element concerns the risk of work intensification. In the absence of clear regulation of loads and performance expectations, time flexibility can result in a compression of available time, increasing pressure on workers and reducing expected welfare benefits. This risk is particularly evident in contexts where flexibility is introduced without a review of the way performance is assessed (Golden, 2012).

Another critical issue concerns the predictability of working time. Although flexibility is often presented as a tool for adapting to individual needs, some forms of flexibilisation can reduce the stability and predictability of working hours, transferring part of the organisational uncertainty onto workers. In such cases, time flexibility can compromise the ability to plan time outside work, generating negative effects on quality of life and work-life balance (Chung & Tijdens, 2013).

The literature also highlights how the benefits and critical issues of time flexibility are unevenly distributed among workers. Effective access to flexibility opportunities is often conditioned by the role occupied, the level of autonomy associated with the tasks and the organisational context. As a result, flexibility can contribute to reinforcing existing differences and inequalities, favouring some groups of workers over others (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017).

Even in popular and applied debate, the benefits and limitations of time flexibility are frequently presented in terms of pros and cons, emphasising how such practices can improve work-life balance but, at the same time, introduce new forms of time pressure and blur the boundaries between the professional and private spheres. These representations, while simplifying the phenomenon, reflect some of the tensions already highlighted in the academic literature, confirming the ambivalent nature of working time flexibility.

Overall, the contributions analysed show that time flexibility cannot be assessed in exclusively positive or negative terms. Its effects depend on how it is implemented, the organisational context and the rules governing its use. Considering both the benefits and critical issues together allows us to move beyond a simplified view of working time flexibility and analyse it as a complex organisational lever, the effects of which must be assessed in light of the specificities of the production contexts.

### 1.3 The main forms of workplace flexibility

#### 1.3.1 Spatial flexibility of work: conceptual framework

In contemporary organisational debate, workplace flexibility is generally understood as the possibility of carrying out work outside the physical spaces traditionally associated with the organisation, such as offices, operational headquarters or production facilities. This dimension of flexibility is based on the conceptual separation between the physical place where the work is carried out and the organisation that coordinates it, allowing for a partial or total dissociation between spatial presence and work performance (Felstead & Jewson, 2000).

From an analytical point of view, spatial flexibility does not coincide with a single organisational practice, but represents a broader category that includes different ways of performing work outside the spatial boundaries of the organisation. In this perspective, the workplace is no longer understood as a fixed and unitary space, but as an organisational variable that can be reconfigured according to the activities carried out, the technologies available and the coordination methods adopted (Allen et al., 2015).

The literature emphasises how the development of spatial flexibility is closely linked to the evolution of information and communication technologies, which have made it possible to coordinate work activities remotely and circulate information outside traditional organisational contexts. However, these transformations do not automatically imply a redefinition of organisational models, but rather offer new possibilities for articulating the relationship between work, space and control (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016).

A central aspect of the conceptual framework of spatial flexibility concerns the distinction between technical possibility and organisational applicability. Although a growing number of activities can be carried out remotely from a technological point of view, the literature

highlights how the remoteness of work is strongly influenced by the nature of the tasks, coordination requirements and constraints related to security and operational continuity. Consequently, workplace flexibility cannot be considered a universally applicable feature, but rather an organisational lever whose use depends on the specificities of the production contexts (ILO, 2020; Eurofound, 2020).

From an organisational point of view, spatial flexibility affects the way work is supervised, communicated and coordinated. The physical separation between workers and the organisation requires the adoption of tools and practices that can ensure the flow of information and the monitoring of activities without relying on physical presence. In this sense, workplace flexibility implies a reorganisation of control methods and a redefinition of availability expectations, which can have ambivalent effects on workers' autonomy (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010).

The literature indicates that access to spatial flexibility is not uniform within organisations, as it is conditioned by the characteristics of the tasks and the way work is organised. The possibility of carrying out work outside traditional locations depends on professional, technological and organisational factors, which limit the applicability of such practices to specific contexts and roles (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017; Chung, 2018).

Even in popular literature on organisation, workplace flexibility is described as a lever that allows us to overcome the traditional coincidence between work and physical space, while recognising its limitations and dependence on the characteristics of the activities performed. These contributions, while adopting simplified language, reflect some of the tensions highlighted by academic studies, confirming the need to consider spatial flexibility as a selective organisational possibility and not as a generalisable model.

Overall, the conceptual framework of workplace flexibility shows how this dimension represents one of the main ways in which organisations can intervene in the spatial structure of work. However, its applicability and effects depend on the organisational, technological and professional conditions in which it is implemented, requiring an analytical approach that is attentive to differences between contexts and roles.

### 1.3.2 Remote working as a form of workplace flexibility

Remote working is one of the main ways in which workplace flexibility has historically manifested itself. This term refers to the performance of work outside the company premises, in places that may include the worker's home or other spaces outside the organisation. From a conceptual point of view, remote working is a form of separation between the physical location and the work performed, made possible by the use of information and communication technologies (Felstead & Jewson, 2000; Allen et al., 2015).

The literature highlights that remote working is not a recent phenomenon, but has its origins in teleworking practices that developed as early as the 1990s. In these early configurations, remote working was generally highly structured, with defined hours, pre-established locations and control methods similar to those of on-site work. In this sense, remote working initially established itself as a spatial transposition of traditional work, rather than a profound transformation of organisational models (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016).

From an organisational point of view, remote working involves a redefinition of the methods of coordination and communication between workers and the organisation. The absence of physical co-presence makes it necessary to use digital tools for sharing information and monitoring activities, changing supervision and control practices. However, the literature emphasises that these changes do not automatically lead to increased worker autonomy, which may remain limited by standardised procedures and forms of remote control (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010).

A central element in the debate concerns the distinction between remote working and other more complex forms of spatial flexibility. Remote working, in its most traditional form, tends to maintain a rigid time structure and a clear separation between working and non-working hours, while shifting the place of work. This feature differentiates it from organisational configurations that combine spatial and temporal flexibility and require a broader rethinking of performance evaluation criteria (Allen et al., 2015).

The spread of remote working has been highly uneven across sectors, professions and organisational roles. Institutional studies show that the possibility of working remotely is closely linked to the nature of the activities and the professional content of the tasks, being more frequent in cognitively intensive jobs and less applicable in contexts characterised by operational activities or physical presence constraints. This highlights how remote working

represents a form of selective flexibility, accessible only to a proportion of workers (Eurofound, 2020; ILO, 2020).

In the most recent organisational debate, remote working is therefore interpreted as a specific form of workplace flexibility, which makes it possible to overcome the coincidence between work activity and company space, without necessarily calling into question the overall organisation of work. Considering it within a broader framework of spatial flexibility allows us to grasp its potential and limitations, avoiding assuming it as a dominant or universally applicable organisational model.

### 1.3.3 Smart working as an organisational configuration

In contemporary organisational debate, smart working is often presented as an advanced form of work flexibility, combining the possibility of working outside traditional locations with greater autonomy in managing time and how work is performed. Unlike remote working in its more traditional form, smart working is not limited to a spatial shift in work activity, but implies a broader redefinition of the organisational logic that governs work (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016).

From a conceptual point of view, smart working can be interpreted as an organisational configuration that integrates spatial flexibility, temporal flexibility and results orientation. In this perspective, the focus shifts from physical presence and adherence to predefined schedules to the definition of objectives and the evaluation of output. However, the literature emphasises that this approach requires significant changes in the ways in which performance is coordinated, supervised and evaluated, which do not always accompany the formal introduction of smart working (Allen et al., 2015; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010).

A key element in distinguishing between smart working and other forms of spatial flexibility concerns the degree of autonomy actually granted to workers. Although smart working is often associated with greater decision-making autonomy, several studies highlight how this autonomy is strongly influenced by organisational practices and control systems. Without a rethinking of supervision mechanisms, smart working can result in a remote reproduction of traditional organisational models, limiting its transformative potential (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010).

The literature also highlights that smart working is not a universally applicable organisational solution. Its implementation is closely linked to the nature of the activities carried out, the level of interdependence between tasks and the possibility of defining measurable objectives. In contexts characterised by operational activities, security constraints or a strong need for real-time coordination, smart working encounters structural limitations that reduce its applicability (Eurofound, 2020; ILO, 2020).

Another important aspect concerns the risk of conceptual overlap between smart working and remote working. The literature emphasises that the indiscriminate use of these terms can generate analytical ambiguity, obscuring the differences between a simple flexibilisation of the workplace and an organisational configuration that requires a more profound review of management and coordination models. In this sense, considering smart working as one of the possible configurations of work flexibility allows us to analyse its characteristics without assuming it as the dominant organisational model (Allen et al., 2015; Messenger & Gschwind, 2016).

Overall, smart working emerges as an organisational configuration that combines different dimensions of work flexibility, but whose impact depends largely on the organisational conditions in which it is implemented. Its analytical relevance lies less in its diffusion as a practice and more in its ability to challenge traditional criteria of work organisation, revealing tensions and constraints that vary significantly across sectors, roles and production contexts.

#### 1.3.4 Limits and constraints of spatial flexibility

Although workplace flexibility is often presented as a solution that can expand the possibilities for work organisation, the literature highlights how its applicability is strongly conditioned by a series of structural, organisational and professional constraints. These constraints limit the spread of spatial flexibility practices and profoundly influence how they are implemented, making it necessary to take an analytical approach that is attentive to the specificities of production contexts (Eurofound, 2020).

A first set of constraints concerns the nature of work activities. Numerous studies show that the possibility of working outside traditional locations is closely linked to the content of the tasks and the degree to which the activities can be digitised. Occupations that require physical presence, direct interaction with plant, machinery or infrastructure, or compliance with stringent safety requirements have extremely limited margins for spatial flexibility. In

these cases, work cannot be easily separated from the place where it is performed, limiting the applicability of remote working practices (ILO, 2020).

Alongside task-related constraints, the literature highlights the importance of organisational factors in determining the actual applicability of spatial flexibility. Coordination methods, the structure of production processes and the level of interdependence between activities have a significant impact on the possibility of working remotely. In contexts characterised by high operational interdependence or the need for real-time coordination, spatial separation can generate inefficiencies or operational risks, making physical presence a central element of work organisation (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010).

Another significant constraint concerns the control and supervision methods adopted by organisations. Spatial flexibility requires a rethinking of performance monitoring practices, which can no longer be based on physical presence. Without adequate adaptation of evaluation systems and control logic, remote working can result in more stringent forms of remote control or increased expectations of availability, limiting the effective autonomy of workers (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Allen et al., 2015).

The literature also highlights how access to spatial flexibility is unevenly distributed among workers. The possibility of working outside traditional locations is often linked to one's position in the organisational structure, level of decision-making autonomy, and the professional content of one's duties. As a result, spatial flexibility tends to be more accessible to managerial and staff roles, while it is severely limited for operational roles, contributing to reinforcing existing segmentations within organisations (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017; Chung, 2018).

Finally, the institutional literature emphasises that spatial flexibility cannot be considered a universally applicable solution, but rather an organisational practice that must be evaluated in light of the specific constraints of each production context. The adoption of such practices requires a balance between the needs for flexibility, operational continuity and security, which varies significantly between sectors and types of activity. In this sense, the limits of spatial flexibility are not simply technical obstacles, but structural elements that profoundly influence organisational choices (Eurofound, 2020; ILO, 2020).

## 1.4 Evolution and diffusion of flexible working practices

Flexible working practices have developed over time in a progressive and non-linear manner, influenced by technological developments, institutional contexts and organisational choices made by companies. Even before the pandemic, the literature documented the presence of forms of flexibility in working time and place, although these practices were generally limited, selective and poorly integrated into dominant organisational models. During this period, flexibility was often introduced as an experimental tool or as a work-life balance measure, rather than as a structural lever for transforming the organisation of work (Eurofound, 2017).

