An Innovative E-Learning Platform for Vocational Training of European Local Police Forces

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last years, the astonishing progress of modern telecommunication networks and the simultaneous spread of the Internet have brought about unprecedented access to a wealth of information and resources. The full development of Internet's potential to improve access to education and training, and to enhance the quality of learning, is a key prerequisite for building a European (and a global) knowledge society. In particular, not only education but also social cohesion and market competitiveness depend more and more on Europe's ability to adapt (appropriately) its educational and training systems in order to realize this major challenge (Stewart, 2004).

Without any doubt, information and communication technologies (ICT) can offer significant potential for the improvement of education and training (Kruse, 2002; Tsai & Machado, 2002) in several areas, as they can strongly support learning processes through enhanced communication, discovery, simulation, exploration, and problem solving (Ewing & Miller, 2002).

In this work we discuss several basic features, various issues and specific targets performed by the *WebPOL Project*, included *in Leonardo da Vinci Action Programs* and supported by the European Commission (WebPOL, 2004). The Project consists in the creation of a virtual environment of vocational training for European local police forces combining actual training, an Internet-based training centre and an innovative training management system. In particular, it responds to the necessity for covering new training needs of the European Local Polices, such as the use of new technology and information systems, language learning, technological crime, dealing with immigration, environmental crime, domestic violence, fight against international crime and terrorism, European cooperation, and many more.

In fact, the entire effort conforms to current European strategic priorities for continuous vocational training, the acquisition of skills, long-term competences and knowledge accessibility, by increasing the human professional capacity to adapt to new technological and managerial changes, and by developing new methodologies to facilitate the European local polices' activities (Rosenberg, 2000; European Commission, 2002).

BACKGROUND

The Need for Learning and Training in Modern "Knowledge-Based" Societies

In today's fast-paced economies, organizations and legal entities are increasingly facing new challenges due to several factors, including, *among others*, increased competition, rapid shifts in technology, changes in the societal demands and globalized markets (Scholte,

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2005). It should be noted that such instigations do not only affect commercial enterprises (as it may be falsely assumed), but also governmental organizations such as educational, military and civilian establishments (Katsioloudes, 2006). In a wider sense, it could be considered that we are currently witnessing a societal transition into "*information societies*", in which economies are almost entirely focused into the production and management of new forms of knowledge. In such "*knowledge-based*" economies, the critical aspects are the informational (i.e. information creation, distribution, etc.) and the resulting "*know-how*" processes, rather than the actual production processes that characterized the industrial economies of the 20th century (Boissot, 1999; Dunning, 2002).

Some key differences with regard to knowledge between the modern "knowledge-based" economy we are transitioning into and the economy of the past century are listed (and briefly described) as follows:

- Information and knowledge are the strongest asset and competitive advantage for an organization (and/or any other legal entity), while all other resources (i.e. technological, infrastructural, etc.) have a "secondary" role. This originates from the fact that the latter are no longer of scarcity, but rather of abundance. Hence, only the "know-how" processes differentiate an organization from its competitors and they are able to provide major potential advantages in the broader scope of its performed activities (Boissot, 1999).
- Unlike most resources that deplete when used, information and knowledge can be shared and actually grow through application. In fact, if applications are appropriately designed, deployed and exploited, a significant growth can be achieved, at multiple levels.
- The effect of location is heavily diminished. Indeed, with the latest advances in electronic telecommunications and related networking (converged) technologies, information retrieval is dramatically simplified and enriched, while information sharing can be accomplished rapidly and efficiently, to fulfill various users' needs and requirements.
- Knowledge enhanced services can command price premiums over comparable services with low embedded knowledge or knowledge intensity (Dunning, 2002).

Based on the above perspectives, it can be easily considered that the human resource competencies are the key component of value in a knowledge-based organization, legal entity or authority. These need to be developed and grow into skills that will enable the organization (or the legal entity or the authority) to fulfill its strategic mission.

It is, therefore, evident that learning and training activities will be of critical importance for individuals, organizations and communities, in order to successfully meet the challenges of today's knowledge-based economies. The spread of the Internet together with an intense variety of broadband-based facilities can be of great assistance (Chochliouros & Spiliopoulou, 2005), and can create a plethora of new "education-oriented" opportunities that have the potential to enable an efficient transition into a truly inclusive "information society" (Nichols, 2003).

Advantages and Opportunities of E-Learning

According to the current international practice, "e-Learning" can be defined as the proper use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet, to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration (European Commission, 2000). However, the term "e-Learning" has now become synonymous for all education and training systems in which ICT are an integral component of. Based on such cases, the ability to use ICT has become a new form of literacy, often referred to as "digital literacy" (Cronje, 2001). The latter can be assumed as important as traditional literacy was in the past; without it, citizens can neither participate fully in society nor acquire the skills and the knowledge necessary for the 21st knowledge-based century, to face global challenges.

In recognition of this, the European Union (EU) has called for sustained action at Member State and Community levels to integrate ICT in education and training systems, taking full account of the need to ensure social cohesion. In particular, The European Commission has set a number of ambitious challenges (European Commission, 2001) to European education and training systems in order to:

- Develop the comprehensive integration of ICT into education and training;

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