Is there a European 'Great Resignation'? The case of technicians in the entertainment sector in Italy

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Abstract

The article examines the debates on the 'Great Resignation' during the Covid-19 crisis in Europe focusing on the case study of technicians in the entertainment sector in Italy. In this passion-driven sector, workers are particularly exposed to processes of precarisation. Drawing on a web survey carried out by the Centro Studi Doc Foundation in November 2021 and interviews with key informants, the impact of the pandemic on labour trajectories and the reasons for leaving or changing jobs are analysed. Findings indicate that unsustainable working conditions and job and economic insecurity were the primary drivers of exit. The pandemic crisis prompted this category of workers to seek employment in other industries, showing the low quality of employment in the entertainment sector and encouraging a process of confrontation that revealed the low quality of working conditions in the entertainment sector. However, post-pandemic employment recovery did not yield significant improvements in working conditions in the sector in the short term.

Keywords: Covid-19, Great Resignation, Entertainment technicians, Mixed-methods

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Abstract Italiano

L'articolo esamina il dibattito sulle Grandi Dimissioni durante la crisi legata al Covid-19 in Europa, concentrandosi sul caso dei tecnici nel settore dello spettacolo in Italia. In questo settore, in cui la componente della passione per il proprio lavoro è molto rilevante, lavoratori e lavoratrici sono particolarmente esposti/e ai processi di precarizzazione. Sulla base di un'indagine web condotta dalla Fondazione Centro Studi Doc nel novembre 2021 e di una serie di interviste con testimoni privilegiati, viene analizzato l'impatto della pandemia sulle traiettorie lavorative e le ragioni per lasciare o cambiare lavoro. I risultati indicano che le principali ragioni di abbandono del settore sono le condizioni di lavoro insostenibili e l'insicurezza lavorativa ed economica. La pandemia ha costretto questa categoria di soggetti a cercare lavoro in altri settori, mettendo in luce la bassa qualità del lavoro nel settore dello spettacolo. Comunque, la ripresa dell'occupazione nel periodo post-pandemia non è stata accompagnata da un sostanziale miglioramento delle condizioni di lavoro nel settore nel breve periodo.

Parole chiave: Covid-19, grandi dimissioni, tecnici dello spettacolo, mixed methods

1. Introduction

Over the past year, a lively debate has arisen about the so-called 'Great Resignation', also known as the 'Big Quit', a phenomenon observed mainly in North America and characterised by the departure of an extraordinarily large number of workers from the workplace in a short period (Cook, 2021; Serenko, 2022; Sheather and Slattery, 2021). In the early 2020s, according to the US Bureau of Labour Statistics, during the first wave of lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most workers kept their jobs but then quit *en masse* as the recovery started and new jobs became available. In total, more than a fifth of workers had left their jobs since April 2021 (Zagorsky, 2022). In this scenario, the sector most affected by mass resignations has been the hospitality industry. In January 2022, the accommodation and food services sector recorded the highest quit rate

(6.0%), followed by retail trade (4.6%) and the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector (3.4%) (Liu-Lastres *et al.*, 2023).

This ongoing trend has been interpreted from different positions. On the one hand, it has been read as the beginning of a silent mobilisation against working conditions that have become unacceptable, and therefore as a radical change in people's attitudes towards work (Coin, 2023; Herrman, 2021; Reich, 2021). On the other hand, other scholars have pointed out that the decline in participation rates is due more to the retirement of older people than to young people quitting (see Choonara, 2022) and to the lowest unemployment rates in the Global North in decades (see Ng and Stanton, 2023). Beyond the different interpretations, there are several gaps that need to be filled in order to understand whether it makes sense to speak of a 'Big Quit' in the aftermath of the pandemic.

This article aims to contribute to this debate in two main ways. First, it empirically analyses the phenomenon in the European continent, by focusing on a context particularly affected by the Covid-19 health emergency: northern Italy. Second, it takes the case of entertainment technicians, a category of subjects in the variegated landscape of artistic work that has been theorised but poorly empirically investigated (Battentier, 2021; Becker, 1982).

The article is structured as follows: the following section addresses the current debate on the Great Resignation by considering the different interpretative perspectives proposed on the phenomenon. Sections 3 focuses on the entertainment sector in Italy. Section 4 illustrates the case study and methods, and Sections 5 reports the main findings. Finally, in the conclusions, we propose our interpretation of the dynamics observed, also in the light of the broad post-pandemic debate on the Great Resignation.

2. The 'Big Quit': A new phenomenon with old dynamics

The Great Resignation, an expression that became popular during the Covid-19 pandemic, represents a phenomenon observed in recent years in some countries in the Global North, characterised by a significant number of workers voluntarily leaving their jobs. Although this phenomenon is particularly relevant in the United States, it has triggered extensive debate in the European context as well.