In the pre-pandemic context, the spread of flexible practices appeared to be highly uneven across sectors, organisations and professional roles. Opportunities for spatial and temporal flexibility were more accessible in cognitively intensive jobs and roles characterised by greater decision-making autonomy, while remaining limited in operational contexts and sectors subject to constraints of physical presence, continuity of service and safety. At this stage, work flexibility was often interpreted as an individual benefit or as an ancillary element of the organisation, contributing to a fragmented and unsystematic spread of practices (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017; Chung, 2018).

The health emergency linked to the spread of Covid-19 represented a moment of significant discontinuity in the spread of flexible working practices, particularly with regard to the place of work. Measures to restrict mobility and physical distancing made it necessary to resort extensively to remote working, leading to a sudden and widespread acceleration of practices that had previously remained marginal or experimental. This large-scale diffusion took place extremely rapidly and involved a large number of organisations and workers, overcoming much of the resistance previously encountered (Eurofound, 2020; ILO, 2020).

In the Italian context, this acceleration was strongly supported by regulatory intervention. Starting in early 2020, a series of decree-laws, directives and circulars promoted the use of flexible working arrangements, in particular agile working, as a priority tool for managing the health emergency. The provisions adopted introduced derogations from the ordinary rules and simplified the procedures for accessing flexibility, favouring a rapid extension of remote working practices in both the public and private sectors (Decree-Law No. 6 of 23 February 2020; Decree Law No. 18 of 17 March 2020; Public Service Directive No. 1/2020; Directive No. 2/2020).

International literature highlights how the adoption of flexible practices during the pandemic has mainly taken place in emergency situations. In many cases, organisations introduced remote working solutions as a contingent response to health restrictions, without a parallel rethinking of processes, coordination methods and performance evaluation systems. This contributed to a rapid but often unstructured spread of flexible working, characterised by temporary arrangements and provisional organisational solutions (Eurofound, 2020; ILO, 2020).

In the period following the most acute phase of the health emergency, flexible working practices entered a phase of redefinition. Recent studies show that flexibility continues to be more widespread than in the pre-pandemic period, but not uniformly so. Organisations have gradually begun to select and consolidate the solutions adopted, distinguishing between practices to be maintained, modified or abandoned. This phase has given rise to different configurations of flexible working, influenced by sectoral constraints, the characteristics of the activities and the composition of professional roles (Eurofound, 2023).

Overall, the evolution and spread of flexible working practices show that these solutions have not been established in a linear or uniform manner. The pandemic has acted as an accelerator of processes already underway, highlighting both the potential and the limitations of different forms of flexibility. At the same time, the post-pandemic phase highlights how work flexibility tends to be reorganised within boundaries defined by production and organisational contexts, rather than generalised as a single, universally applicable model.

## Chapter 2 - Work Flexibility in Organizations

### 2.1 Work Flexibility in Contemporary Firms

#### 2.1.1 The Plurality of Flexibility Practices in Firms

When work flexibility is observed from the perspective of firms, it becomes clear that it does not translate into a uniform set of organizational solutions. On the contrary, flexibility in working time and place takes different forms, varying in intensity, modes of implementation, and degree of integration within the organization. In contemporary business practices, flexibility does not appear as a standard model, but rather as a range of differentiated organizational arrangements.

Firms may introduce limited and circumscribed margins of flexibility, for example by intervening in specific aspects of working time or location, or they may adopt more articulated configurations that affect the organization of daily activities more profoundly. In many cases, such practices do not derive from a single, coherent project, but instead develop progressively in response to operational, technological, or managerial needs that emerge over time. The result is a form of flexibility built through successive adjustments rather than through a comprehensive redesign of work organization (Kalleberg, 2001).

A relevant element concerns the gap that may arise between formally adopted solutions and the way they are actually used. Organizational arrangements that appear similar at a formal level may translate into very different practices, depending on informal rules, expectations of availability, and coordination mechanisms that characterize the organizational context. In this sense, flexibility does not simply coincide with the introduction of specific measures, but rather with the way these measures are incorporated into the organization's everyday functioning (Fleetwood, 2007).

The plurality of flexibility practices is also reflected in the coexistence, within the same firm, of different organizational arrangements. In many organizations, more structured forms of flexibility coexist with informal or temporary solutions, giving rise to fragmented and sometimes weakly coherent configurations. Some groups of workers may enjoy broad autonomy in managing working time or place, while others operate under more rigid rules, despite referring to the same organizational framework. This coexistence highlights how flexibility does not spread uniformly, but according to selective and situated logics (Putnam, Myers & Gailliard, 2014).

Overall, the observation of flexibility practices in contemporary firms conveys the image of a reality characterized by strong heterogeneity and a low level of standardization. Flexibility emerges as a set of differentiated organizational arrangements, often partial and layered, reflecting specific constraints and contingent choices rather than the adoption of a single, shared model. Understanding this plurality represents a necessary step in analyzing the reasons that lead firms to adopt different forms of flexibility and in interpreting the limits and possibilities of such practices within organizational contexts.

### 2.1.2 Organizational Determinants of Work Flexibility

The plurality of flexibility practices observable in firms is not random, but reflects structural differences among organizations. The ways in which working time and place are made flexible depend on specific organizational factors that affect the available margins for intervention and the possibilities for adaptation. From this perspective, work flexibility can be understood only in relation to the organizational arrangements within which it is applied and to the constraints that delimit its use (Kalleberg, 2001; Alessi, 2012).

A first relevant element concerns the sector to which the firm belongs. The characteristics of the production process, the degree of standardization of activities, and the presence of constraints related to safety or service continuity significantly influence the forms of flexibility that can be adopted. In contexts characterized by highly interdependent activities or by strict requirements of physical presence, the margins for intervention on working time and place are more limited. Conversely, sectors dominated by high cognitive-intensity activities or less operationally constrained tend to offer greater opportunities for flexibilization, particularly with regard to spatial flexibility (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017; Kingma, 2019).

Firm size represents another factor that helps explain the variety of flexibility practices. Larger organizations generally have more articulated coordination structures, formalized regulatory systems, and dedicated organizational resources, which allow them to introduce and manage flexibility measures in a more systematic way. In smaller firms, by contrast, flexibility tends to be less formalized and more often based on informal solutions or implicit agreements between management and workers. This difference affects not only the diffusion of practices, but also their stability and predictability over time (Aroles, 2019; Fleetwood, 2007).

A further determinant concerns organizational structure and modes of work coordination. Arrangements characterized by high interdependence among activities, strong process control, or the need for real-time coordination make it more complex to intervene in the temporal dimensions of work without modifying the organization's operating rules. In such contexts, working time assumes a central function of regulation and control, limiting the introduction of extensive forms of temporal flexibility. Conversely, more decentralized or goal-oriented organizational structures tend to offer greater margins for adaptation, as they require coordination mechanisms that are less rigidly anchored to presence and fixed schedules (Blagoev, Schreyögg & Jordan, 2018; Alessi, 2012).

These factors help explain why, even in the presence of formally similar tools or policies, flexibility practices take very different configurations across firms and, at times, within the same organization. Work flexibility thus emerges as the result of a balance between adaptation needs and organizational constraints, rather than as the application of standardized solutions. Understanding the organizational determinants of flexibility therefore makes it possible to interpret more rigorously the differences observed in business practices and to avoid simplified readings that attribute such differences exclusively to managerial choices or individual preferences (Putnam, Myers & Gailliard, 2014).

<b>Organizational Determinant</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Implications for Flexibility</b>
<b>Sector of activity</b>	Nature of the production process, degree of task standardization, safety constraints, and service continuity requirements	Defines the structural margins of flexibility, particularly with regard to working time; operational sectors face more stringent constraints than high cognitive-intensity sectors
<b>Firm size</b>	Organizational scale and availability of coordination and regulatory structures	Influences the degree of formalization of flexibility practices and their stability over time; in small firms, informal solutions tend to prevail
<b>Organizational structure and coordination</b>	Ways in which activities are organized, level of interdependence, and need for real-time coordination	Primarily affects temporal flexibility; highly coordinated arrangements make time a central lever of regulation
<b>Formal rules and informal practices</b>	Set of policies, implicit rules, expectations of availability, and managerial practices	Explains the gap between formal flexibility and actual flexibility and the coexistence of different arrangements within the same organization

**Table 2.1.2:** Organizational Determinants of Work Flexibility

## 2.2 Time Flexibility and Place Flexibility: A Comparison of Organizational Practices

### 2.2.1 The Prevalence of Interventions on the Place of Work

In contemporary organizational practices, work flexibility is more frequently introduced through interventions on the place where work is performed rather than through a substantial revision of working time. Firms tend to make work less tied to the traditional physical workspace by allowing activities to be carried out in locations other than the office, while largely keeping working hours, rhythms, and temporal structures unchanged. This configuration reflects a different organizational sensitivity to the two dimensions of flexibility and an asymmetric perception of their complexity (Kingma, 2019).

In many organizational contexts, flexibility is implemented through the reorganization of workspaces and the adoption of digital infrastructures that allow the content of work to be separated from the physical place in which it is carried out. Work is thus conceived as potentially independent of a specific space, provided that the necessary technological and organizational conditions are ensured. This makes it possible to intervene in the place of work without having to fundamentally redefine the temporal rules that structure the coordination of activities, rendering spatial flexibility more easily integrable into existing organizational arrangements (Kingma, 2019).

Place-based flexibility therefore takes the form of an incremental organizational adaptation, enabling firms to respond to needs related to mobility, efficiency, and organizational attractiveness without calling into question the temporal structure of work. In many organizations, particularly in knowledge-based contexts such as consulting firms, professional services, or ICT companies, remote work and the use of flexible spaces are widely adopted and supported by digital tools that facilitate remote collaboration. However, this greater spatial freedom does not necessarily correspond to a similar degree of temporal flexibility: working hours, deadlines, meetings, and decision-making processes continue to be organized around shared time windows, and temporal availability remains a central requirement of work performance. In such configurations, the place of work is made flexible, while time continues to play a fundamental role in regulation and coordination (Kingma, 2019).

This dynamic helps explain why interventions on the place of work are more easily adoptable even in organizations characterized by significant structural constraints. Modifying space

makes it possible to preserve the predictability of activities and synchronization among organizational members, reducing the risks associated with reorganizing working time. Spatial flexibility therefore appears more compatible with consolidated organizational arrangements, whereas interventions on working time are more complex, as they directly affect the coordination and control mechanisms that regulate the organization's everyday functioning (Kingma, 2019).

Overall, the prevalence of interventions on the place of work over those on time does not reflect a greater intrinsic relevance of the spatial dimension, but rather signals the different organizational difficulties associated with the two levers of flexibility. Place flexibility emerges as a solution that allows firms to adapt without substantially altering the temporal rules that structure work, thereby confirming the central role of time as a key organizational regulatory element.

### 2.2.2 Working Time as a Sensitive Organizational Lever

Working time represents a central component of the organization of activities, as it contributes to structuring coordination, predictability, and synchronization of work processes. Unlike the place of work, which can be made flexible without necessarily altering the organization's modes of functioning, time constitutes a dimension that is deeply intertwined with the rules governing the distribution of activities and the interdependencies among different organizational actors (Blagoev, Schreyögg & Jordan, 2018).

The temporal regimes adopted by organizations define when work must be performed, in what sequence, and according to which expectations of availability. These regimes do not merely establish formal working hours, but also enable coordination among interdependent activities, ensuring process continuity and coverage of organizational functions. In this sense, working time operates as an organizational device that makes it possible to govern the complexity of interactions and to stabilize work practices over time (Blagoev et al., 2018).

