



REP

Centro di Ricerca sugli Enti Pubblici Società di Fondazione Etica

GEOGRAPHY OF AGILE WORKING IN LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

THE CASE OF PROVINCIAL CAPITAL MUNICIPALITIES

Introduction

Citizens are usually particularly interested in the political dynamics of local authorities, such as provincial capital municipalities and almost never in the functioning capacity of the administrative machinery, without which no public intervention can be implemented. This is why the European Commission devotes many of its actions and recommendations to what it defines as “administrative capacity.” Without an efficient administration, even the most significant policies risk failing, especially at the local level.

To strengthen the administrative machinery, it is first necessary to understand its overall state of health. This is precisely what we do as the Research Center on Public Entities (REP): every year we map the overall performance of Public Administrations, including provincial capital municipalities, by collecting and analyzing the data that they are legally required to publish on their institutional websites¹. This makes it possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each individual authority and to take targeted action to support it.

¹ The analysis of public administration performance is based on the Administrative Capacity Index, a comparative evaluation model developed by Fondazione Etica over the past fifteen years. It differs from other evaluation models because it uses exclusively objective data published by the authorities, rather than data derived from interviews or questionnaires; it is not based solely on budget data but also on five other macro-areas that reflect the ESG sustainability of each entity (governance, personnel, services, procurement, environment); and the scoring system is assigned on a comparative basis.

Especially following the COVID-19 health emergency, a key element in measuring **organizational well-being** and staff welfare is the use of **agile working**. Moreover, agile working also serves as an **indicator of the administrative capacity** of local authorities, as it requires investments in digitalization, organizational skills, and results-oriented human resource management systems. The following analysis is devoted to these topics.

Smart working in the Italian Public Administration has evolved from a measure aimed at work-life balance and organizational innovation (Laws 124/2015 and 81/2017) into a “system-wide” tool to be planned and monitored within the performance cycle—initially through the POLA (Organizational Plan for Smart Working), and since 2022 through the PIAO (Integrated Plans of Activities and Organization).

More recently, the 2025 Guidelines on the PIAO² and the Operational Manual for Metropolitan Cities and Municipalities³ outline a phased process which, among other aspects, includes integration with economic and financial planning and budgeting, as well as a dedicated subsection (3.2). This subsection may include a snapshot as of December 31 each year, required compliance measures, actions, and indicators of organizational health related to smart working.

The regulation of smart working in Public Administration has also been affected by the renewal of the National Collective Bargaining Agreement (CCNL) for Local Functions 2022–2024, signed on February 23, 2026⁴, which introduces a comprehensive and distinct framework for both agile working and remote work within the local authorities sector, defining access conditions, areas of application, and organizational safeguards.

With the end of the emergency phase, the need has emerged to stabilize the institution of **smart working**, clarifying rights, duties, and limits. For the sake of clarity, it is worth noting that in public debate the term *smart working* is often used in a generic sense to refer to flexible forms of work carried out outside the usual workplace. In the Italian legal system, however, the properly regulated model is **agile working**, introduced by Law no. 81/2017 and subsequently governed also by collective bargaining. This model provides flexibility in terms of working time and location, along with a stronger focus on objectives and results. By contrast, **remote work**, also provided for by the CCNL for Local Functions, consists of carrying out work activities at a distance from a workstation designated by the administration or from the employee’s home, with more structured organizational arrangements that are generally more similar to on-site work.

For agile working, the contract provides that each Administration must first identify the activities that can actually be carried out remotely, while also specifying situations of exclusion, such as shift-based activities or those requiring equipment that cannot be adapted to smart working. The contractual framework also emphasizes the need to balance workers’ flexibility and well-being with the objectives of improving efficiency and the quality of public services, as well as with the specific technical and organizational needs of the Administrations.

² <https://www.funzionepubblica.gov.it/media/dmubevfl/piao-linee-guida-2025.pdf>

³ <https://www.funzionepubblica.gov.it/media/4fbngtey/piao-manuale-operativo-cm-e-comuni.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.aranagenzia.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/CCNL-Comparto-2022-2024-23-02-26.pdf>

Alongside agile working, the contract also regulates remote work, distinguishing between its possible forms of implementation, which may include the employee's home or other locations designated by the Administration, such as coworking spaces or satellite offices. In this area, the renewal of the CCNL introduces more detailed technological and organizational requirements and, above all, provides for a prior assessment of the suitability of the workplace in terms of safety and accident prevention, to be carried out at the start of the activity and subsequently at least every six months. This is an operationally significant element, often not explicitly addressed in the PIAOs of local authorities. Indeed, the need to ensure such organizational compliance and safety conditions may help explain the more limited diffusion of agile working: where an authority lacks adequate tools to manage these checks and requirements, the application of this arrangement tends to be more restricted.