The phenomenon of the Great Resignation is not entirely unprecedented. Some authors (Gittleman, 2022) have pointed out that periods of rapid economic recovery have often led to a wave of voluntary resignations, as they present numerous job opportunities, which make it easier for workers to find new positions that better match their preferences or offer better working conditions. This perspective suggests that the current wave of resignations may be linked to economic cycles rather than being an entirely new phenomenon (Amanor-Boadu, 2022; Hobijn, 2022). In this regard, it has been estimated that in the United States during the initial phase of the lockdown and the end of 2022, the average monthly quit rate was considerably higher than those documented since the conclusion of the Great Recession (end of 2009) (Amanor-Boadu, 2022). Although data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate an upward trajectory of the quit rate since late 2009,[1] this trend showed a significant acceleration after the advent of the pandemic, with a concomitant increase in the volumes of job vacancies and a decline in the number of employed persons. In the months following the onset of the pandemic, in the US, the total number of employees (not considering agriculture) fell by 14.6%, largely due to an increase in voluntary resignations. At the conclusion of March 2022, the US labour market exhibited 11.5 million vacancies, in comparison to a peak of 4.5 million resignations, which corresponded to 3% of the total workforce. This represented a notable increase from the 2.6% observed prior to the pandemic. These trends were more pronounced in small and medium-sized enterprises, where union density is generally lower and working conditions and pay are less favourable (Amanor-Boadu, 2022). The most recent projections, however, indicate a return of the quit and vacancy rates and trends to pre-pandemic levels.

Similar trends in the quit rates have also been documented in the European context, for example in France (Dares, 2022), the UK (Choonara, 2022), and Italy (INPS, 2023). However, descriptive analyses of people out of work who have recently left their job reveal that more than two out of three did it for labour market reasons, i.e. the end of a fixed-term contract, redundancy, or the closure of a business for economic reasons, and not as a personal choice. This is especially for those with a low level of education and young people (Eurostat, 2023). Others showed that the decline in participation rates is due more to the

[1] The monthly trend of labour market flows in the US can be monitored here: https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/JTSQUR

retirement of older people than to young workers' employment transitions (Choonara, 2022).

In Italy, INPS documented that between 2021 and the beginning of 2022 there was an increase in resignations of 1.074 million in 2021 and 1.184 million in 2022, i.e. an increase of 14% and 26% respectively compared to 2019. At the same time, it estimated that after three months, around two out of three resigning workers (under 60) had found a new job (INPS, 2023). Recent European data also show an increase in job changes immediately after the pandemic period: the number of employed in new jobs grew more than the total number of employed persons. In the first quarter of 2022, an average of 4.1% in Europe had a job that started in the last three months. One year earlier, the figure was 3.6%. Finland and the Netherlands had the highest percentage of new entrants to the labour market (respectively 6.6% and 6.1%) (Eurostat, 2024). Overall, this data seems to support the reading of those who argue that rather than a 'Great Resignation', it is more accurate to describe the phenomenon as a 'Great Reshuffle' and to employment transitions of workers in search of better employment conditions and not merely economic ones (Orrell and Cox, 2021; INPS 2023; Busso, 2023).

In this frame, some authors (Coin, 2023; Sull *et al.*, 2022) have also taken the opportunity to return work culture to the centre of academic discussion, recalling its fundamental role concerning the phenomenon of resignation. Toxic work environments, characterised by factors such as lack of respect, non-inclusiveness, inadequate pay, unethical behaviour and lack of recognition, contribute significantly to employee dissatisfaction and turnover. A survey conducted by the PEW Research Centre in early 2022 documented that most American workers who left their jobs in 2021 stated that the main reasons were low pay (63%), lack of advancement opportunities (63%), and feeling disrespected at work (57%) (Parker and Horowitz, 2022). A toxic work culture is in fact a strong predictor of job quitting, linked to high turnover even more than remuneration, especially in those industries where workers have a high level of self-identification with their jobs, to the point that, in some cases, they are almost disposed to work for free (Brook et al., 2020; Scharff, 2018). In this perspective, mass job quitting has also been read as an act of resistance to a toxic work culture and unsatisfactory conditions. In her analysis, Francesca Coin (2023) argues that workers, in search of autonomy and self-realisation, are quitting their jobs because they find them unsatisfactory or not aligned with their personal values. The Great Resignation is in this case interpreted as a form of silent collective protest against the commodification of labour, and a demand for a more human and more satisfying work environment.

Beyond mass resignations, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have radically changed workers' expectations and attitudes towards work. Flexibility, work-life balance, and meaningful work have become more important than ever. In this regard, Ng and Stanton (2023) emphasised the need for policies that support employee well-being and satisfaction in the post-pandemic era, also in an effort to attract and retain workers. In a similar vein, Serenko (2022) also highlighted the impact of large resignations, especially in the case of qualified employees, urging organisations to reflect on the consequences of losing precious institutional knowledge, and to implement new organisational policies that are capable of valorising employees' work. The phenomenon of 'Big Quit' thus presents itself in a complex and multifaceted manner, with significant implications for workers, organisations, and society at large.