Intervening in working time therefore implies a modification of the ways in which activities are coordinated and made mutually compatible. Changing schedules, rhythms, or temporal sequences requires a realignment of organizational processes, as it directly affects interdependencies among activities and expectations of presence and availability. For this reason, temporal flexibility is more difficult to implement than spatial flexibility, as it calls

into question temporal arrangements that perform a stabilizing function within the organization (Blagoev et al., 2018).

The centrality of time as an organizational lever also emerges in contexts characterized by the widespread use of digital technologies and remote work. The use of digital tools, while allowing a greater separation between work and physical location, does not eliminate the need for temporal coordination. On the contrary, digitalization often tends to reinforce the importance of synchronization and temporal availability, making time an even more relevant element for the organization of activities (Wajcman & Dodd, 2017).

Within this framework, working time continues to operate as a scarce and regulated organizational resource, whose management is fundamental to ensuring the functioning of collective activities. Even in the presence of greater spatial flexibility, organizations maintain relatively stable temporal regimes that enable coordination and monitoring of work performance. Temporal flexibility, precisely because it affects these mechanisms, represents a particularly sensitive organizational lever, the use of which requires more profound interventions in existing organizational arrangements (Blagoev et al., 2018; Wajcman & Dodd, 2017).

Overall, working time emerges as a structuring dimension of the organization, whose flexibilization cannot be considered a simple operational adjustment. The difficulty of intervening in time compared to place of work reflects the central role that temporal regimes play in the coordination and stabilization of organizational practices, helping to explain the greater caution with which firms approach temporal flexibility (Blagoev et al., 2018; Wajcman & Dodd, 2017).

## 2.3 Organisational Innovation and Working Time

### 2.3.1 Organisational Innovation: Conceptual Clarification

Before analysing changes in working hours as a potential form of organisational innovation, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by organisational innovation in the academic literature. The concept has been developed within innovation studies and organisational theory and does not exclusively coincide with the introduction of technological or product innovations.

According to the OECD's *Oslo Manual*, organisational innovation consists of the implementation of new organisational methods in business practices, workplace organisation, or external relations of the firm (OECD, 2018). This definition highlights how innovation may concern the ways in which work is structured, coordinated and managed, extending beyond the technical or productive dimension.

In line with this perspective, Damanpour and Aravind (2012) distinguish between technical innovations, relating to products and production processes, and administrative or organisational innovations, which concern organisational structures, administrative processes and managerial systems. Organisational innovation, in this view, affects the internal functioning of the firm by modifying authority relationships, coordination mechanisms and control systems.

Within organisational studies, innovation takes on a more specific meaning when it entails a transformation of the fundamental rules governing the coordination and regulation of interdependent activities. In such cases, it does not represent a mere incremental adjustment, but rather a reconfiguration of organisational arrangements that reshapes the ways in which activities are synchronised, monitored and evaluated (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012). This interpretation is consistent with approaches that conceptualise working time as a structuring element of organisational functioning (Blagoev, Schreyögg & Jordan, 2018).

In light of these contributions, organisational innovation in the present study is understood as a qualitative transformation of the rules that regulate coordination, control and accountability within the firm. A change cannot be considered innovative solely because it introduces a new policy or modifies a technical parameter; it assumes the characteristics of organisational innovation only when it affects the underlying logics that structure collective action and organisational interdependencies.

This conceptual clarification provides the theoretical foundation for analysing changes in working hours not merely as administrative adjustments, but as potential levers for transforming temporal arrangements and organisational coordination mechanisms.

### 2.3.2 Changes in Working Hours as a Potential Organisational Innovation

In light of the definition of organisational innovation outlined above, changes in working hours cannot automatically be classified as a process of innovation. Organisations frequently adjust working schedules in response to contingent needs, fluctuations in demand, regulatory constraints or operational requirements, without such interventions entailing a transformation of the rules that structure organisational functioning. In these cases, working time is treated as a technical or administrative variable, whose regulation allows existing coordination and control mechanisms to remain unchanged (Blagoev, Schreyögg & Jordan, 2018).

For a modification of working hours to be interpreted as organisational innovation, it must affect the fundamental rules governing the temporal distribution of activities and the coordination among organisational actors. Working hours do not merely constitute a neutral framework within which work takes place; rather, they represent an organisational rule that helps define temporal sequences, expectations of availability and modes of synchronisation. When changes in working hours involve a revision of these rules, they require a broader reorganisation of processes and may therefore assume an innovative character (Blagoev et al., 2018; Wajcman & Dodd, 2017).

From this perspective, innovation does not primarily lie in a quantitative variation in the number of hours worked, but in a qualitative transformation of how time is organised and utilised. Interventions that introduce greater temporal flexibility, a different distribution of hours or a reduction in working time may be considered innovative only insofar as they alter coordination mechanisms, making it necessary to redefine interdependencies among activities and organisational actors. In the absence of such transformations, changes in working hours remain predominantly operational adjustments, lacking substantive innovative content (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012).

Changes in working hours also produce significant effects on coordination mechanisms. Standardised temporal regimes enable the alignment of individual and collective activities through shared schedules and predefined sequences. Greater temporal flexibility, by contrast, requires new forms of synchronisation and a redefinition of coordination practices, particularly in contexts characterised by a high degree of interdependence among activities. Research on organisational change indicates that variations in working hours may affect teams' ability to collaborate effectively, making stronger alignment around

objectives and responsibilities necessary, rather than relying solely on the simultaneous presence of actors (Blagoev et al., 2018).

In addition to their impact on coordination, changes in working hours influence control and performance evaluation mechanisms. Rigid temporal regimes facilitate forms of control based on physical presence and temporal availability, whereas greater flexibility requires the development of alternative modes of control, often oriented towards results and outputs. Studies on smart working and flexible schedules show that such transformation does not eliminate control, but reshapes its forms, requiring new supervisory tools and strengthened managerial support practices in order to prevent organisational misalignment (Wajcman & Dodd, 2017).

With regard to autonomy, changes in working hours may open up greater discretion in time management, allowing employees to organise their activities more flexibly. However, temporal autonomy does not represent an automatic or unequivocally positive outcome of organisational innovation. The literature emphasises that increased discretion must be accompanied by appropriate coordination and support mechanisms, in order to prevent autonomy from resulting in organisational isolation or an intensification of pressures related to temporal availability.

Within this framework, temporal autonomy is closely linked to processes of responsibility and accountability. The possibility of autonomously managing working hours implies that the ability to organise time effectively becomes an integral part of job performance. Studies on Work Time Control show that individual control over the distribution of time may foster motivation and proactive behaviour; however, these effects depend on the overall coherence of organisational arrangements and on the presence of coordination systems capable of making autonomy functional to collective objectives, thereby avoiding temporal overload or work intensification (Wajcman & Dodd, 2017).

Overall, changes in working hours may be considered organisational innovation only when they involve a revision of the temporal rules structuring coordination, control and autonomy within the organisation. In such cases, working time becomes a high-impact lever of transformation, capable of producing significant effects on both organisational processes and the way work is performed. Conversely, limited and circumscribed

interventions that do not affect these dimensions remain predominantly operational adjustments, lacking the defining characteristics of organisational innovation.

Analytical Dimension	Operational Change in Working Hours	Change as Organizational Innovation
<b>Nature of the intervention</b>	Technical or administrative adjustment	Revision of organizational rules
<b>Object of change</b>	Quantity or distribution of working hours	Temporal regimes and coordination logics
<b>Impact on coordination</b>	Limited, existing arrangements remain unchanged	Redefinition of synchronization mechanisms
<b>Impact on control</b>	Control based on presence and fixed schedules	Shift toward results- or output-based control
<b>Temporal autonomy</b>	Marginal or absent	Potentially greater, but constrained
<b>Accountability</b>	Low	High: time management as part of job performance
<b>Depth of change</b>	Superficial	Structural
<b>Organizational risks</b>	Limited	Misalignments, work intensification

**Table 2.3.2:** Working Time Changes: Operational Adjustments vs. Organizational Innovation

## 2.4 Organizational Constraints and Role Differences

### 2.4.1 Role Differences in Access to Schedule Flexibility

Access to working-time flexibility measures is not evenly distributed within organizations, but is strongly differentiated according to the role performed, the degree of decision-making autonomy, and the nature of the activities carried out. The literature shows that temporal flexibility tends to be concentrated primarily in roles characterized by greater discretion and control over how work is performed, while it is significantly more limited in operational roles subject to more stringent structural constraints (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017).

Managerial roles generally exhibit a high level of autonomy in the management of working time. In such positions, working hours are often less rigidly defined and more closely linked to the achievement of objectives and results. For example, in complex organizational contexts, managers may enjoy considerable flexibility in the distribution of working hours, provided that coordination with higher decision-making levels and compliance with strategic deadlines are ensured. In these cases, schedule flexibility is compatible with organizational arrangements based on accountability and management by objectives, rather than on continuous presence within fixed time slots (Blagoev, Schreyögg & Jordan, 2018).

Staff roles occupy an intermediate position between management and operational activities. Although they are generally subject to more clearly defined organizational constraints than managerial roles, these positions involve activities that are less directly tied to operational continuity. Functions such as administration, planning, human resources, or specialized technical support can, for example, adopt limited forms of schedule flexibility - such as earlier or later starting times - without compromising the overall functioning of the organization. This possibility is made feasible by the fact that staff activities show a lower dependence on immediate synchronization with other roles and greater predictability of workloads (Felstead & Henseke, 2017).

By contrast, operational roles are characterized by high interdependence among activities, requirements for physical presence, and constraints related to the continuous coverage of essential functions. In such contexts, schedule flexibility is structurally more difficult to implement. Consider, for instance, shift-based work or production processes that require the simultaneous presence of multiple operators: variations in individual schedules may undermine activity coordination, increase the risk of service discontinuities, or negatively affect safety. Limited access to temporal flexibility therefore does not stem from discretionary choice, but from organizational constraints inherent in the nature of operational activities (Blagoev et al., 2018).

Comparative studies show that these differences are systematically reproduced across organizations and sectors, highlighting a structural tendency toward the selective distribution of schedule flexibility. Roles that require synchronized presence and a high degree of temporal coordination exhibit reduced margins of flexibility, whereas those characterized by greater autonomy and lower temporal dependence tend to benefit from broader access to flexible arrangements. This dynamic can be observed, for example, in comparisons between

highly operational activities and coordination or support functions, which are able to manage working time more discretionarily (Eurofound, 2017).

Within this framework, schedule flexibility can be interpreted as a selective organizational resource, whose distribution is closely linked to power arrangements, control mechanisms, and the structure of organizational interdependencies. Differentiated access to temporal flexibility thus contributes to generating asymmetries in work experience across different roles, placing significant limits on the uniform adoption of such practices within organizations (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017).

Overall, the analysis of role differences highlights that schedule flexibility cannot be considered a universally applicable measure, but must be assessed in light of organizational characteristics and the specific nature of the activities performed. This awareness is essential for understanding the structural limits of temporal flexibility and for interpreting its conditions of applicability, particularly in contexts characterized by a substantial presence of operational roles.

