Chapter VIII

E-Learning Strategies of Italian Companies

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Abstract

The chapter gives a contribution to the understanding country-specific e-learning models, focusing on the e-learning experience of Italian companies in the pharmaceutical and banking industries. The chapter analyzes the antecedents of a corporate e-learning adoption process, asking whether it is forced by the rational search for economic benefit, or by bandwagon pressures, whereby companies are more interested in their reputations. The chapter also aims at understanding how companies are implementing e-learning, analyzing the most important features of the e-learning strategies: users, contents, infrastructures, and services and supports. After having discussed the result of the research conducted on a document analysis, a survey, some interviews, and two in-depth case
studies, the emerging B2E strategy for e-learning is explained. In the conclusions the main issues related to the e-learning processes in the Italian companies are summarized, and the research methodology and the possible future research lines are discussed.

Introduction

In recent years, corporate e-learning has been the subject of several studies. On the one hand, it has been identified as one of the latest best practices in HRM (Nacamulli, 2003) because it enables companies to meet new intellectual capital investment requirements (ASTD, 2001). These include the need to enhance quality and effectiveness in program development while reducing costs, to update the skills base throughout the organization (at all levels, across a wide geographical area, etc.), and to increase the organization’s learning capability by integrating online training and strategic knowledge management (Ley & Ulbrich, 2002).

On the other hand, due to the exponential rate at which this innovation was adopted in the USA, in the last years the experience of pioneers, in both the public and private sectors, and their best practices have become one of the main issues dealt with in corporate e-learning research and literature (Shank, 2002; Horton, 2001; Rosenberg, 2001).

However, corporate e-learning is not spreading worldwide as fast as expected, and it is far from being applied extensively in Europe and Italy, despite a number of enthusiastic forecasts (Anee, 2003; IDC, 2002). Furthermore, if we look at companies’ e-learning experiences, it appears that organizations are approaching it in an incremental and experimental manner. Among other explanations, three factors (partially related) can help to understand this controversial rate of diffusion. First of all, many benefits promised on paper are not what e-learning is really providing (Prandstraller, 2001). Secondly, even if the standardization process does seem to simplify the identification of some main features of a corporate e-learning strategy, it is still rather difficult to relate them to ROI. Thirdly, technological and organizational best practices are not simply introduced as they are by companies, but adoption of best models is a learning process and depends on specific organizational capabilities such as absorptive capacity (Martin, Robson, & Jennings, 2002; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990).
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