3. The impact of Covid-19 on the entertainment sector in Italy

All major institutions at international and European levels have estimated that the impact of the pandemic has been especially harsh for the entertainment sector, whose workers have been one of the most affected working groups due to the shutdown of entertainment, mainly performing arts activities. At the beginning of the pandemic in Italy, all entertainment and event activities were the first to be stopped by the Prime Ministerial Decree of 25 February 2020. Then, the Prime Ministerial Decree of 9 March 2020 turned the Country into a 'protected zone' and activated the first lockdown (11 March – 4 May). From this date, activities resumed slowly and with many restrictions, until a second Prime Ministerial Decree (24 October 2020) that again closed all aggregation activities and activated a new form of lockdown for the following months. In 2021, the containment measures continued until the summer, gradually reducing, but limited capacity obligations for shows remained until 31 March 2022 when Italy emerged from the state of emergency. The impact of these total or partial closures led to a loss of 8 billion euros in 2020 in the entertainment industry, equivalent to -73% of turnover, compared to the 11.4 billion euros earned by the industry in 2019 (Martinelli, 2021). This loss corresponded to a substantial decline in the number of people employed, with a loss of 68,322 workers (-

20.6%) of the 331,503 workers who were active in 2019 (INPS, 2024). In 2019, in Italy, 14,675 workers in the entertainment industry were technicians, accounting for 4.5% of the total number of workers in the sector. On average, each technician in 2019 had an income of 13,120 euros for 121 working days per year. During the first year of the pandemic, the number of entertainment technicians decreased by around 1,800 units, equivalent to a loss of 12.5% of workers. Similarly, the annual salary and average working days decreased by 116% (average of 11,277 euros as annual income in 2020) and 125% (average of 97 working days in 2020), respectively (INPS, 2024).

Taken together, the trends just described make the entertainment sector a privileged site for studying how the pandemic crisis contributed to changes in labour relations at the individual, organisational, and institutional levels, and to the development of the material and cultural conditions underlying job quitting mentioned in the previous section. In this frame, we want to understand how the pandemic crisis contributed to reshaping employment relations, career prospects, and work-life balance for entertainment technicians in Italy. What were the main reasons that influenced their exit and their future career prospects? And what happened to the employment conditions in the entertainment sector in the post-pandemic period?

4. Research context and methods

To analyse the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on entertainment technicians, between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022 the Research Centre 'Doc Foundation' conducted a web survey. The research was financed by Rete Doc and commissioned by Doc Servizi, the largest Italian cooperative of entertainment workers with almost 6,000 members in 2024, of which 1,500 were technicians. Workers are employees of the cooperative and maintain autonomy in their business management (Martinelli *et al.*, 2022a; Mondon-Navazo *et al.*, 2021). Founded in 1990 in Verona, the cooperative has more than 30 years of history of attention to working conditions of performing arts workers. Doc Servizi was hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, with a loss of 61% of its turnover (from 59 million euros in 2019 to 23 million in 2020) and 45.3% of members (Martinelli, 2021). In response to the crisis triggered by Covid-19, the cooperative undertook several initiatives to support workers in the entertainment sector. It launched the sector's first petition, which successfully secured financial aid from the Italian Government. Additionally, it provided 24-hour assistance to workers, offering guidance on accessing subsidies, navigating the implications of government decrees, and managing events under new regulations. The cooperative also introduced a (paid) training program that attracted over 1,100 participants. Furthermore, in collaboration with other organisations and networks, it proposed a series of reforms for the Italian entertainment industry, some of which were subsequently adopted (Martinelli, 2021).

Considering that most cooperative members are entertainment technicians, Doc Servizi asked the Centro Studi Doc Foundation to launch a survey to collect data and information on the working situation of this group of workers and to study what actions should be taken to support the sector. The result was a study carried out in collaboration with key players in the world of entertainment technicians (Martinelli *et al.*, 2022b).[2] In particular, the web survey was administered between 11 and 23 November 2021 via each partner's web channels (social media, newsletters, intranet, etc.) to more than 1,000 technicians who were employed in the entertainment sector before the pandemic. The questionnaire had two completion tracks, one for workers still working in the entertainment sector, and one for those who had left the sector. The final sample includes 947 valid answers. This sample represented 7% of the total number of technicians in the entertainment sector in Italy and can be considered sufficiently representative, reflecting the coherence that exists between the demographic characteristics of the sample and the macro characteristics detected by INPS.

The questionnaire focused on job conditions in autumn 2021 and reasons for leaving the entertainment sector. It analyses socio-demographic controls (sex, age class, zone of residence) and job-related variables: sector, type of profession, type of contract, and years of experience in the sector. Descriptives of the sample are included in Table 1. At the end of the questionnaire, participants had the choice to answer the open question: "Would you like to tell us more about your experience with the situation on the labour market for technicians?"