<b>Organizational Role</b>	<b>Autonomy in Time Management</b>	<b>Activity Interdependence</b>	<b>Access to Schedule Flexibility</b>
<b>Managerial roles</b>	High	Medium	High
<b>Staff roles</b>	Medium	Medium	Medium
<b>Operational roles</b>	Low	High	Limited

**Tabella 2.4.1:** Role-Based Differences in Schedule Flexibility

#### 2.4.2 Structural Constraints of Operational Activities

Operational activities are characterized by a set of structural constraints that limit the applicability of working-time flexibility compared to other organizational roles. These constraints do not stem from discretionary organizational choices or cultural resistance, but are linked to the nature of the activities performed and to the conditions required to ensure their proper functioning. In this sense, the lower level of temporal flexibility associated with operational roles should be interpreted as the result of objective organizational requirements rather than as a simple asymmetry in treatment (Blagoev, Schreyögg & Jordan, 2018).

A first relevant constraint concerns service continuity. Many operational activities require constant temporal coverage, which necessitates the presence of personnel during specific time slots or throughout the entire day. In such contexts, working time performs an essential coordinating function, ensuring that activities are carried out without interruptions and that handovers between shifts take place in an orderly manner. The possibility of freely adjusting individual schedules is therefore limited, as any variation must be compatible with overall coverage requirements (Blagoev et al., 2018).

A second constraint relates to the physical presence required to perform operational activities. Unlike many staff or managerial tasks, operational work is often tied to specific locations, facilities, infrastructures, or production processes that cannot be carried out remotely. This dependence on the workplace translates into greater temporal rigidity, as the synchronization of activities requires the simultaneous presence of multiple operators. Empirical studies show that highly location-dependent jobs exhibit reduced margins of temporal flexibility precisely because of the need to coordinate people, tools, and processes within the same space and at the same time (Felstead & Henseke, 2017).

A further constraint is represented by the high interdependence of operational activities. In many contexts, tasks are organized in closely linked temporal sequences, in which the work of one operator directly depends on that of others. In these cases, working time assumes a stabilizing function, as it allows individual actions to be aligned and interactions to be made predictable. Individual schedule flexibility is therefore difficult to reconcile with organizational arrangements based on strong temporal interdependence, as it may generate misalignments and inefficiencies (Wajcman & Dodd, 2017).

These constraints are often compounded by requirements related to safety and reliability, which are particularly relevant in operational activities. Compliance with procedures, shift

systems, and predefined working times helps reduce the risk of errors, ensure orderly information handovers, and maintain high standards of control. In such contexts, temporal rigidity does not necessarily represent an organizational limitation, but may instead constitute an essential component of risk management and the safe functioning of processes (Blagoev et al., 2018).

These structural constraints help explain why, even within the same organization, different temporal regimes coexist for different roles. Operational activities tend to be embedded in more standardized and less flexible working-time regimes, whereas activities characterized by lower interdependence and greater autonomy can adopt more flexible temporal arrangements. Schedule flexibility is therefore not universally applicable, but must be assessed in relation to the structure of activities and the organizational requirements that govern their execution (Kosseck & Lautsch, 2017).

Overall, the analysis of the structural constraints of operational activities highlights how temporal flexibility encounters objective limits in contexts characterized by service continuity, physical presence, interdependence, and safety requirements. These elements do not entirely preclude the possibility of intervening in working hours, but they strongly delimit the modes and conditions under which such interventions can be applied. This awareness is essential for realistically interpreting the innovative potential of schedule flexibility and sets the stage for the analysis of sectors in which these constraints are particularly salient.

## 2.5 The Electricity Sector as a Critical Context

### 2.5.1 Organizational Characteristics of the Electricity Sector

The electricity sector displays organizational characteristics that make it a particularly relevant context for analyzing working-time flexibility as a potential organizational innovation. As a critical infrastructure sector, it is required to ensure service continuity and supply reliability throughout the entire day, operating under conditions of high technical and organizational complexity. The need to guarantee the constant functioning of networks and plants imposes organizational arrangements that are strongly oriented toward stability, predictability, and temporal coordination of activities (Eurofound, 2017).

From the perspective of work organization, the electricity sector is characterized by a strong integration of operational, technical, and coordination activities. The management of plants, distribution networks, and control systems requires the simultaneous contribution of different professional roles, whose activities are closely interdependent. This interdependence translates into a temporal structure of work based on shift systems, on-call arrangements, and continuous staffing, which make it possible to ensure coverage of essential functions and the capacity to intervene in the event of failures or emergencies. In this context, working hours do not merely represent a contractual variable, but constitute a central component of the organizational arrangement (CCNL Elettrici).

The widespread use of shift work represents a structural feature of the sector. Service continuity requirements necessitate the distribution of work across multiple time slots and, in many cases, across cycles covering the entire week. This temporal organization helps reduce individual margins of schedule flexibility, as any variation must be compatible with overall coverage constraints and with coordination needs across different shifts. The adoption of standardized temporal regimes therefore responds to objective organizational requirements rather than discretionary choices on the part of firms (Eurofound, 2017).

Within this arrangement, operational roles play a central function. Network technicians, plant operators, and maintenance personnel carry out activities that require physical presence and strict adherence to procedures, often in high-risk contexts. Operational work in the electricity sector is characterized by strong temporal interdependence, as many activities must be performed sequentially or simultaneously by multiple operators, making precise synchronization of working hours necessary. As highlighted in the literature on organizational temporal regimes, such conditions significantly reduce the possibility of adopting forms of schedule flexibility similar to those observed in less constrained contexts (Blagoev, Schreyögg & Jordan, 2018).

These elements are compounded by significant safety and reliability requirements. The electricity sector is characterized by high safety standards, which require compliance with defined working times, structured handover procedures, and systematic controls. Within this framework, working hours perform a crucial organizational function, contributing to the structuring of individual and collective responsibilities and to the reduction of error risks. The resulting temporal rigidity should not be interpreted exclusively as a limitation on

flexibility, but rather as an essential component of organizational functioning and risk management (Wajcman & Dodd, 2017).

For these reasons, the electricity sector represents a particularly critical context for analyzing schedule flexibility as a potential organizational innovation. The coexistence of strong structural constraints, a significant operational component, and high requirements of continuity and safety makes this sector a privileged testing ground for observing how temporal flexibility practices can be introduced, adapted, or constrained. The analysis of this context therefore makes it possible to highlight the tensions between organizational innovation and structural constraints, setting the stage for an in-depth empirical examination of the practices adopted by firms in the sector.

### 2.5.2 Centrality of Operational Roles and Implications for Schedule Flexibility

In the electricity sector, the presence of a broad and structurally central operational component significantly affects the possibilities for introducing forms of schedule flexibility. Unlike organizational contexts predominantly characterized by knowledge-based or coordination activities, the functioning of firms in the electricity sector largely depends on operational roles directly involved in the management of plants, networks, and critical infrastructures. This centrality of operational roles reinforces the temporal constraints discussed in the previous sections, making schedule flexibility a particularly complex organizational lever to implement.

Operational activities in the electricity sector are characterized by strong temporal and functional interdependence. Many processes require the simultaneous presence of multiple operators, coordination across consecutive shifts, and compliance with rigidly defined operational sequences. In these contexts, working hours perform an essential synchronizing function, allowing individual and collective activities to be aligned and ensuring service continuity. The possibility of introducing individual schedule variations is therefore limited, as any modification must be compatible with the overall organizational arrangement and with system-wide coordination requirements (Blagoev, Schreyögg & Jordan, 2018).

The centrality of operational roles is also reflected in the widespread adoption of organizational models based on shift systems and on-call arrangements. These temporal structures make it possible to ensure continuous coverage of essential functions and to respond promptly to emergencies or malfunctions. However, these same models reduce

individual discretion in the management of working time, as schedules are defined according to system requirements rather than individual worker preferences. In this sense, schedule flexibility encounters structural limits that cannot be overcome without a more profound reorganization of operational processes (Eurofound, 2017).

A further relevant element concerns the safety and reliability requirements that characterize operational work in the electricity sector. The activities performed often involve high risks and require strict compliance with standardized procedures, including precise handover practices between shifts and systematic operational controls. Under these conditions, working hours contribute to structuring responsibilities and reducing uncertainty, functioning as an organizational control mechanism. The resulting temporal rigidity therefore does not represent merely a constraint on flexibility, but rather a functional component of risk management and service reliability (Wajcman & Dodd, 2017).

The dominant presence of operational roles also implies a selective distribution of flexibility opportunities within firms in the electricity sector. As highlighted in the literature, roles characterized by greater autonomy and lower dependence on simultaneous presence tend to have broader access to schedule flexibility measures, while operational roles remain more strongly bound to standardized temporal regimes. In the electricity sector, this asymmetry is particularly pronounced, given the strategic importance of operational activities for the overall functioning of the organization (Kosseck & Lautsch, 2017).

Within this framework, the analysis of schedule flexibility in the electricity sector cannot overlook the centrality of operational roles and the constraints that characterize them. Temporal flexibility cannot be introduced uniformly, but instead requires differentiated solutions tailored to the specificities of the activities performed. For this very reason, the electricity sector represents a particularly meaningful context for observing how organizations address the dilemma between requirements for coordination, safety, and service continuity, on the one hand, and attempts at organizational innovation related to the management of working time, on the other.

### 2.5.3 Implications for the Analysis of Schedule Flexibility as an Organizational Innovation

The analysis of the organizational characteristics of the electricity sector and the centrality of operational roles highlights how schedule flexibility assumes, in this context, a meaning that is profoundly different from that observed in other organizational settings. Requirements of service continuity, the presence of critical infrastructures, the high interdependence of activities, and stringent safety standards contribute to the configuration of a highly structured temporal arrangement, in which working hours perform an essential function of coordination and control. Under these conditions, intervening in working hours does not constitute a simple organizational adjustment, but potentially entails a revision of the rules that make organizational functioning itself possible.

In light of these elements, schedule flexibility in the electricity sector cannot be interpreted as a standard solution or as a practice that can be easily transferred from other organizational contexts. As discussed in the previous sections, temporal flexibility tends to be selectively distributed across different roles and is particularly limited in operational activities, which represent a central component of the sector. As a result, any intervention in working hours must necessarily confront strong structural constraints, which reduce individual discretion and make the adoption of uniform flexibility models highly complex (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017; Blagoev, Schreyögg & Jordan, 2018).

In this sense, the electricity sector can be interpreted as a critical case for the analysis of schedule flexibility as a potential organizational innovation. While in contexts characterized by high autonomy and lower temporal interdependence flexibility can be introduced through incremental adaptations, in the electricity sector it directly comes into tension with fundamental mechanisms of coordination, safety, and reliability. It is precisely this tension that makes the sector particularly suitable for testing the conditions under which a change in working hours can genuinely take on the characteristics of an organizational innovation, rather than remaining a merely adaptive intervention.

Organizational innovation, as discussed in Section 2.3, does not lie in the simple quantitative variation of working time, but in the qualitative transformation of the ways in which time is organized, coordinated, and controlled. In the electricity sector, any attempt to introduce greater temporal flexibility must necessarily confront the need to preserve collective synchronization arrangements, clear accountability structures, and rigorous safety procedures. This makes particularly evident how changes in working hours can produce

ambivalent effects, generating new opportunities for autonomy and responsibility, but also new risks of misalignment and intensified control (Wajcman & Dodd, 2017).

A further relevant element concerns the coexistence, within firms in the electricity sector, of roles with different organizational characteristics. Alongside operational activities, there are staff roles and coordination functions that may, at least in part, benefit from wider margins of schedule flexibility. This internal heterogeneity suggests that temporal flexibility, where introduced, tends to take differentiated forms tailored to the specificities of activities and roles involved, rather than being configured as a uniform practice extended across the entire organization. The analysis of schedule flexibility in the electricity sector therefore requires consideration not only of structural constraints, but also of the ways in which organizations attempt to manage such constraints through selective and context-specific solutions (Eurofound, 2017).

