

A word from our colleague in Brussels

(who has temporarily moved to Malta)

Once 'smart working' was a dream, now it is a must

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly changed our lives. Before joining the OIE family, what is now called 'smart working' for me was a necessary evil. Something I had to implement as it was one of a plethora of measures adopted by the Maltese Public Administration to facilitate what are called locally 'family friendly measures'.

For my colleagues and I, it was something we had to live with. In fact, I, like many Directors, had to draft a policy for my department on which category of personnel could make use of teleworking, how many hours per week could be adopted, how work progress could be assessed and last but not least how productivity could be verified.

And I had occasion to think, 'It would be nice to avail these measures at some point'. At that time, I could not have imagined that later this would be the norm and not the exception, and that now I am one of the many who is compelled to make best use of such a privilege. And I do consider it a privilege when I think of the many whom, from one day to the next do not know if they still have a job due to the economic crisis brought about by COVID. But like many privileges, it comes at a cost.

In my case, the cost is the loss of the thing that I enjoy the most: physical contact with friends and colleagues. I crave listening to people and looking at their eyes without the screen as intermediary (with annexed speakers!). Smiling and nodding to a person, indicating mutual agreement or showing surprise at something unexpected being told. The wonderful electricity that you can feel when you sit around a table and something is going to be discussed, even more when something important is on the agenda or an important decision is going to be taken. But most of all, at this very moment, I miss the wonderful atmosphere of the office in Brussels with Djahne and Tomasz; the point in the day when we sit together to analyse something and discuss it and those few minutes break during which we tell each other things that help us understanding each other better.

Returning home because of COVID-19, I knew it was going to impact my family life, as they would have to isolate with me for two weeks. (In Malta the situation is far better than most countries in Europe). At first, it was strange to be back. My family was used to me travelling every week, arriving from the office late in the evening. So initially, it was like a strange holiday; to be more precise, my two daughters said this looked like an extremely long weekend. Because during the weekend, they were used to seeing me working but then dedicating my spare time to what I really like doing a lot, cooking for them. (Actually, I also cook a lot for my personal pleasure!) After the two weeks of forced quarantine was over, my wife could return to work. She is a veterinarian and is in charge of a National Veterinary Laboratory. Having less ties compared to other colleagues, this has meant that she needs to work seven days a week doing both administration and carrying out even routine tests to make up for those who must stay at home.



So besides my normal working activities I have had to do things which my wife usually takes care of even though I have some help from my two daughters.

Our two dogs and 17 cats are really enjoying this working from home situation!

Yes, 17 cats sounds crazy, but we built a cattery and rescued many cats who would not otherwise have had normal lives. We have a completely blind cat and one with one eye; we also had a dwarf cat and deaf cat and some people literally abandoned a few cats in our garden. The cats are really enjoying our company and couldn't be happier.

So, our life has changed completely; teleconferencing is the norm; school and private lessons are done remotely; even piano and yoga classes!

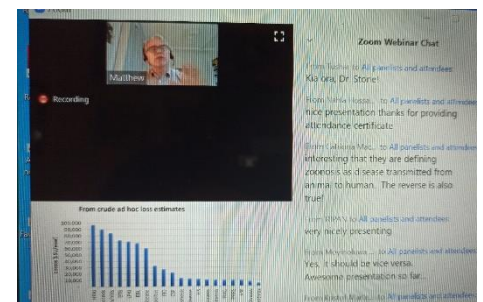
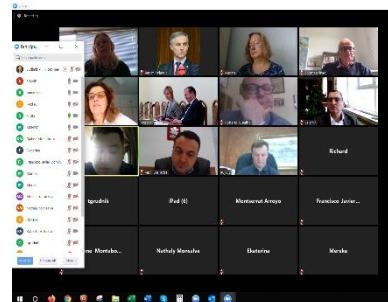


Last Saturday evening instead of watching a movie together, which is quite common when we don't have guests or we go out, we did something different, we watched and listened to the first session of the World Veterinary Congress.

We enjoyed the very interesting presentations, the passionate interventions of Matthew, and I also had the pleasure of hearing the intervention of an FAO colleague, who I discovered many years ago, during a seminar in Turkey, is married to an ex-pupil of my 94-year-old auntie. Like most teachers of longstanding, my auntie remembers him and all her former students. When I told this story to my family, they could not believe it. They are very much attached to my Auntie.

Ultimately, this is another way to strengthen the bond with the family; the laughs, the emotions, and the surprises are the medicine I take when something doesn't go well during the day. An e-mail awaiting a reply, or the drop of the Internet connection during a conversation which makes you miss an important point. At these times, I think of the best moments I spend together with my family, I recharge my batteries and everything returns normal.

But then I also look forward to meeting again in Brussels, in Paris or in another city, my wonderful friends and colleagues.



We wish to thank our colleague Roberto Andrea Balbo for submitting this article.