[2] The study was carried out by Centro Studi Doc Foundation Doc in collaboration with ANSI (Associazione Nazionale Services Italiani), Adotta un Fonico e dagli un Lavoro Vero, Bauli in Piazza, BEA (Best Events Awards), BeNow (ex-fasolmusic.coop), Music Innovation Hub, STS Communication srl, Skeldon, UNISCA, ZioGiorgio, and #ChiamateNoi (Martinelli *et al.*, 2022b).

The work realities of entertainment technicians remain largely underexplored in the academic debate (Battentier, 2021; Becker, 1982), with national statistical institutes (INPS and ISTAT) providing only aggregated data relating to the macro-group of ‘technicians.’ To address this gap, we adopted the classification criteria currently used by Doc Servizi to delineate the work sectors and professional areas specific to entertainment technicians. In particular, work sectors include Live music and festivals; TV, film and broadcasting; Theatre; Corporate, congresses and exhibitions; and Other. The professional areas include Audio/sound; Lighting; Video; Production; Scenography and staging; and Other. Descriptives show that in the pre-pandemic period, the majority of web-survey respondents worked in the live music and festival sector (43%) (Table 1). The rest of the technicians split equally between the theatre (17.4%), the corporate sector (congresses and conventions) (17.4%), and the TV, cinema and broadcasting sector (14%). Before the pandemic, about 75.9% of technicians worked in the areas of audio (39.4%), lighting (21%), and video (15.5%). This was followed by the production area (13%), sets and props (6.9%) and facilities (2.6%) (Table 1)

The questionnaire was also accompanied by a series of informal conversations and formal interviews with key experts within Doc Servizi, who shared their expertise on the group of technicians in the entertainment sector. In fact, the collaboration between the authors – two academics and a researcher from within Doc Servizi and current director of the Fondazione Centro Studi Doc – began in 2018 as part of a six-year comparative ethnographic project (Mondon-Navazo *et al.*, 2021; Murgia, 2025). This allowed a constant dialogue with the members of the cooperative and a privileged, long-term observatory on the internal dynamics and characteristics of the workers who were part of it.

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics

	Freq.		Freq.
Sex		*Sector*	
Men	84.9	Live music, and festivals	43.3
Women	15.1	Theater	17.4
Age		Corporate, congress and exhibitions	17.4
<45	60.1	TV, film, broadcasting	14.0
>=45	39.9	Other	7.8

Area of residence		*Professional Areas*	
North-West	36.5	Audio/sound	39.4
North-East	27.0	Lighting	21.0
Centre	23.3	Video	15.5
South	13.2	Production	13.0
Experience in the entertainment sector		Scenography and staging	6.9
10 year or less	69.5	Other	4.2
More than 10 years	30.5	*Contract*	
		Cooperatives	58.1
		Self-employment	23.4
		Dependent	18.5
N.	*947*		

5. Findings. Is there a Great Resignation among entertainment technicians in Italy?

5.1. Who are the Quitters?

Focusing on the working conditions of the technicians who participated in the web survey after the third lockdown in Italy, Figure 1 illustrates that most respondents resumed their professional activities (78%), although one-fifth of the technicians (21.7%) ceased working in the entertainment industry. Notably, one-tenth of the total (10.3%) are still seeking employment in this sector, while another tenth has opted to pursue opportunities outside of it. The proportion of individuals who left the industry (leavers) is approximately 11.4%. Leavers are defined by adding the employed and unemployed in alternative sectors to those who are inactive.

Figure 1 – Job condition in Autumn 2021(N=947)