In light of these considerations, it becomes evident that theoretical analysis alone is insufficient to fully understand how schedule flexibility is actually interpreted and implemented within firms in the electricity sector. The complexity of the context and the presence of strong organizational constraints make an empirical investigation necessary, aimed at exploring the concrete practices adopted by organizations and the strategies through which they seek to reconcile stability requirements with attempts at innovation. The following chapter therefore focuses on analyzing these dynamics through the examination of empirical evidence collected during the research, with the objective of understanding how schedule flexibility is articulated in a sector characterized by a significant operational component and stringent temporal constraints.

## Chapter 3 - Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research Objectives

The present study aims to analyse whether, and under what conditions, changes in working-time flexibility may assume the characteristics of an organisational innovation within a structurally constrained sector such as the electricity industry.

As highlighted in Chapter 2, temporal flexibility may affect the fundamental mechanisms of coordination, control, and the distribution of autonomy within organisations. However, in sectors characterised by a high presence of operational activities, the need to ensure service continuity, and compliance with stringent safety requirements, working time represents a central lever of organisational regulation. In such contexts, the possibility of intervening in the temporal coordinates of work does not depend exclusively on managerial choices or cultural orientations, but must contend with structural constraints that significantly delimit the margins of flexibility that can be effectively implemented.

The research therefore seeks to understand not only how flexibility is concretely implemented, but also why certain forms of schedule flexibility prove difficult to apply, particularly with regard to operational roles. Attention is focused on the organisational constraints that condition its adoption, on the differences between professional categories in access to such practices, and on the interpretations expressed by management concerning the possibility of extending or transforming existing models.

In order to better understand the specificities of the electricity sector, the analysis also draws upon a comparison with selected organisational contexts operating in different sectors, characterised by a greater degree of diffusion and structuring of working-time flexibility practices. This comparison does not aim to identify models that may be transferred mechanically, but rather to highlight, by contrast, the factors that in the electricity sector favour or hinder the evolution of flexibility.

The objective is to reconstruct the dynamics through which schedule flexibility is negotiated, adapted, and governed within firms in the electricity sector, seeking to understand whether it remains a selective and compensatory measure or may, under certain conditions, evolve towards a broader form of organisational innovation.

## 3.2 Research Design

The research adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, consistent with the objective of gaining an in-depth understanding of the organisational dynamics underlying the implementation of schedule flexibility and of analysing its possible configuration as an organisational innovation. The focus is not directed towards the quantitative measurement of the phenomenon, nor towards the statistical generalisation of the findings, but rather towards the reconstruction of the interpretative logics, tensions, and processes through which flexibility practices are introduced, negotiated, adapted, or limited within organisations.

The choice of a qualitative research design responds to the very nature of the object of study. Schedule flexibility does not present itself exclusively as a technical or contractual variable, but rather as an organisational practice that intersects structural, cultural, and managerial dimensions. Understanding whether, and under what conditions, it may assume the characteristics of an organisational innovation requires careful analysis of the perceptions of the actors involved, of the operational constraints of the context, and of the ways in which decisions are formulated and justified. A qualitative approach makes it possible to grasp these dimensions in an articulated manner, avoiding reductive simplifications.

The study is structured as a case study centred on the Italian electricity sector, which is considered the primary context of analysis. The decision to focus on this sector is linked to the presence of specific organisational characteristics, such as a high operational component, the requirement to ensure service continuity, the presence of safety constraints, and the diffusion of structured temporal regimes. These elements render the analysis of schedule flexibility particularly significant, as they test its compatibility with strongly regulated organisational arrangements.

Alongside the main case, the research design incorporates a comparison with selected firms operating in different sectors and characterised by a greater degree of diffusion or structuring of flexibility practices. The inclusion of these additional cases follows a logic of contrastive comparison, aimed at highlighting the organisational specificities of the electricity sector and at distinguishing, insofar as possible, between structural constraints linked to the nature of activities and organisational choices attributable to different managerial models. The comparison does not take the form of a systematic cross-sector analysis, but rather constitutes an interpretative tool intended to enrich the understanding of the primary case.

From an epistemological perspective, the research is situated within an interpretative framework. Although it builds upon a structured theoretical background and a preliminary phase of literature systematisation, the analysis does not merely aim at testing predefined hypotheses. Instead, the research process develops through a progressive process of conceptual construction, grounded in the interaction between theory and empirical evidence. In this sense, the research design may be traced back to an abductive logic, in which the continuous interplay between data and theoretical categories enables a gradual refinement of the interpretation of the phenomenon under study.

The analysis thus developed through an iterative dynamic, whereby the examination of the interviews led to a revision and clarification of certain initial assumptions, allowing structural constraints to be integrated with managerial and cultural dimensions that emerged during the investigation. This process made it possible to avoid a unidimensional reading of the phenomenon, instead fostering a more articulated understanding of the conditions influencing the adoption or limitation of schedule flexibility practices.

The analysis of qualitative data was conducted through a structured approach based on the progressive construction of conceptual categories, which will be described in detail in the section dedicated to the analytical methodology.

### 3.3 Research Process and Construction of the Conceptual Framework

#### 3.3.1 Literature Review

Before proceeding to the analysis of the empirical material, a preliminary phase of theoretical in-depth study was conducted with the aim of constructing a solid and coherent conceptual framework in relation to the object of study. This phase did not serve a merely descriptive function, but was conceived as a methodologically necessary step in order to acquire a structured understanding of the academic debate on schedule flexibility and on its possible interpretation as a form of organisational innovation. The objective was not to anticipate the results of the empirical analysis, but rather to develop a theoretical foundation that would enable a conscious, critical, and non-superficial reading of the interviews.

The bibliographic search was conducted systematically through the use of the Scopus database, selected for its broad coverage of international scientific journals and for the possibility of applying targeted filters in relation to keywords, disciplinary fields, and

publication time span. The queries were constructed by combining terms such as “organizational innovation”, “working time”, “worktime flexibility”, “remote working”, “work design”, and “work-life balance”, with the aim of identifying contributions relevant both to the organisational dimension and to the temporal dimension of work. The intention was to avoid an analysis limited solely to the perspective of work-life balance or, conversely, exclusively centred on productivity, instead privileging an integrated view of the phenomenon.

A temporal filter was applied in order to prioritise contributions published predominantly within the last decade, thereby capturing the most recent transformations linked to digitalisation, the diffusion of remote working, and post-pandemic organisational models. This choice responds to the need to situate the analysis within the contemporary debate, avoiding excessive reliance on contributions that are no longer fully representative of current organisational dynamics.

In order to ensure the high qualitative standard of the selected sources, journals were verified through the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR). Only articles published in journals classified in the Q1 quartile within the fields of Management, Organisational Studies, and Economics were included. This criterion made it possible to circumscribe the theoretical foundation to peer-reviewed contributions of recognised scholarly authority, excluding popular sources or works lacking adequate scientific validation. The selection was not guided by the quantity of results, but by their conceptual coherence and methodological quality.

At a later stage, the search was complemented through the use of the Elicit tool, employed as an exploratory support instrument to broaden the bibliographic review and to identify further contributions consistent with the previously defined keywords and quality criteria. The use of Elicit did not replace the critical selection of sources, but rather functioned as a complementary instrument for identifying potentially relevant articles, which were subsequently subjected to manual verification in terms of thematic coherence and publication quality.

The selected contributions were subjected to a process of in-depth reading and conceptual systematisation. The main theoretical findings were organised into a structured presentation document, used as a working tool to synthesise and interrelate the different strands of the debate. Within this document, contributions relating to the reduction of working time,

temporal flexibility, remote working, organisational control mechanisms, autonomy, and the digital transformation of temporal regimes were distinguished and compared.

This phase of synthesis served a dual function. On the one hand, it enabled the acquisition of in-depth knowledge of the topic, necessary in order to approach the analysis of the interviews competently; on the other hand, it allowed the identification of recurring theoretical dimensions that proved useful in orienting the subsequent empirical phase. The preliminary theoretical framework thus constructed was not conceived as a rigid scheme to be applied to the data, but rather as an initial conceptual map, open to revision and redefinition in light of emerging evidence.

In this sense, the literature review did not represent a moment separate from the empirical analysis, but rather the first step in an integrated methodological process, aimed at ensuring that the qualitative investigation developed on solid theoretical foundations consistent with the contemporary scientific debate.

### 3.3.2 Construction of Analytical Categories

The theoretical framework developed during the preliminary phase was not conceived as a model to be rigidly applied to the data, but rather as an interpretative orientation tool. The objective was not to test predetermined hypotheses, but to initiate the analysis of the interviews with an adequate theoretical sensitivity capable of capturing the organisational dynamics underlying schedule flexibility.

On the basis of the systematisation of the contributions identified in the literature and a preliminary discussion with the supervisor, several broad areas of attention were identified to structure the initial phase of reading the transcripts. In particular, attention focused on three possible interpretative dimensions: structural constraints linked to the nature of activities and the organisation of work; cognitive and cultural constraints connected to managerial representations of flexibility; and the ways in which organisations elaborate localised and differentiated responses to pressures for change.

These dimensions did not constitute closed categories nor theoretical schemes to be strictly confirmed or refuted, but rather represented an initial analytical framework, useful in avoiding a reading entirely devoid of conceptual orientation. They found recurring support in the literature examined, which highlights how temporal flexibility practices are simultaneously influenced by structural arrangements, managerial logics, and organisational

adaptation processes. In this sense, the three dimensions performed a preliminary guiding function, without rigidly constraining the coding process.

The analysis of the interviews was therefore initiated with these areas as reference points, while maintaining an openness to the emergence of unexpected elements. The in-depth reading of the transcripts progressively revealed that the dynamics related to schedule flexibility were more articulated than the initial distinction between structural and cognitive constraints suggested. At a preliminary stage, certain difficulties appeared to be primarily attributable to the operational nature of the electricity sector, particularly to the presence of shift systems, temporal interdependencies, and service continuity requirements. However, as the analysis progressed, it became evident that these factors did not operate in isolation, but were intertwined with modes of exercising control, managerial perceptions of risk, and evaluations concerning internal equity across different professional categories.

This process led to a progressive re-elaboration of the initial categories. Certain elements initially attributed to a single dimension proved to be transversal, making it necessary to broaden and further articulate the interpretative framework. Attention thus shifted from the mere identification of constraints to the understanding of the ways in which such constraints are interpreted, negotiated, and governed within organisations.

The construction of analytical categories developed iteratively, through continuous interaction between empirical evidence and theoretical references. Recurring themes emerging from the interviews were progressively organised into micro-themes, which were subsequently aggregated into broader interpretative dimensions. This process, coherent with a Gioia-inspired approach, enabled the transition from an initial phase of theoretical sensitisation to a phase of conceptualisation grounded in the data.

The final conceptual structure therefore does not coincide with the preliminary framework, but rather represents its evolution through systematic interaction with the empirical material collected. The resulting interpretative framework is the outcome of an abductive process, in which theoretical categories oriented the analysis without determining it, while the data progressively contributed to redefining and enriching the conceptual architecture of the study.

### 3.4 Empirical Context and Sample

The empirical context of the research is represented by the Italian electricity sector, characterised by a complex organisational structure and a significant incidence of operational activities. Firms operating within this sector are required to ensure service continuity, infrastructure reliability, and compliance with stringent safety standards. Within this framework, the organisation of work, and in particular the management of working time, assumes a central function in the coordination of activities and the stabilisation of production processes.

The electricity sector displays an articulated internal configuration, in which operational roles directly involved in the management of plants, networks, and maintenance activities coexist with staff and managerial roles engaged in planning, control, and support functions. This internal differentiation constitutes an element of particular interest for the analysis of schedule flexibility, as it makes it possible to observe, within the same sector, different degrees of applicability of flexible practices. The presence of tasks characterised by shift systems, on-call arrangements, and strong temporal interdependence renders the electricity sector a particularly significant context for investigating the structural and organisational limits of temporal flexibility.

