Chapter 14
An ICT-Based Network of Competence Centres for Developing Intellectual Capital in the Mediterranean Area

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ABSTRACT

The rising of the knowledge economy, enhanced by the fast diffusion of ICTs, drives a wider perspective on the divide among Countries, interpreting it more and more as the result of an asymmetry in the access to knowledge and in the readiness to apply it in order to renew the basics of their development dynamics. Looking at the Mediterranean Area, the positive correlation between the Networked Readiness Index and the Global Competitive Index developed at Global Economic Forum – INSEAD, shows that the opposite sides of the Mediterranean Sea are performing a development path at two different paces. In the effort to face the challenge of supporting the creation of Intellectual Capital able to apply, diffuse and benefit from e-business, in 2005 the e-Business Management Section (eBMS) of Scuola Superiore ISUFI – University of Salento launched the "Mediterranean School of e-Business Management". The present work aims to offer a presentation of its genesis, its most distinctive features, operational model and action plan. The preliminary results of its activities show the role and the main challenges of the School in addressing the needs of the Mediterranean Countries towards a logic of partnership for the development of their intellectual assets.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-789-3.ch014

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the 21st Century's was marked by a pervasive change in the geo-political scenario, characterized by a new international division of work and distribution of production. The fast diffusion of the Information and Communication Technologies accelerated the rising of a novel technological cycle. At macro-economic level, this brought to a natural mechanism of "*casting out*" of some economic realities from the global competitive landscape. This bi-polarization trend differentiates the economies involved in the global market from those excluded from the new production systems proper of the "knowledge economy", based on the access to information and technology [Castells, M. (2000)].

The interpretation of these phenomena brought to the conceptualization of the "*Digital Divide*", a multidimensional phenomenon reshaping the map of the world [Sachs, J., (2000)], encompassing a *global* dimension, referring to the divergence in Internet Access between industrialized and developing Countries; the *social* dimension, referred to the richness of information in each nation; and a *democratic* dimension, referred to the adoption of digital resources for the participation in public life [Norris, P. (2001)].

The phenomenon, that started to be investigated only under the views of the diffusion of ICT physical infrastructure and of ICT access, becomes more and more the expression of an asymmetry in the access to knowledge and in the capability to use it in order to radically renew models, processes, and development dynamics.

On the one hand the development and diffusion of the ICT at a global scale supported an exponential growth of the capability to compute, manage, share and broadcast information. On the other one it caused the rise of the level of knowledge and competencies required to employ the new technologies and to create new appropriate applicative solutions.

The wished leapfrog in the age of digital networks, knowledge and globalization [Negroponte, N., (1998)] can be achieved only if a competitive ascending spiral is activated starting from growing investments in technological infrastructures, human resources, and innovation, focusing on a productivity increase in traditional sectors and development in sectors with a higher employment of technologies and knowledge. To face the challenge of reducing the "*Digital and Knowledge Divide*" and speed up the leapfrog of the emerging economies, it becomes necessary the investments in all the components of the Intellectual Capital [Bontis, N. (1998)]. This requires:

- a radical change in training and education;
- the development of new learning strategies;
- the introduction of new technologies to support the organizational processes;
- the enhancement of interactions among markets, universities and a wide community of actors that present a concrete context of application;
- the promotion of networks of organization and local communities for the innovation advancement;
- the support of national and international cooperation for Intellectual Capital creation.

In the effort to face these challenges, in 2005, the e-Business Management Section of Scuola Superiore ISUFI – University of Salento, launched the *Mediterranean School of e-Business Management*, a program funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research.

The initiative was aimed at proposing a systemic approach to the *"Digital and Knowledge Divide"* in the Mediterranean Area, through the creation of a network of Competence Centres for developing Human, Structural and Social Capital, focusing on the exchange and integration of practices in Business and ICT management, to leverage the capability of Mediterranean Countries to leapfrog the global economy.