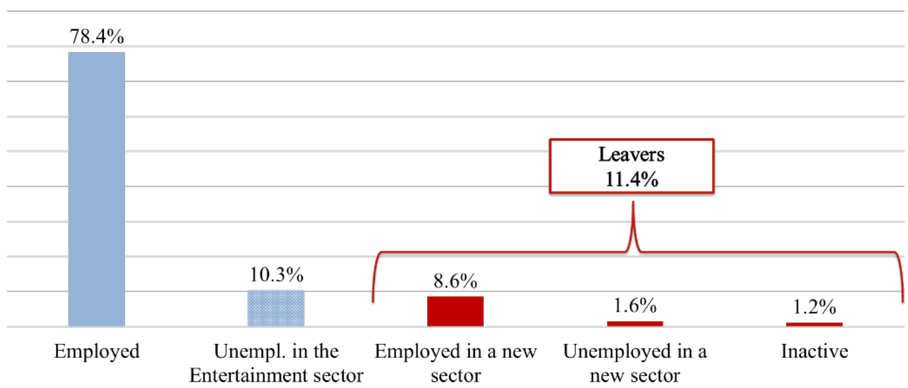
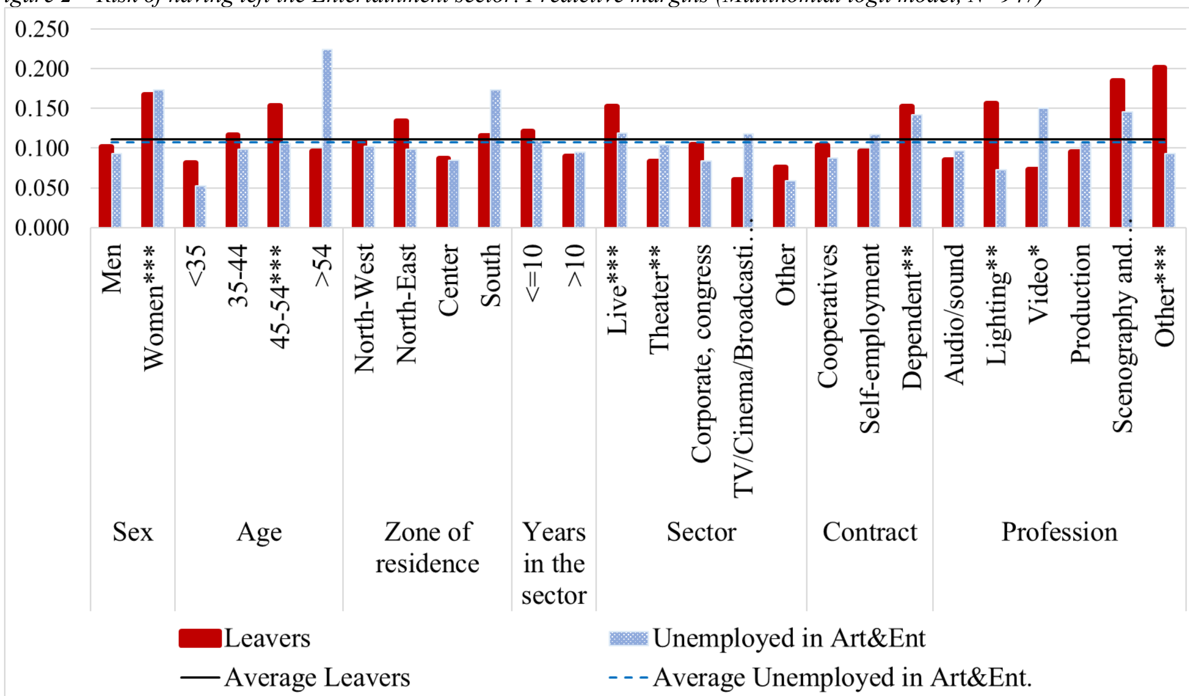


Figure 2 compares the risks of being a leaver with those of searching for a job in the entertainment sector, controlling for a selection of socio-demographic (sex, age, zone of residence) and work characteristics (sector, contract and type of profession before the pandemic, years working in the sector). Figure 2 reports predicted probabilities based on a multinomial logit model. The results indicate that the probability of leaving the sector is higher among women and those aged 45-54. When considering working conditions prior to the pandemic, the risk of exiting the entertainment sector is more pronounced among those employed in the live performance sector. Conversely, a markedly lower risk of leaving the sector is observed among those engaged in the TV/cinema/broadcasting sector. It can also be observed that the impact of the dropouts was more pronounced among those engaged in de facto prescribed artistic domains during the period of lockdown. On the contrary, the crisis had a less pronounced effect on those whose work was more amenable to remote working practices and hybrid organisation of work that were favoured by the security regulations imposed by the pandemic emergency. In line with this observation, the results for occupation type show that those most likely to leave the sector are those who perform tasks and duties related to live event production, such as stage and prop technicians, sound technicians, and the category ‘other’, which mainly includes safety managers and structural technicians (e.g. scaffolders).

Furthermore, the probability of leaving the sector or being unemployed appears to be significantly associated with the type of employment status held prior to the pandemic (Fig. 2). Those employed by agencies and entertainment companies are the most likely to have considered leaving the sector or to be unemployed. This outcome is, to some extent, a consequence of the gradual recovery of labour demand in the sector in Italy following the pandemic. Indeed, this recovery did not reach pre-pandemic levels until 2023. Conversely, this indicates a greater vulnerability in terms of maintaining one's professional trajectory in the aftermath of a crisis. At the same time, data suggest that individuals employed by 'entertainment cooperatives' are more likely to resume their pre-pandemic employment and less likely to leave the sector or remain unemployed in the post-emergency period. Ultimately, the risk profile of 'leavers' differs from that of those seeking employment within it. This is particularly evident in terms of age, sector and occupation. Individuals aged over 54 and those residing in the South are more likely to still be looking for a job in the entertainment sector. More specifically, those employed as video technicians and set designers are also particularly vulnerable to unemployment within the entertainment sector.