The sectoral context is also characterised by the presence of specific collective regulation, governed by the National Collective Labour Agreement (CCNL) for workers in the electricity sector, which defines formal frameworks relating to working time, shift systems, and on-call regimes. Although this contractual framework does not constitute the object of normative analysis in the present study, it represents a structural element of the context, contributing to delimiting the margins within which organisations may intervene in the management of working time and configuring an institutional framework within which any organisational innovations must be situated.

Within this context, eight nationally significant firms were involved - ENEL, Terna, Hera, A2A, Iren, Acea, ERG, and CVA - representing the principal actors within the Italian electricity landscape. These organisations, by virtue of their size and operational complexity, constitute structured organisational arrangements characterised by a plurality of functions, territorial articulation, and the presence of a substantial operational component. The decision to include multiple firms belonging to the same sector made it possible to reduce the risk of attributing to a single organisation dynamics that might instead reflect broader sectoral

trends. The plurality of cases thus facilitated an internal comparative analysis within the sector, useful in identifying recurring patterns, differences, and organisational specificities.

The sample was constructed according to a purposive sampling logic, oriented towards the analytical relevance of cases rather than their statistical representativeness. The objective was not to provide a quantitative measurement of the diffusion of flexibility practices within the sector, but rather to select organisations capable of offering an articulated picture of the dynamics associated with working-time management in contexts characterised by high structural complexity. The interviews involved managerial figures and professionals directly engaged in the definition, implementation, or management of work policies, particularly within HR functions and organisational areas affected by flexibilisation processes.

For comparative purposes, three additional firms operating in different sectors were also included - Lamborghini (automotive), Intesa Sanpaolo (banking), and NHOA (energy-tech) - selected for their high degree of structuring of flexibility practices. The inclusion of these cases does not respond to a strict sectoral comparison logic, but rather aims to introduce a contrastive comparison, useful in distinguishing between constraints attributable to the specific nature of the electricity sector and organisational solutions that may be adopted in contexts less constrained from an operational perspective. This choice broadens the interpretative perspective and avoids a self-referential reading limited to a single productive domain.

Overall, the selected empirical context combines sectoral homogeneity and organisational diversification. On the one hand, the analysis of multiple firms within the same sector makes it possible to observe recurring patterns and common tensions; on the other hand, the comparison with firms operating in different sectors allows the specificities of the electricity sector to be highlighted in relation to more advanced or less constrained flexibility models. This configuration strengthens the interpretative capacity of the study, enabling schedule flexibility to be analysed as a situated phenomenon, influenced by concrete organisational arrangements, specific operational conditions, and a formally defined institutional framework.

## 3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

### 3.5.1 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through individual semi-structured interviews and a concluding focus group, with the aim of qualitatively exploring the organisational dynamics related to schedule flexibility in the electricity sector.

The individual interviews were conducted online and lasted between one hour and one and a half hours. The choice of a semi-structured format made it possible to maintain a common framework across interviews, while ensuring flexibility in exploring specific themes that emerged during the conversation. This approach proved consistent with the exploratory nature of the research, enabling the collection of articulated and reflective narratives from the interviewees.

The interview guide was developed in coherence with the research objectives and structured around a number of recurring thematic areas, including: the modalities of implementation of schedule flexibility; perceived organisational and operational constraints; differences between professional categories; coordination and control mechanisms; and managerial evaluations regarding the sustainability and evolution of the practices adopted. This structure ensured comparability across interviews, while allowing space for the emergence of unexpected themes or firm-specific particularities.

The interviews were audio-recorded with the prior consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed in full. The transcripts underwent a revision process aimed at improving readability, intervening exclusively on formal elements such as repetitions, hesitations, or imperfections typical of spoken language, without altering the substantive content of the statements. This step made it possible to obtain a coherent and analytically usable textual corpus.

To complement the empirical design, an in-person focus group was conducted, involving the same HR representatives previously interviewed. The decision to involve the same interlocutors made it possible to explore in dialogical form the themes that had emerged in the individual interviews and to observe dynamics of convergence and divergence across different organisational experiences. The focus group represented a moment of collective discussion, useful in challenging individual interpretations and in bringing to light shared or conflicting reflections.

Overall, the combination of individual interviews and a focus group allowed for the integration of personal perspectives and collective dynamics, strengthening the depth and interpretative richness of the material collected. The adopted approach privileges the quality and informational density of the data over their numerical extent, in coherence with the qualitative orientation of the research.

### 3.5.2 Data Analysis: A Gioia-Inspired Approach

Data analysis was conducted following a qualitative approach inspired by the Gioia methodology, adopted flexibly and adapted to the characteristics of the empirical material collected. The objective was not to apply a predefined protocol rigidly, but to use the structured logic of the method to organise the interpretation of the interviews systematically, while ensuring coherence and traceability of the analytical process.

The initial phase of analysis involved an in-depth and repeated reading of the transcripts, aimed at familiarising with the content and identifying the most significant passages. During this stage, the so-called *powerful quotes* were extracted, namely portions of text that were particularly dense from a conceptual perspective and capable of clearly expressing perceptions, evaluations, or organisational tensions related to schedule flexibility.

The powerful quotes were highlighted through a colour-coding system, which made it possible to visually distinguish recurring thematic nuclei within the interviews. This procedure did not serve a merely graphical function, but rather represented an operational tool for progressively organising the material and identifying connections between statements originating from different firms. The use of colour coding facilitated the recomposition of the content into homogeneous thematic clusters, supporting the transition from a descriptive reading to a more structured phase of conceptualisation.

On the basis of the analysis of the highlighted quotes, recurring micro-themes were identified, constructed while maintaining, as far as possible, a language close to that used by the interviewees. This choice made it possible to preserve the perspective of organisational actors, avoiding premature abstraction of the categories. The micro-themes represented the first level of conceptual systematisation, enabling similar statements to be grouped together and transversal patterns across the different organisations involved in the study to be identified.

At a subsequent stage, the micro-themes were progressively aggregated into broader interpretative dimensions. This step required an iterative process of comparison between emerging themes and the preliminary theoretical framework, in line with an abductive logic. The final dimensions were neither simply deduced from theory nor generated in a purely inductive manner, but were constructed through continuous dialogue between empirical data and conceptual elements that had already emerged during the literature review phase.

The aggregation process led to the identification of five main interpretative dimensions, which constitute the final conceptual structure of the analysis. These dimensions synthesise the tensions, constraints, and opportunities associated with schedule flexibility in the electricity sector, taking into account differences between organisational roles and the operational specificities of the context. Table 3.5.2 summarises the final analytical structure, highlighting the connection between the micro-themes emerging from the interviews and the identified aggregate dimensions.

The structure presented in Table 3.5.2 does not represent a rigid classification, but rather the result of an iterative process of conceptual re-elaboration, through which the micro-themes were progressively reconducted to interpretative dimensions capable of capturing the complexity of the phenomenon analysed. The dimensions are analytically distinct yet empirically interconnected, as they reflect organisational dynamics operating simultaneously at structural, managerial, and cultural levels.

The adopted approach may be defined as *Gioia-inspired* insofar as it retains the tripartite structure typical of the method - powerful quotes, micro-themes, aggregate dimensions - while adapting its application to the characteristics of the available material. The absence of dedicated qualitative analysis software was compensated by a manual process of systematic coding and by a rigorous organisation of the material, ensuring internal coherence and traceability of interpretative choices.

Overall, the analysis followed an iterative and progressive trajectory, characterised by moments of revision and reclassification of themes. This process made it possible to avoid a linear or excessively simplified reading of the phenomenon, fostering the emergence of an interpretative structure consistent with the complexity of the analysed context and with the objectives of the research.

Aggregate Dimension	Micro-Themes
<p><b>1. Service-Driven Structural Constraints on Work Flexibility</b></p>	<p>Operational constraints of essential services;  Legal and safety constraints;  Production workload constraints;  Flexibility under production constraints;  Essential service constraints with adaptive learning;  Production workload constraints on working time reduction;  Logistical enablers of work flexibility;  Service-constrained organizational redesign;  Transformation of operational roles</p>
<p><b>2. Inequality, Trade-offs, and Compensatory Flexibility Mechanisms</b></p>	<p>Disparities between professional categories;  Acceptable work-time trade-offs;  Compensatory flexibility mechanisms;  Overtime reduction as an organizational lever;  Extension of worker protections;  Internal equity concerns;  Selective use of flexibility tools based on perceived well-being</p>
<p><b>3. Managerial Cognitive and Capability Constraints</b></p>	<p>Cultural and generational resistance;  Trust-control tension;  Limited leadership and managerial capabilities;  Managerial capability development; Office presence as coordination mechanism;  Shift from time-based to results-based work;  Social cohesion constraints of remote work;  Trust-based work regulation;  Task-based approach to coordination</p>
<p><b>4. Institutionalization and Governance of Flexible Work</b></p>	<p>Contractual constraints and enablers;  Large-scale implementation of work agreements;  Boundary-based work regulation;  Alignment of on-site and remote work rules;  Limits of work policy standardization;</p>

	<p>Joint governance of experimentation; Institutional resistance to flexible work implementation</p>
<p><b>5. Flexibility as a Strategic Lever for Performance, Well-Being, and Talent</b></p>	<p>Flexibility-based approach to productivity and well-being; Perceived benefits of work flexibility; Evidence-based internal decision making; Measurement challenges of work performance; Flexibility as employer attractiveness; Well-being as a primary organizational objective; Changing perceptions of flexibility</p>

**Table 3.5.2** - Dimensions and Micro-Themes Emerging from the Analysis

### 3.6 Research Limitations

As with any qualitative exploratory study, the present research presents certain limitations that should be explicitly acknowledged in order to clearly delimit the scope of validity of the conclusions reached and to avoid excessively expansive interpretations of the findings.

A first limitation concerns the purposive nature of the sample and the sectoral configuration of the study. The firms involved were selected on the basis of their analytical relevance to the object of investigation rather than according to criteria of statistical representativeness. Although the organisations considered belong to the principal actors within the national electricity sector, the objective was not to construct a numerically extensive sample, but rather to analyse in depth the organisational dynamics underlying schedule flexibility in a context characterised by strong structural constraints.

Consequently, the findings cannot be generalised to the entire electricity sector in quantitative terms, but should instead be interpreted as analytical contributions aimed at understanding organisational logics and mechanisms.

A second limitation concerns the predominant focus on the Italian electricity sector. While this choice allows for an in-depth examination of a context particularly significant for analysing flexibility as a potential organisational innovation, it reduces the immediate transferability of the findings to other sectors characterised by different operational structures. The interviews conducted in firms operating in other domains served a comparative and interpretative function, but do not constitute a systematic cross-sector analysis. Therefore, any differences observed between sectors should be considered as

elements supporting the interpretation of the primary case, rather than as exhaustive comparative evidence.

A further limitation is linked to the qualitative and interpretative nature of the research design. The construction of conceptual categories and interpretative dimensions is the result of a coding and aggregation process conducted by the author, following a structured but non-automated approach. Although the adopted method included systematic stages of reading, selection of powerful quotes, identification of micro-themes, and subsequent aggregation into conceptual dimensions, the interpretation of the data inevitably involves a subjective component. Transparency in the description of the methodological process seeks to make explicit the analytical choices undertaken, but does not entirely eliminate the possibility of alternative readings of the empirical material.