These are limitations and obstacles that emerge from the present analysis, which shows how agile working now represents an organizational model that is **firmly established** within local Public Administration, yet still characterized by **highly uneven diffusion**. In particular, the differences observed among **authorities across different territories and of varying sizes** suggest that the **adoption of smart working does not depend solely on a favorable regulatory framework, but also on the organizational, technological, and managerial capacity of individual Administrations**.

What the data show for provincial capital municipalities

The overall picture analyzed below focuses on an indicator measuring the share of **employees engaged in agile working** in a provincial capital municipality (Comune CP) out of the total number of permanent employees⁵.

Overall, considering all the authorities analyzed, the **national figure**⁶ for employees **working in agile mode stands at 20.3%**. This relatively modest figure suggests, on the one hand, that smart working is now an organizational model present in many municipal administrations, and, on the other, that it is not yet fully consolidated as a widespread and structural model.

The analysis of the top and bottom 10 performers (Figure 1) highlights **significant variability**.

At the top of the ranking are municipalities with high levels of adoption, **with more than 45% of employees** working in agile mode, such as Bologna (47.2%) and Terni (45.1%), the two cities that come closest to having half of their workforce in agile working.

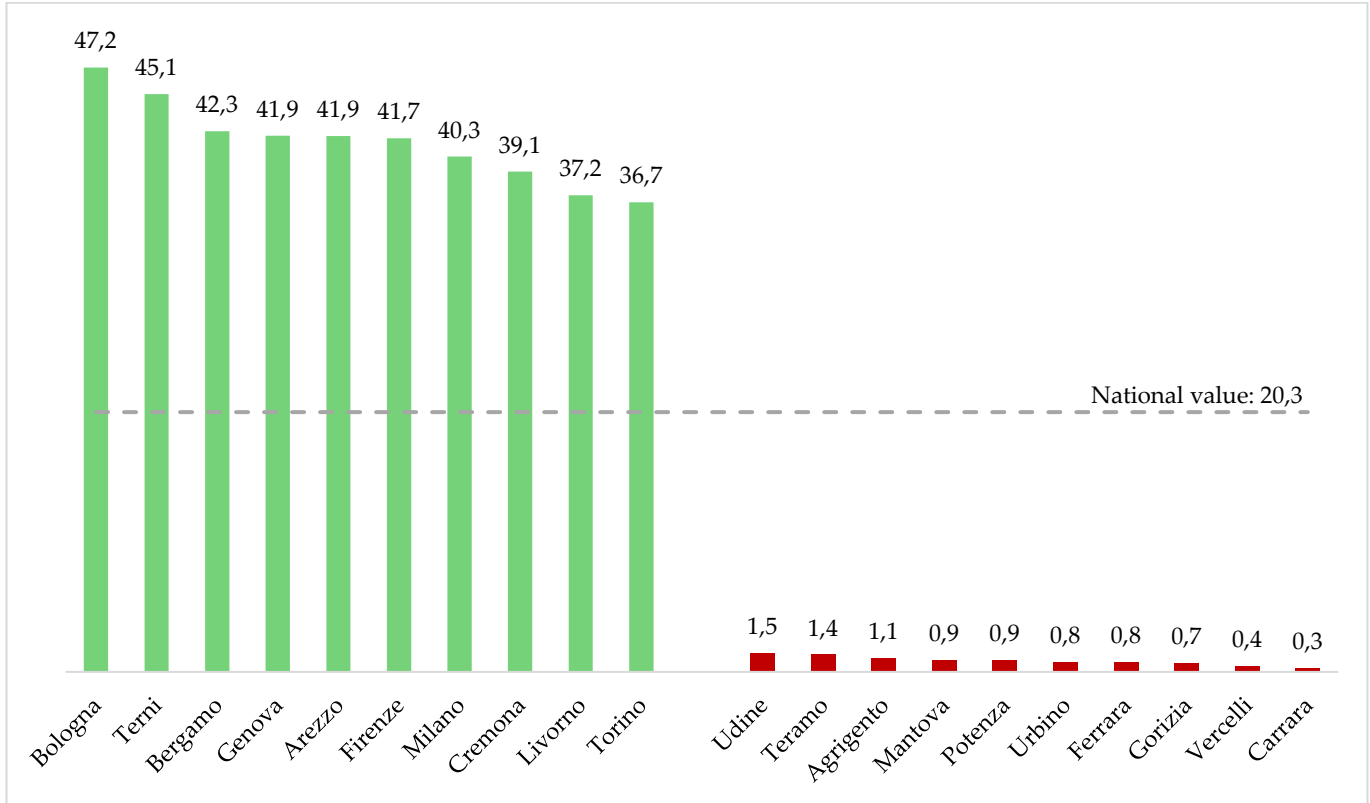
Still above 40% are Bergamo (42.3%), Genova and Arezzo (both at 41.9%), Firenze (41.7%), and Milano (40.3%). As can be seen, these are all municipalities in Central and Northern Italy.