Figure 2 – Risk of having left the Entertainment sector. Predictive margins (Multinomial logit model, N=947)



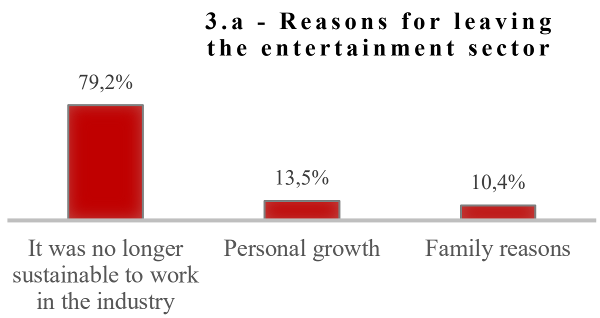
*** p<0.001 **p<0.005 *p<0.01

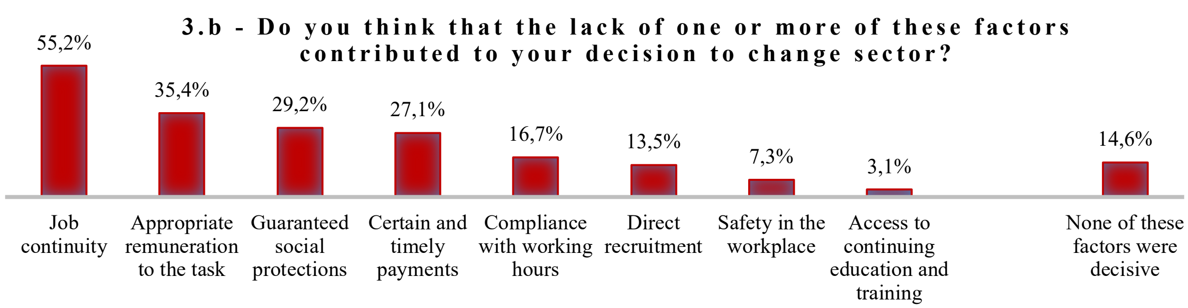
5.2. Reasons for quitting

The analysis of the reasons for leaving the entertainment sector reveals that eight out of ten respondents indicate that the unaffordability of continuing to work in the sector is the primary factor influencing their decision to leave (Figure 3). This result is consistent across all demographic and employment status categories. The remaining respondents (10%) indicated that their decision was motivated by factors related to personal growth and family commitments. The pursuit of a superior work-life balance represents a pivotal factor influencing individuals' decisions to depart from the industry, particularly for those in technical roles who are frequently on tour and separated from their families. It is noteworthy that this motivation is most prevalent among individuals aged 54 and above. Consequently, leaving the sector is not perceived as a choice, but rather as an inevitability. In the context of prolonged industrial action and the absence of government support, many workers experienced a reduction in their savings, compelling them to seek alternative employment. The work of entertainment technicians is frequently characterised by seasonal employment, with lengthy periods of travel, and a considerable workload, which implies a lack of continuity and fragmentation of work activities. Finally, this category of workers is poorly organised and represented, resulting in a working context with low levels of protection and stability.

Considering these precarious working conditions, the questionnaire sought to ascertain whether and to what extent such conditions had influenced the decision to leave the sector. The analysis indicates that for approximately 50% of those who left the sector, the lack of job continuity was a significant factor in their decision to seek employment in another sector. For approximately one-third of leavers active in a new sector, the lack of appropriate remuneration for the tasks performed and guaranteed social protection also constituted an important factor. Finally, for approximately one-quarter of respondents, the lack of certain and regular payments also played a role. Once more, the prevalence of these shortcomings in working conditions is shared equally by women and men, age groups and professional profiles.

Figure 3 – Reasons for leaving the entertainment sector- Only employed or unemployed in a new sector after pandemic crises. (N=96)





The survey also included an open question aimed at investigating the motivations of workers who left the entertainment sector. The question was posed in these terms: “Would you like to tell us more about your decision to change the sector?” In contrast to what usually happens with questionnaires, where people hardly ever answer open-ended questions, in this case about one in two respondents who left the sector answered this question and, in several cases, did so quite articulately.

A first interesting element is the fact that almost all respondents to the open question seem to react to the way it was formulated, which assumes that it was the workers’ decision. The answers given are similar and strongly state that quitting the job could not be defined as a ‘choice’.

> It is not a choice! […]
> It was not my decision […]
> The decision is a consequence! […]

Only in one case did a respondent describe leaving his job in the entertainment industry as a choice, linked to a need for change and the search for new challenges. Among those who felt forced to leave their jobs, the pandemic was not mentioned as a reason for leaving. Workers interviewed referred mainly to bad working conditions, which have worsened over time, especially with regard to work rhythms and loads, poor pay levels, and the near absence of social protection.

> Working in this sector puts a strain on the body and mind, which deteriorates much more quickly due to the excessive number of hours of physical work (many hours standing up and constantly on the move) as well as the huge emotional stress (solving constant snags, unforeseen events, many nights without sleep, etc.).

> Too much downward competition, excessive precariousness.

> It’s an industry that is getting worse and worse; you work more, do more tasks and get paid less, and you never know when.

Moreover, among the responses, we found numerous cases in which the Italian context was compared to other countries since creative work is particularly mobile and increasingly performed by straddling different national contexts. In particular, the respondents pointed out the backwardness of this sector in Italy, not so much for issues of a technical nature or related to artistic quality, but mainly for the scarcity of workers' rights, who often find themselves working in the informal economy without having signed any contract, either as a freelance or as an employee.