An additional element concerns the composition of the group of interviewees. The interviews predominantly involved managerial figures and HR professionals directly engaged in the definition or management of flexibility policies. This choice made it possible to reconstruct with precision decision-making logics, perceived constraints, and the organisational strategies adopted, but does not systematically include the perspective of operational workers. Given the centrality of operational roles within the electricity sector, future integration through interviews addressed directly to such figures could further enrich the understanding of the dynamics identified.

The temporal dimension of the study should also be considered. The interviews were conducted during a specific phase of the organisational evolution of the firms involved. Schedule flexibility represents a phenomenon in transformation, influenced by technological, regulatory, and cultural changes. It is therefore possible that, over time, certain practices may be further consolidated, modified, or reformulated, making a potential longitudinal investigation particularly valuable.

Finally, the research primarily focuses on the organisational conditions that favour or limit the adoption of schedule flexibility as a potential innovation. It does not systematically analyse the quantitative effects of the practices adopted in terms of economic performance or productivity measured through objective indicators. The attention is directed towards organisational logics and managerial perceptions, rather than towards the measurement of economic impacts.

Despite these limitations, the research offers an articulated reconstruction of the dynamics influencing schedule flexibility within the electricity sector, contributing to clarifying the organisational, cultural, and structural conditions that delimit its evolution. The findings also provide a foundation for further comparative or longitudinal investigations aimed at deepening the analysis of the transformation of temporal regimes in organisations characterised by a strong operational component.

## Chapter 4 - Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Empirical Evidence on Working Time and Workplace Flexibility

#### 4.1.1 Introduction to the Emerging Evidence

This section outlines the main findings that emerged from the analysis of the interviews conducted within the electricity sector and in the comparative cases included in the study. The analysis was developed following a Gioia-inspired approach, which enabled progressively broader and more interpretative aggregate dimensions to emerge from the coding of the empirical evidence.

The interviews made it possible to explore how working time and workplace flexibility are perceived, interpreted and practised across different organisational roles, highlighting significant differences between operational and non-operational activities. The data show that flexibility does not take the form of a uniform model; rather, it assumes differentiated configurations depending on the structural constraints of the sector, the characteristics of the tasks performed and the organisational arrangements adopted by firms.

In particular, while workplace flexibility appears to be relatively more widespread and more fully integrated into organisational practices, working time flexibility emerges as a more sensitive and problematic lever. Changes to working hours, in fact, must contend with service continuity requirements, shift systems and coordination constraints that structurally characterise the electricity sector.

The analysis identified several recurring dimensions that make it possible to describe the concrete configurations of flexibility, differences in access across roles and the main organisational tensions associated with the management of working time. In the following paragraphs, these dimensions are examined by first distinguishing between workplace flexibility and working time flexibility, and then exploring differences across organisational roles and the perceived effects on coordination and control mechanisms.

#### 4.1.2 Structural Constraints and Configurations of Flexibility

The interviews clearly show that labour flexibility in the electricity sector is strongly shaped by structural constraints linked to the essential service nature of the activities carried out by firms. The continuity of supply, the management of critical infrastructures and compliance with high safety standards are described by interviewees as non-negotiable

elements that significantly limit the scope for intervening in the organisation of working time.

HR representatives tend to frame these constraints as structural features of the sector, which are difficult to overcome through simple organisational interventions. Within this context, working time assumes a central coordinating function: the presence of shift systems, on-call arrangements and continuous operational coverage means that working hours are not merely a contractual variable, but rather an organisational mechanism that underpins process stability and reliability.

Operational roles, although not directly interviewed, emerge as the category most exposed to these constraints. Field activities and plant supervision require physical presence and synchronisation between teams, significantly reducing the scope for individual autonomy in managing working hours. The forms of temporal flexibility mentioned with reference to these roles are mainly configured as circumscribed adaptation tools - such as shift swaps, the use of time banks or the rationalisation of overtime - rather than as a comprehensive revision of working regimes.

For non-operational functions, the scope for intervention appears broader, particularly with regard to workplace flexibility. However, even in these areas, time management remains embedded within defined organisational frameworks that require coordination across teams and adherence to shared time windows. The possibility of intervening more decisively in working hours does not emerge as an organisational priority, but rather as a dimension to be balanced against efficiency and stability requirements.

Overall, the evidence suggests that flexibility in the electricity sector primarily develops as an adaptive response within a structurally delimited perimeter. While continuity and safety requirements do not exclude the presence of margins for adaptation, they contribute to configuring working time as a sensitive organisational lever, whose revision is approached cautiously and without an explicit drive towards radical transformation.

#### 4.1.3 Flexibility as a Strategic Lever and Its Selective Distribution Across Roles

Alongside the structural constraints described in the previous section, the interviews frequently reveal an interpretation of flexibility as an organisational lever oriented towards productivity and wellbeing. The HR managers interviewed emphasise that the introduction

of margins of flexibility, particularly for compatible functions, is associated with greater individual accountability, improved work-life balance and, in some cases, enhanced overall performance.

Flexibility is also linked to talent attraction and retention objectives, especially within non-operational functions and roles characterised by higher professional content. In this sense, it is not described solely as an adaptive response to contextual changes, but also as a strategic instrument aimed at making the organisation more attractive and sustainable in the medium term.

However, this configuration is not evenly distributed within the firms analysed. The interviews highlight disparities across professional categories, with significantly broader margins of flexibility for administrative, technical and managerial functions compared to operational roles. Respondents generally attribute this differentiation to the structural constraints of the sector rather than to discretionary choices.

The presence of such asymmetries, in some cases, necessitates the introduction of compensatory mechanisms for more constrained staff. These include tools such as the rationalisation of overtime, time banks or shift-swapping arrangements, which allow a certain degree of individual adaptation within a stable shift structure. While these mechanisms do not eliminate role-based differentiation, they represent attempts to mitigate perceived disparities and maintain organisational balance.

Overall, flexibility emerges as a selective strategic lever: valued in relation to productivity and wellbeing, yet structurally distributed in a differentiated manner according to the characteristics of the activities performed.

#### 4.1.4 Managerial Culture, Governance and Cognitive Constraints

In addition to structural constraints and the selective distribution of flexibility, the interviews highlight elements related to managerial culture and the governance mechanisms of flexible working practices. In particular, the adoption or extension of margins of temporal flexibility is described as dependent not only on operational conditions, but also on how management interprets the meaning and function of working hours.

Interviewees tend to situate flexibility within a logic of stability and continuity rather than organisational experimentation. The electricity sector appears characterised by strong institutional embeddedness, which translates into a cultural orientation centred on reliability, control and risk management.

Within this context, innovation is primarily associated with technological dimensions - such as grid digitalisation, automation and predictive maintenance - rather than with organisational or temporal redesign interventions.

The interviews show that temporal flexibility is mainly interpreted as a retention and wellbeing tool rather than as a strategic lever for rethinking coordination models or performance evaluation systems. This interpretative framework influences the degree of managerial investment in process redesign. Management by objectives and results-based evaluation are recognised as desirable; however, their implementation requires competencies, tools and monitoring practices that are not always fully consolidated.

A recurring theme concerns the tension between trust and control. While flexibility is associated with greater individual accountability, there remains a preference for organisational models based on direct supervision and predefined roles, particularly in operational activities. In line with the dynamic managerial capabilities perspective, this configuration can be interpreted as an expression of consolidated cognitive schemas that shape what managers perceive as legitimate, feasible and consistent with sectoral priorities.

Moreover, the governance of flexibility appears characterised by a balance between formalisation and situated adaptation. Firms have introduced policies and regulations to discipline the modalities and limits of flexibility; however, these instruments operate within a logic of caution aimed at preserving internal coherence and operational stability. Standardisation encounters limits linked to the variety of activities and the strong differentiation across roles, rendering flexibility a regulated but non-transformative practice.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the management of flexibility in the electricity sector is filtered through a managerial culture oriented towards continuity and risk reduction. Flexibility is not rejected, but it is interpreted within cognitive and institutional frameworks that delimit its strategic scope, privileging incremental solutions over systemic reconfigurations of temporal regimes.

The main empirical dimensions emerging from the analysis are synthesised in Table 4.1, which provides a structured overview of the configuration of working time flexibility and its organisational implications in the electricity sector.

<b>Macro-Dimension</b>	<b>Main Evidence</b>	<b>Configuration of Flexibility</b>	<b>Organisational Implications</b>
<i><b>Structural constraints</b></i>	Service continuity, safety requirements, shift systems, technical interdependence	Limited flexibility in operational roles; circumscribed adjustments	Predominantly incremental adaptation
<i><b>Flexibility as a strategic lever</b></i>	Well-being, retention, employer attractiveness, productivity	Selective and welfare-oriented use	Partial transformative impact
<i><b>Disparities across roles</b></i>	Differences between professional categories	Greater autonomy for non-operational roles	Need for compensatory mechanisms
<i><b>Managerial culture and governance</b></i>	Stability orientation, risk aversion, cautious approach to change	Incomplete transition to output-based models	Innovation conditioned by embedded cognitive frames

**Table 4.1.4** - Summary of Empirical Findings on Work-Time Flexibility in the Italian Electricity Sector

## 4.2 The Change in Working Hours as Organisational Innovation

In light of the empirical evidence presented in the previous section, the question arises as to whether the change in working hours observed in the electricity sector can be interpreted as a form of organisational innovation. Addressing this issue requires an explicit comparison between the theoretical criteria outlined in Chapter 2 and the dynamics concretely observed in the analysed context.

Within the adopted theoretical framework, organisational innovation does not coincide with the mere introduction of new practices or the adoption of formal flexibility tools.

Rather, it entails a significant reconfiguration of the mechanisms through which work is coordinated, controlled and evaluated. From this perspective, modifying working hours can be considered innovative only insofar as such modification affects the underlying logics of organising activities, redefining the relationships between autonomy and supervision, between presence and results, and between time worked and value produced.

The empirical analysis shows that various forms of temporal and spatial flexibility are present in the electricity sector: hybrid working arrangements for compatible functions, flexible entry and exit windows, time banks and shift-swapping mechanisms. These practices indicate the existence of a certain degree of adaptation compared to traditional models rigidly based on physical presence. However, in most cases, their introduction does not appear to be accompanied by a structural revision of coordination mechanisms or by a systematic rethinking of organisational processes.

In particular, working time continues to perform a central function of synchronisation and operational coverage, especially in activities characterised by high technical intensity. In operational roles, working hours represent a device ensuring reliability and service continuity, which is difficult to replace with fully flexible or exclusively results-based models. The changes introduced mainly take the form of circumscribed adjustments aimed at enabling individual adaptation without altering the overall architecture of shift systems and activity coverage.

The differentiation between operational and non-operational roles represents one of the key elements in assessing the innovative character of temporal change. In non-operational functions, flexibility translates into greater autonomy in managing both working hours and workplace location, made possible by lower dependence on physical presence and the use of digital tools. In these areas, the introduction of hybrid working and broader time windows signals a partial shift towards coordination models less constrained by spatial and temporal simultaneity.

However, even in these cases, no radical reconfiguration of processes emerges. Flexibility is predominantly conceived as an organisational benefit functional to wellbeing and retention rather than as a lever for systematically redesigning work activities. The differentiated distribution of flexibility, with broader margins for staff functions and significant limitations for operational activities, confirms that the change does not assume a homogeneous or systemic character.

The structural differences in the configuration of work-time flexibility between operational and non-operational roles are summarised in Table 4.2.

In operational roles, working hours continue to be structured around shift and coverage logics that guarantee service continuity and uncertainty management. Temporal flexibility manifests itself through compensatory instruments - such as shift swaps or time banks - which introduce margins of individual adaptation without affecting the underlying organisational framework. In this sense, the temporal configuration remains substantially anchored to models of collective synchronisation, in which time represents a structural constraint rather than a strategic variable.