⁵ The data, drawn from the MEF's Conto Annuale, refer to 2023, the most recent update available as of the drafting of this report (March 2026): see <https://contoannuale.rgs.mef.gov.it/>

⁶ The indicator on agile working in provincial capital municipalities is calculated as the ratio between employees engaged in agile working and permanent staff. In calculating the national value, as well as territorial and size-based values, aggregate figures are not obtained as an average of municipal values, but rather as the ratio between the totals of variables A and B aggregated for each level of analysis (region, size class, and macro-area). This procedure allows for a measure that is weighted according to the workforce size of each authority and avoids distortions arising from differences in municipal staff size. The calculation also includes entities with a value of zero, in order to provide a comprehensive representation of the diffusion of agile working across the full set of provincial capital municipalities considered.

Also in Central Italy is the municipality at the bottom of the ranking: Carrara, with a share of employees in agile working **just above 0%**. Slightly better, but still below 1%, are other municipalities such as Vercelli (0.4%), Gorizia (0.7%), Ferrara and Urbino (both at 0.8%), and Mantova and Potenza (both at 0.9%).

Figure 1. Top & Bottom 10 – Employees in agile working as a share of total permanent staff (%)



Source: REP Administrative Capacity Index – Re-elaboration based on MEF data (2023)

Note: The figure does not include municipalities with a percentage of employees in agile working equal to zero, which are reported in Table 1.

However, there is one piece of data that should be highlighted in negative terms: **just over a quarter of provincial capital municipalities** (26.8%) report having **no employees engaged in agile working**, thus performing even worse than the authorities that appear at the bottom of the ranking in Figure 1.

These are 30 municipalities, listed in Table 1: mostly smaller municipalities, though still classified as provincial capitals⁷. Among them, in Southern Italy, the municipalities of Palermo and Catania stand out—large entities included within the administrative perimeter of their respective Metropolitan Cities.

⁷ The smallest provincial capital municipality is Urbino, with 13,849 inhabitants according to the latest ISTAT data as of 01.01.2026.

Table 1. Municipalities with values equal to zero for the indicator “Employees in agile working as a share of total permanent staff (%)”

Macro-area	Size	Provincial capital municipalities
North	Medium	<i>La Spezia, Varese, Vicenza</i>
	Small	<i>Belluno, Cuneo, Imperia, Pordenone, Verbania,</i>
Center	Medium	<i>Pesaro</i>
	Small	<i>Ascoli Piceno, Macerata, Rieti</i>
South	Large	<i>Caserta, Catania, Palermo,</i>
	Medium	<i>Catanzaro, Cosenza, Foggia, Messina, Pescara, Taranto</i>
	Small	<i>Avellino, Benevento, Caltanissetta, Carbonia, Chieti, Matera, Nuoro, Trapani, Vibo Valentia</i>

Source: REP Administrative Capacity Index – Re-elaboration based on MEF data (2023)

Finally, it should be noted that in the middle of the ranking of the 112 provincial capital municipalities, the distribution of values is more uniform in terms of geographical location: values close to the overall figure are recorded by Southern municipalities such as Barletta (18.8%), as well as Northern municipalities such as Lecco (20.8%), and Central municipalities such as Lucca (19.3%).

Agile Working by Territories and Population

Continuing the analysis, one of the most significant findings concerns the geographical dimension of the phenomenon. By aggregating the data by macro-regional areas, a clear North–Central–South gradient emerges.

In **Northern Italy**, the share of employees engaged in agile working reaches an overall macro-area value of **27.8%**, significantly higher than the national figure of 20.3%.

Central Italy is positioned at intermediate levels, with a percentage of **16.1%**, which is still below the national overall value.

In **Southern Italy**, the spread of agile working is considerably more limited, standing at **8.8%**, a value more than three times lower than that of the North.

Table 2. Employees in agile working as a share of total permanent staff (%) – Values by macro-area

Macro-area	Number of employees in agile working	Total number of permanent employees	Overall value by macro-area (%)
Center	6.020	37.419	16,1
North	17.621	63.402	27,8
South	2.425	27.453	8,8

Source: REP Administrative Capacity Index – Re-elaboration based on MEF data (2023)