> I worked many years abroad, mainly for international tours and training, and when I came back to Italy it was blatant and even embarrassing to see how far behind we were in the entertainment sector, not only on a technical level, but above all in the organisation and the fiscal side, etc.
>
> It's impossible to work as a sound engineer for several factors […] the most embarrassing one is that there are so many people willing to work off the books and for less than the right regular fee compared to those who prefer to go legit with their own VAT number or other work arrangements such as being members of a cooperative.

In addition to the prevalence of precarious working conditions and the high proportion of jobs remaining in the informal economy, a third element reported by several interviewees concerned the importance to obtain a job in this sector, of being able to rely on personal connections rather than showcasing professional skills and qualifications. Networking and personal recommendations were thus confirmed to be crucial and to play a key role in career advancement, often overshadowing formal qualifications.

> It seems that if you are not connected to someone, no matter how hard you try and how good you are, you will do little work. It is an industry that relies a lot on connections rather than merit.
>
> Despite a solid education, and many years of working as an event planner and organiser, production assistant, but also as a simple square staff/entrance control etc., I have not been able to position myself in the events industry. Sometimes, unfortunately, I have found that it matters more to 'know someone' than to know the job to be done.

> Working in show business has become impossible because there is too much clientelism and too many recommendations are needed. Qualifications, studies, aren't needed, only those who are friends with you count.

Although the pandemic was not mentioned as a reason for quitting the job, the workers interviewed, particularly affected by lockdown measures, described it as a 'revealing' factor, an unforeseen situation that made their usual working conditions evident. In fact, the respondents to the open question seemed to have somehow 'discovered' that working conditions can be very different and much better than what they were used to.

> Working 8 hours in an office I receive about the same pay as working 16 hours in a theatre.

> Before Covid, I never really realised the sacrifices I was making such as travelling, inhuman hours, absolute uncertainty in planning my private life, and inconvenience caused to my family by my absence. Today I have a €2,000 a month job from 8am to 5pm with a company car and zero hassle, and the best thing is that I no longer have to check if the company I worked with two months earlier has paid my invoice, on the 15th OF EVERY MONTH I CERTAINLY GET MY PAY! […] I conclude by saying THE GAME IS NOT WORTH THE CANDLE, we are not entrepreneurs, we cannot wait 60 days otherwise our pay should be much higher.

> Other sectors offer more, with a greater possibility of professional growth for the technical skills acquired, greater chances and opportunities for job continuity and with certain payments… realising this earlier would not have been bad.

The above responses came from workers who claimed they did not want to return to the sector, even when work would have started again after the end of the measures preventing the opening of theatres and cultural and performing arts venues. In our findings, however, this is only one side of the coin of the mass resignation phenomenon, which many interpreted as an awareness on the part of workers of the indecent working conditions and a need to rethink their lives. The other side is represented by the responses of workers who, despite being aware of the low quality of work and pay, hoped anyway that the lockdown would end as soon as possible so that they could return to work.

> Unfortunately, I had to change, but I would like to return to events right away!
>
> I would actually like to return to the events world, hoping to create a stable and continuous situation.
>
> Because of Covid I had to take the first possible job (factory worker) in order to make a living. In the meantime, I have always tried to return to my previous job, even though it is without guarantees (neither continuous work nor punctual payments that allow you to live decently).

In these interview excerpts, the identification with work, combined with low working conditions, positions these workers in an ambiguous process typical of artistic work (Brook et al., 2020; Scharff, 2018). On the one hand, they experience important symbolic and identity rewards. However, on the other hand, they also experience a lack of rights and social protection, finding themselves trapped in a kind of 'passion trap' (Armano *et al.*, 2022) and in ambivalent mechanisms (see also Busso and Rivetti, 2014): while their work can be a source of passion, it can also be understood in its literal sense, linked to the pain and suffering that can result from the intense pressures of working in the entertainment industry and its conditions of career instability. This shows that the category of entertainment technicians, traditionally considered as 'support personnel' and people 'assisting the artist' (Becker, 1982, p. 77), is not so easily distinguishable from that of creative and artistic workers (Battentier, 2021). Various studies have in fact highlighted the work of 'care' performed by technicians in the musical field (Leyshon, 2009), as well as their fundamental contribution in the realisation of an artwork (Rubio, 2012). Becker himself had actually acknowledged that the notion of 'support personnel' is in itself problematic (Becker, 1982), since the convention of dividing artistic production into a central activity carried out by artists and other less relevant tasks performed by support personnel is endogenous to the art worlds rather than driven by sociological analysis.

