Virtual Learning Networks in Higher Education: The Case of Egypt’s Regional IT Institute

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Virtual organizations are spreading worldwide in different sectors. However, most of the publications address theoretical foundations; as for the practical implementations, they are not well reported in the literature. This paper addresses a case of a virtual organization in the field of knowledge. Today, the learning process is becoming a vital factor in business and socioeconomic growth where the role of information and communication technology is having a growing and an innovative impact. The case of the Regional IT Institute, established in 1992, targeting educating graduate students while being in Egypt through a number of partnerships with organizations in Europe and the United States reflects the realization of a number of related elements to virtual organizations. The case provides many lessons to be replicated that demonstrate the opportunity to expand in exchanging the wealth of knowledge across societies using a hybrid of forms for virtual organizations.

The continuous innovation in information and communication technology led to the development of virtual organizations with different forms and structures. Virtual organizations are defined as networks of institutions that, using cutting-edge technology, unite to provide a value-added competitive advantage (Strausak, 1998). The virtual integration of its respective capacities, irrespective of time and distance barriers, enables the realization of its common objective: becoming more competitive in the marketplace. The ultimate goal of a virtual organization is to achieve markets differentiation and better performance through the use of information technology (Appel and Behr, 1997).

The world is currently living in an emerging knowledge-based global economy where the continuous innovations in information and communication technology have forged stronger links between individuals, organizations and nations (Ungson and Trudel, 1998). This is leading to the creation of growing opportunities for collaboration in various fields and has helped in the adaptation and management of technology (Palmer, 1998). In the past, organizations worldwide were competing in trade and raw materials; however, during the next millennium the focus will be on intellectual property rights and globally oriented products and services. The 21st century will address more knowledge, and information-intensive issues where the critical element is people “humanware” (Kamel, 1998).

With growing competition in information societies, developing standards and reducing costs, virtual organizations represent the opportunity in the 21st century to reallocate resources and to reposition organizational status in the global cyber marketplace aiming to supply goods and services by means of its staff, equipment and information systems (Sieber, 1997). This paper explains the case of the Regional IT Institute (RITI), which was established in 1992 for the design and delivery of degree and non-degree professional programs to leverage the capacities of human resources in Egypt. The programs are jointly delivered with the institute’s strategic alliances represented by international institutions that disseminate knowledge through the use of a hybrid of methods, including class sessions and distance
learning techniques. The case is built around trust between the involved parties (Brigham and Corbett, 1996) and with neither a hierarchy in place or a leading role played by any of the involved parties (Appel and Behr, 1997). The model helps set recommendations for similar initiatives that address one of the global growing needs: human resource development.

**Background**

The changing economical, business and technological trends and the need to rationalize the use of resources has led to the evolution of the concept of virtualness. The virtual organization, as a concept, is based on strategic considerations such as optimizing the business size, identifying the market area, and ascertaining core competencies (Sieber, 1997). Training and education are vital societal requirements that are reflected by the growing need to train and educate more people. However, with a limited infrastructure and scarce financial resources, such an objective becomes difficult to achieve (Kamel, 1999). This factor is magnified in developing economies where limited resources are usually allocated to sectors such as food and health as a priority to education. However, things will change in the next millennium; the world will move from focusing on products and manufacturing to knowledge and investing in people. Countries of the world will focus on developing new methods to absorb the growing learning needs of the society (Kamel, 1998), otherwise their business and socioeconomic development plans will be difficult to realize and developing countries will risk losing more grounds to the developed world.

Flexibility is an important element of organizational virtualness (Kocijan, 1997) and in the education field, diversity of domains and scheduling of topics provides a wider choice for the beneficiary enabling a larger pool of specialties and professions. The use of information and communication technology has been a key factor in the success of the concept of virtualness. The availability of the World Wide Web and the Internet facilitated the exchange of information and knowledge between different partners and provided new mechanisms for the provision of value-added outcomes using information and communication technology (Gristock, 1997). Moreover, the new competitive differential depends on the creation and application of technology as a form of knowledge (Ungson and Trudel, 1998).

**Human Resource Development in Egypt**

Since 1985, Egypt has invested heavily in human resource development through two dimensions: educational and professional. Thus, a number of training centers were established to address management and IT issues linked to the needs of the market and covering various sectors in the economy. These centers had a remarkable impact on the development of human capacities, skills and knowledge. The achievements to date include a large number of programs that contributed in leveraging the skills and knowledge for many fresh graduates as well as employees across different organizational levels. The achievements across Egypt’s 26 provinces include thousands of graduates annually possessing expertise in emerging trends information and communication technology applications. One of these centers is the Regional IT Institute located in Cairo and working as a base for a satellite of programs in cooperation with a multiplicity of world leading institutions. The Regional IT Institute was established to support in transforming the society using the latest technologies and methods in education and training, and having as a motto, building through learning.

**Case Study: Regional IT Institute (RITI)**

The Regional IT Institute (http://www.riti.org) was established as a subsidiary of the Regional Information Technology and Software Engineering Center (RITSEC). It is a not-for-profit organization supported financially by its various services and programs that target the education and professional development discipline as an important vehicle for business and socioeconomic development. The Regional IT Institute has become one of the leading institutions in Egypt in professional development in the fields of management and information technology. Today, the institute extends its services through a global outreach program to countries in Europe, Africa and Asia through the development of joint alliances with regional and international institutions. The institute pioneered in Egypt in introducing a new mode of operation that is based on virtual teams.

**Mission & Strategic Objectives**

The mission of the institute is to contribute to business and socioeconomic growth in Egypt through investing in people in tailor-made executive degree and non-degree programs in the areas of business, management, and information and communication technology.

This is meant to help close the technology gap between Egypt and the world by investing in people and keeping pace with the massive and continuous developments taking place worldwide by linking people to information technology. The objectives of institute include: investing in people as the oil of