ABSTRACT

One of the domains where ICTs’ impact on healthcare and social services can be assessed is through the presence of healthcare interactions in virtual social networks, blogs, and portals. The emerging concept of e-health is covering part of this new phenomena, and the task is to make a clear statement of the problem: what are the relevant dimensions and the impacts of new technologies and practice in health and social services, and how this is changing the present business model in these industries? The present chapter deals with three main issues. The first is the Concept of E-health. The second issue is related to the Healthcare online social networks. In this domain, the authors consider that it is important to distinguish different types of networks, taking into consideration their aim, since they will have different implications both for business as usual and for strategic purposes of different healthcare services’ providers. Finally, the authors assess the ICTs’ impact on healthcare in the domain of e-business. By integrating these different concepts, they demonstrate how ICTs directed to healthcare are changing the underlying structure of healthcare businesses, supplying new business models, and becoming a driver for change and productivity gains, while contributing to infrastructure and skill development to healthcare. These changes are posing interesting strategic challenges to the healthcare sector that is worthwhile to consider and equate in light of the conditions required for success.

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the past half-century, we have witnessed incredible advances in medical science and related technologies within the health care industry. This industry is today characterized by more to know, more to do, more to manage, more to watch, and involving more people than ever (Institute of Medicine, 2001). According to the Institute of Medicine, in 2001 the healthcare was considered the world’s largest industry, accounting for more than three trillion US dollars annually and employing several tens of millions of people. These numbers have increased recently, and according to OECD, health costs accounted for an average world’s GDP expenditure of about 7 percent in 2008 (ESOMAR, 2010), having reached the amazing sum of 6 trillion US dollars in 2010 (PWC, 2010).

Notwithstanding these levels of expenditure, one may observe many inefficiencies, inequities and quality variations within the healthcare industry, much of this being attributable to inadequate information flow within the healthcare processes (Kirsch, 2002).

Former US Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson launched in 2004 the Decade of Healthcare Information Technology (HIT) in the US. His vision should have been translated in a ‘healthcare system that is interoperable, produces high-quality care with clinical decision support, is cost-effective, integrates evidence from the bench to the bedside, serves the medically underserved, promotes consumer involvement and empowerment, leads to improved accuracy and privacy of healthcare information and facilitates public health monitoring’. These could, in fact, be considered as adequate messages to describe how Information Technology (IT) can help to transform healthcare (Middleton, 2005).

Considering that information is above all useful when it generates knowledge that can be applied to generate more business value, the main issue, when discussing the impact of ICT in the healthcare (e-health) business, is not then just to calculate how much is invested or what are the industry savings with these investments, but rather what was the offered value that resulted from these investments. This type of analysis focuses on the strategy issue and its conception and implementation.

In this chapter, we start by analyzing the implications arising from the concept of e-health, describing the main trends that are affecting the sector (e.g. the Internet and the related online social network phenomenon). Ultimately, we try to delimit the conditions for success in e-health strategy. We then discuss the basic concepts of e-business and e-commerce applied to the e-health industry in general, at the light of the identified trends and the strategic principles that organizations in this industry must take into account.

2. THE CONCEPT OF E-HEALTH

The concept of e-health has several definitions according to the context, perspectives and aims of study and consequently it is difficult to encounter a universally accepted definition. The aim of this first section is not to propose a base-definition of e-health. Instead, we intend to analyse its main constitutive elements.

One of the reasons that explain the variety of e-health definitions has to do with the concept itself which integrates multiple dimensions. Health does not mean just the absence of illness. Illness can induce an individual creative reaction that results on a healthier situation. To accomplish this reaction an individual “…must be flexible, one should have different options to deal with the social and economic system” (Capra, 1982: 316). Individual health depends on the type of relation one establishes with himself and with his social and economic system. By means of learning capacity an individual preserves his “…autonomy and is able to deal with larger systems” (ibidem: 317). Integrating complexity and multidimensional