5.3 The new rise after the pandemic

Recent data show that the number of technicians working in the entertainment industry is growing compared to pre-pandemic figures. In 2021, the number of entertainment technicians increased by 9.3% compared to 2020. Thereafter, by 14.3% from 2021 to 2022, even surpassing the 2019 numbers (+9.3%). Finally, in 2023 there were 5.5% more workers than in 2022 (INPS, 2024). This growth in the number of entertainment technicians goes hand-in-hand with a new increase in the number of workers in this sector, which amounted to 367,535 in 2023 (+10.9% compared to 2019 and +39.9% compared to 2020). The average income also increased, amounting in 2023 to 15,137 euros (+15.4% compared to 2019) corresponding to 124 working days per year, which is almost the same amount as in 2019 (+2.5% compared to 2019). The incidence of entertainment technicians rose slightly from 4.5% before the pandemic to 4.6% in 2023. This growth may be due to a number of factors: technicians who have returned to work in the sector as they wished (who corresponded to the 10.3%); legislative interventions in favour of those working in the entertainment field introduced over the last few years, as a result of the mobilisation of entertainment workers (Iannuzzi and Campolongo, 2020; Martinelli, 2021); actions by private entities who have set up targeted training courses to bring new workers into the sector (e.g. Doc Servizi and Scena Unita); and the recovery of events that should have taken place during the years of the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. world tours, international congresses, etc.).

The interviews with key experts confirmed that there was a strong return of technicians who used to work in the industry and wanted to come back. Among the reasons were the surplus work that required so many workers, making the return easier, the passion for the work ("They liked the work and came back for the so-called 'rock and roll fire' that never leaves you"), and the fact that the work was better paid than in the pre-Covid period. The main reason for the increase in tariffs, according to key experts, was because when there was a real reboot of the industry (starting in 2023), the number of technicians was not sufficient to cover the needs, therefore customers were forced to pay more for services. Another reason was the work done by cooperatives such as Doc Servizi to adapt tariffs to the cost of living. Despite this, the key experts also pointed out that the effects of the post-pandemic improvement in tariffs to date have been cancelled out by continuous increases in the cost of living. Similar dynamics have also been registered in other countries and sectors (see Choonara, 2022).

A last feature that characterised work in the post-Covid period concerns the fact that the way of working has changed and there was an important entry of young people. Key experts spoke of "a greater awareness by people that you have to work the right amount of hours" and therefore "don't work a thousand hours because it's rock-n-roll" and that there is also more "attention to both safety and work-life balance". This new awareness seemed to be linked to the new generations, because the entry of new young people concurred with this new orientation.

> Listen, you have to do this set-up. You start at 8 o'clock, then you go until 2 o'clock. Then it stops until 5, then it goes from 5 to midnight." Then maybe the average young person says: "Eh no, though, I have to be there all day, I'd rather stay at home". You have to realise that… it's not like in my day, it's funny to say that… you would go to the warehouse at 7 and come back at 3-4 in the morning and it was fine because that's how it was.

According to the interviews conducted post-pandemic with key experts, young people were the ones who carried out these demands most often, although they were not the only ones who did so.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This work contributes to the debate on the (Quiet) Great Resignation by focusing on the case study of technicians who left the entertainment sector after the pandemic in Italy. Our analysis points out that for these workers quitting was not a choice of emancipation from work in the sector but rather the result of unsustainable working conditions (insecurity and discontinuous remuneration). The pandemic, by forcing people to look for a work in other sectors, revealed the poor working conditions in the entertainment sector, breaking the 'spell' of symbolic reward that kept (or trapped?) workers in the sector, regardless of the widespread desire to return if conditions were better.

The economic instability brought on by the pandemic forced the vast majority of technicians (86%) to leave the entertainment sector. With limited financial support, insufficient economic protections, and dwindling savings, many were compelled to seek employment in other industries to sustain themselves. Even before the pandemic, the entertainment sector lacked mechanisms to ensure dignified working conditions. As highlighted in the survey, technicians reported persistent challenges, including delayed and unreliable payments, inadequate remuneration for their work, a lack of social protections, and the absence of job continuity.

Recent statistical data indicate a return of workers to the entertainment sector. Indeed, already the responses to the open-ended survey question revealed that many workers who left the sector during the pandemic due to a lack of opportunities expressed a desire to return. However, in light of the poor working conditions described, there is no need to celebrate the return of workers to the sector, but rather to advocate and campaign for an improvement of working conditions, so that work in the entertainment sector can be experienced not only as a symbolic and identity reward, but also as an activity in the formal economy to which labour and social rights are acknowledged. Concerning the needs for improvement, those involved in the research repeatedly referred to specific measures to deal with the structural difficulties, which can be summarised in the following points: introduce a supplementary income to support workers in non-working periods; guarantee access to social protection; verify the application of labour law; facilitate safety training and lifelong learning; and support generational shift.

A final element that emerged from the survey results and the post-pandemic analysis is that those who managed to network with other workers in the sector also managed to maintain and obtain better working conditions. Doc Servizi and similar organisations have proved capable of both mapping the sector and promoting new forms of representation and coalition among workers. The ability both to better understand the evolution of the industry and unite workers has also resulted in greater lobbying activity. This lobbying has led to the drafting of laws that have improved working conditions in the sector. Additionally, it has started a debate for the drafting of the Performing Arts Code, a law that should unify all Italian regulations concerning the entertainment sector and is expected in the summer of 2025.

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