

RECOVERY AND INNOVATION

The Global Recruiter spoke with Agostino di Maio, General Manager of Assolavoro, the Italian National Association of Work Agencies about the the Italian labour market.

Q: What are the main challenges and opportunities currently facing your labour market?

A: The Italian labour market is characterised by wide geographical (North-South) and gender (male-female) differences and cannot be assessed as a whole. In the South of the country the difficulties lie in the employment rate, which is significantly lower than in the North, while in the North the real challenge is up-skilling, re-skilling and skills shortages. A particular hurdle is the lack of specific skills for existing vacancies during a period of economic recovery, especially digital skills and those in sectors that will receive particular support from the European plans for post-pandemic recovery. Training is therefore the main asset for growth, and today we have the opportunity to support the development of a training system that can concretely guarantee the employability and professional reintegration of workers. Through Forma.temp, the bilateral fund dedicated to the training of temporary workers and financed entirely with private resources, the Italian Agency Work sector ensures the employability of workers through a tailor-made training that meets the real needs of the market. Thanks to this asset, agencies can be a driver of growth in the country.

Q: How do you see the industry's role evolving in both the short and longer term? What is the outlook for flexible staffing?

A: Over the last year, the pro-cyclical nature of agency work in Italy has been confirmed. It grew by 23.8 per cent in 2021, reaching a peak of over 510,000 workers in December 2021 with an open-ended contract rate of over 27 per cent. This confirms the effectiveness of agency work in meeting the needs of companies. Agency work in Italy is a best-in-class example and, thanks to strict regulation, workers have the same rights, the same protections and the same pay as workers employed directly by companies. Agency work represents two per cent of total employment in Italy, a number that is growing compared to 2020 (1.7 per cent).

Q: WEC is promoting social innovation as a way to accommodate new challenges. What does this mean in your market? Has that changed with the Covid crisis?

A: Italy's agency work sector was the first to react to the pandemic by guaranteeing workers, thanks to specific agreements with the sectoral trade unions, prompt payments of salary integrations (through the Solidarity Fund) and a series of specific welfare measures (through Ebitemp Fund). The actions taken in Italy have been highlighted by the OECD in its Employment Outlook 2020 as among European best practice – notably the initiatives undertaken by Assolavoro with the trade unions at various levels for the protection of workers. Recently, Assolavoro's role in social innovation has also been recognised at a global level: we were proud to be winners in the 'leadership in social innovation' category at the 2021 World Employment Confederation Awards.

Q: How prepared is your market for the post-Covid world of work?

A: The Italian labour market is reacting positively to the post-Covid phase, although in a "patchy" way and with all the contradictions and differences already mentioned. The increasingly transitional nature of the labour market and the need to guarantee the right balance between the needs of flexibility for companies and those of protection for individuals are acknowledged with difficulty: Agencies are candidates to play a leading role in this new phase of the labour market.

Q: What actions are you taking to support your members, their client companies and workers to lead in the new normal?

A: Assolavoro is constantly at the service of its members and workers. It also enjoys a fruitful dialogue with the sectoral trade unions which led to the signing of the National Collective Agreement in 2019 – something that we are now preparing to renew in the current year. The Agency Work sector in Italy supports workers through the Ebitemp Fund, guaranteeing sectoral welfare with dedicated benefits that have been enhanced with ad hoc services during the pandemic. In this complicated period, further aggravated by the war waging in Europe, we wanted to demonstrate to the Ukrainian Ambassador to Italy our full solidarity and willingness to support the Ukrainians who are in our country, or who will be arriving in the coming weeks to the best of our ability. We are also verifying what the best concrete support initiatives can be, in conjunction with the Ministry of Labour and trade unions. ■