A further relevant element concerns performance control and evaluation mechanisms. Organisational innovation, insofar as it implies a shift from input-based to output-based logics, requires a transformation in supervision and coordination practices. The evidence collected indicates that, although the importance of management by objectives is formally recognised, a fully consolidated transition towards exclusively results-based evaluation systems is not observed. Physical presence, particularly in certain functions, continues to constitute an implicit reference point in assessing commitment and availability.

Within this framework, managerial mindset plays a crucial role. Interviewees describe a cultural orientation strongly centred on operational stability, risk management and service continuity. This orientation does not translate into a rejection of flexibility, but rather frames it within logics of caution and gradualism. Working hours are primarily perceived as instruments of reliability and coordination rather than as levers of organisational innovation. Consequently, the impetus towards a profound reconfiguration of temporal regimes appears limited, even in the absence of explicit resistance to change.

Overall, the change in working hours within the electricity sector can be interpreted as a selective and gradual process that introduces elements of adaptation without substantially altering the fundamental logics of coordination and control. The presence of flexible practices signals an evolution beyond rigidly prescriptive models; however, at present, it does not appear sufficient to qualify the phenomenon as a fully developed form of organisational innovation.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Operational Roles</b>	<b>Non-Operational Roles</b>
<i>Temporal flexibility</i>	Limited; rigid shift systems; shift swaps	Flexible entry/exit windows; autonomous schedule management
<i>Spatial flexibility</i>	Physical presence required	Hybrid work arrangements
<i>Coordination mechanisms</i>	Collective synchronisation; operational coverage	Digital coordination; goal-oriented alignment
<i>Control logic</i>	Direct supervision; presence-based reference	Partial shift toward output-based evaluation
<i>Primary function of flexibility</i>	Operational compensation	Well-being and talent retention

**Table 4.2** - Comparison Between Operational and Non-Operational Roles in the Configuration of Work-Time Flexibility

### 4.3 Comparison with the Literature

The evidence emerging from the analysis of the electricity sector enables a structured dialogue with the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2, highlighting both significant convergences and interpretative tensions in relation to studies on organisational innovation and working time flexibility.

First, the findings confirm the theoretical assumption that temporal flexibility cannot be automatically equated with organisational innovation. The literature emphasises that organisational innovation entails a substantial reconfiguration of coordination mechanisms, control practices and the logics governing the allocation of responsibilities. In the analysed context, the introduction of practices such as hybrid working, time banks or shift-swapping arrangements indicates a degree of adaptation compared to rigidly prescriptive models, yet it does not appear to be accompanied by a systemic transformation of organisational processes. In this respect, the empirical evidence aligns with perspectives that distinguish between the formal adoption of tools and the actual redefinition of organisational architectures.

Second, the results are consistent with the socio-technical perspective, according to which transformations in work systems require realignment between technical and social dimensions. In sectors characterised by high operational intensity, strong technical interdependence and stringent requirements of continuity and safety, working time does not represent a neutral variable but a structural element of the productive system. The evidence shows that, within the electricity sector, this configuration limits the possibility of intervening in working hours without affecting deeply embedded organisational equilibria. This finding is coherent with literature emphasising that organisational innovation in infrastructural contexts requires systemic and coordinated interventions rather than isolated adjustments.

A further area of convergence concerns the role of institutional logics and managerial interpretations. Studies in organisational institutionalism highlight that external pressures - whether cultural, regulatory or mimetic - do not automatically translate into organisational change, but are filtered through consolidated cognitive schemas and sectoral priorities. In the case analysed, flexibility is predominantly interpreted as a wellbeing and retention tool rather than as a strategic lever for transformation. This configuration supports the view that organisational change is mediated by cultural logics and managerial perspectives that shape what is perceived as legitimate, necessary or risky.

At the same time, elements of tension emerge in relation to certain narratives present in recent literature, particularly that developed in the post-pandemic period. Several studies have suggested that the diffusion of hybrid working has triggered a structural transformation of organisational models, fostering a generalised shift towards results-based systems. In the electricity sector, such a transition appears more gradual and differentiated. Physical presence continues to fulfil a relevant organisational and symbolic function, especially in operational roles, and management by objectives does not appear to be fully consolidated as a substitute for traditional supervision mechanisms.

Comparison with experiences from other sectors, discussed in Chapter 2, further suggests that the transformative scope of flexibility depends significantly on the alignment between organisational culture, digital investments and the strategic vision of management. In contexts where people-centred approaches and results-based management are already embedded, temporal flexibility tends to be integrated into broader transformation

processes. In the electricity sector, this alignment appears only partial, configuring a less linear evolutionary trajectory.

Overall, the dialogue with the literature indicates that the case of the electricity sector represents a context in which flexibility dynamics develop in a selective and gradual manner, confirming the importance of structural and cultural constraints in mediating the scope of organisational innovation. Rather than positioning itself at the extremes of inertia or radical transformation, the evidence suggests an intermediate configuration in which elements of adaptation coexist with logics of continuity.

The main operational conditions identified are summarised in Table 4.3.

<b>Key Dimension</b>	<b>Current Configuration Identified</b>	<b>Required Intervention</b>	<b>Expected Effect</b>
<b><i>Control logics</i></b>	Physical presence still symbolically relevant; management by objectives not fully consolidated	Strengthening of output-based evaluation and managerial training	Reduced dependence on physical presence
<b><i>Operational planning</i></b>	Rigid shift systems; flexibility predominantly compensatory	Digitalisation and greater transparency in shift management	Reduction of perceived rigidity
<b><i>Strategic framing</i></b>	Flexibility viewed primarily as a welfare/retention measure	Integration into strategic plans and HR systems	Alignment between policies and organisational vision
<b><i>Monitoring</i></b>	Absence of structured metrics	Introduction of indicators on productivity, engagement and turnover	More informed assessment of organisational impact

**Table 4.3** - Conceptual Configuration of Work-Time Flexibility in the Italian Electricity Sector

## 4.4 Organisational Implications

Overall, the implications emerging from the analysis suggest that working time flexibility, in contexts characterised by high operational intensity, cannot be addressed as an isolated or merely technical intervention. Rather, it requires an integrated vision encompassing organisational culture, managerial competencies and process architecture. Only under such conditions can flexibility move beyond a compensatory dimension and assume a more genuinely transformative scope.

From this perspective, the implications discussed above may be further articulated into a number of intervention trajectories consistent with the empirical evidence collected. If flexibility is to evolve from an adaptive measure into a conscious lever of organisational development, the principles identified must be translated into concrete operational choices.

First, in roles compatible with greater temporal autonomy, organisations could structurally strengthen management by objectives by investing in managerial training focused on clear goal-setting, continuous feedback systems and results-oriented performance evaluation.

The effective consolidation of output-based models represents an essential precondition for ensuring that flexibility does not remain anchored to implicitly presence-based logics, but is instead accompanied by a coherent redefinition of coordination and control mechanisms.

Second, even within operational contexts - although under stringent structural constraints linked to service continuity, safety requirements and technical interdependence - margins of incremental innovation remain exploitable. A more advanced use of digital tools for shift planning, combined with the introduction of transparent allocation and exchange mechanisms, could help reduce perceived rigidity and enhance organisational fairness without compromising system reliability. In this sense, innovation would not take the form of a radical disruption of existing models, but rather a progressive optimisation of coordination arrangements.

A further line of intervention concerns the explicit integration of flexibility into strategic planning documents and performance management systems. Embedding flexibility within the broader strategic framework of the organisation, rather than treating it as an ancillary or predominantly welfare-oriented measure, would allow for a more coherent alignment between formal policies, organisational objectives and evaluation systems. Such alignment constitutes a necessary condition for preventing flexible practices from remaining episodic or disconnected from the organisation's overarching vision.

Finally, firms operating in complex environments could benefit from the introduction of structured monitoring systems aimed at assessing the impact of flexibility on productivity, engagement and turnover. The absence of systematic indicators constrains the organisation's ability to accurately evaluate the effects of implemented practices and to guide potential evolutionary trajectories. A stronger integration between measurement tools, information systems and decision-making processes would contribute to transforming flexibility from an adaptive response into a strategically governed and consciously enacted organisational lever.

In this way, the lines of intervention outlined above should not be understood as prescriptive recipes, but rather as enabling conditions which, if activated coherently and systemically, may expand the transformative potential of working time flexibility in sectors characterised by high operational intensity.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research set out to investigate whether the change in working hours in the Italian electricity sector can be interpreted as a form of organisational innovation. Through a qualitative Gioia-inspired approach, the analysis sought to move beyond a merely descriptive account of flexibility, questioning its actual capacity to affect mechanisms of coordination, control and work configuration.

The empirical evidence shows that forms of temporal and spatial flexibility are present within the electricity sector, albeit with differentiated intensity and modalities. Instruments such as hybrid working, flexible entry and exit windows, time banks and shift-swapping arrangements indicate a partial departure from models rigidly grounded in physical presence. However, in most cases, these practices are not accompanied by a systemic reconfiguration of organisational processes or performance evaluation mechanisms.

A central finding of the study concerns the role of structural constraints. The infrastructural and capital-intensive nature of the electricity sector, characterised by service continuity requirements, high safety standards and strong technical interdependence, significantly delimits the margins for intervention on temporal regimes. In operational roles, working hours continue to fulfil an essential function of synchronisation and operational coverage, configuring flexibility primarily as a compensatory tool rather than a transformative lever. In non-operational roles, greater margins of autonomy are observed; yet even in these cases, flexibility is mainly interpreted as a wellbeing and retention measure rather than as an opportunity for organisational redesign.

Alongside structural constraints, the research highlights the importance of managerial mindset in mediating the scope of change. Working hours are primarily perceived as instruments of reliability and control, while innovation is predominantly associated with the technological dimension. This cultural orientation contributes to framing flexibility within logics of gradualism and caution, thereby limiting its transformative potential.

Overall, the findings suggest that the change in working hours in the Italian electricity sector cannot, at present, be classified as a fully developed form of organisational innovation. Rather, it takes the form of a set of incremental and selective adaptations embedded within consolidated organisational and cognitive arrangements. This does not imply the absence of evolutionary potential: flexibility could assume a more innovative

character if accompanied by strengthened managerial competencies, broader diffusion of results-oriented evaluation systems and an integrated redesign of work processes.

From a theoretical perspective, the contribution of this research lies in demonstrating how the relationship between flexibility and organisational innovation is deeply mediated by sectoral context and managerial interpretative frameworks. In this sense, the study invites a move beyond linear narratives that automatically associate the diffusion of hybrid working with structural transformation, instead proposing a configurational and context-conditioned reading of the phenomenon.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that firms operating in contexts characterised by high operational intensity should consider flexibility not merely as a welfare instrument, but as a potential lever for organisational development, provided that it is integrated with coherent interventions in governance systems, performance measurement and managerial culture. In the absence of such integration, flexibility risks remaining confined to adaptive or compensatory measures.

This research presents certain limitations. The analysis focuses on a specific sector and relies predominantly on the perspectives of HR functions, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Future research could incorporate the viewpoint of operational staff, develop cross-sector comparisons or adopt a longitudinal approach in order to observe the evolution of temporal regimes over time.

In conclusion, working time flexibility in the Italian electricity sector occupies an intermediate position between continuity and transformation. It does not confirm a narrative of organisational inertia, yet neither does it legitimise the idea of widespread organisational rupture. Rather, it reveals a conditioned process, in which the innovative potential of working time remains closely dependent on the activation of specific structural, cultural and managerial conditions.

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