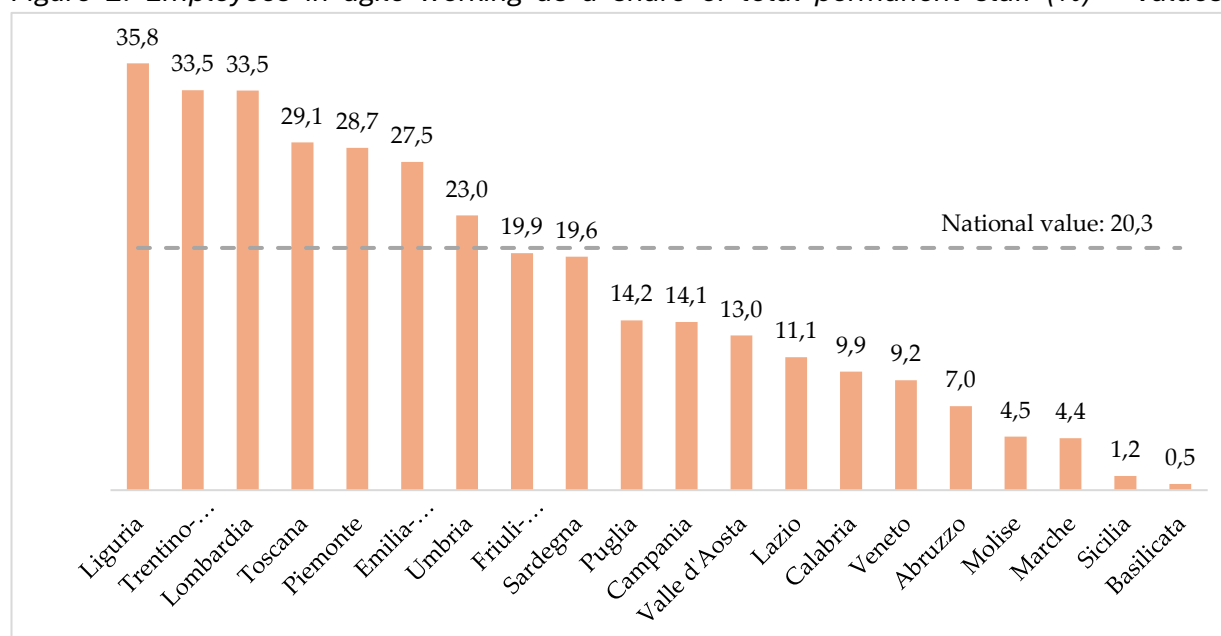
The territorial gap therefore appears pronounced: **municipalities in Northern Italy** show a **diffusion of agile working that is more than three times higher** than those in the Southern regions.

The regional-level analysis further reinforces this evidence (Figure 2).

The **highest percentages**, above 30%, are recorded in provincial capital municipalities in Liguria (35.8%), Lombardy (33.5%), and Trentino-Alto Adige (33.5%). In Central Italy, the highest share is found in municipalities in Tuscany (29.1%).

By contrast, provincial capital municipalities in Southern Italy not only exhibit **the lowest percentages**, but in some cases levels barely above zero, such as in Basilicata (0.5%) and Sicily (1.2%).

Figure 2. Employees in agile working as a share of total permanent staff (%) – Values by Region



Source: REP Administrative Capacity Index – Re-elaboration based on MEF data (2023)

The **gap between municipalities**, grouped by regional level, with the highest and lowest diffusion of agile working is particularly **significant**: between the maximum value recorded in the provincial capital municipalities of Liguria (35.8%) and the minimum in Basilicata (0.5%), **there is a difference of more than 35 percentage points**.

Another interpretative aspect concerns the **demographic size** of municipalities. The data show (Table 2) a clear **correlation between the size of the authority and the diffusion of agile working**.

Table 3. Employees in agile working as a share of total permanent staff (%) – Values by demographic size

Size	Number of employees in agile working	Number of employees in agile working	Overall value by size (%)
Big (over 250,000 inhabitants)	17,571.00	70,950.00	24.8
Medium (between 249,999 and 60,000 inhabitants)	8,022.00	46,959.00	17.1
Small (lower than 60,000 inhabitants)	473.00	10,365.00	4.6

Source: REP Administrative Capacity Index – Re-elaboration based on MEF data (2023)

In **large provincial capital municipalities** (over 250,000 inhabitants), the share of employees working in agile mode reaches 24.8%, a figure higher than the national overall value. In **medium-sized municipalities** (between 60,000 and 249,999 inhabitants), the percentage drops to 17.1%, which is also below the national figure. Finally, in **the smallest provincial capital municipalities** (fewer than 60,000 inhabitants), the diffusion of agile working is very limited, with a share of 4.6%.

The gap between large and small provincial capital municipalities is therefore very wide: in the largest urban centers, the share of workers in smart working is more **than five times higher than in the smallest ones**. This outcome is likely influenced by **the difficulty of commuting in large cities**, as well as by certain **characteristics typical of larger administrations**, including greater availability of digital infrastructure, more complex organizational structures, and a higher presence of administrative activities that are suitable for agile working.