Chapter 9
An e-Training Support Program for Regional and Local Development

Vassilis Syrris
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

Fenia Tsobanopoulou
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New forms of learning such as distance training and consulting constitute a significant field that presents considerable advantages compared to the traditional educational practices. Computer and communication technologies like World Wide Web/Internet and broadband networks enrich the knowledge environments and grant new perspective to learning mechanisms. In this case study we analyze the technological, cultural and social issues involved in an online distance training program implemented to address in particular farmers, animal-breeders, unemployed and low-salary workers. Distance consulting focuses on subjects concerning entrepreneurial skills and personal training. The project scope includes decentralization, local intervention for employment purposes and bridging of geographical and technological distances.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of the new global economy form an environment characterized by uncertainty, insecurity and risky decision-making. This established status urges countries to implement and incorporate a digital policy in all financial and social sectors in order to achieve solid, sustainable development. Contemporary politicians, businessmen and citizens are compelled to think in digital terms; to see future economic viability and social growth under a digital umbrella.

The prospect of a digitized world, that is, an organizational configuration where computers, network communications and almost every device equipped with electronic circuits and processors will control and administer procedures and actions, presents in parallel both challenges and threats. One major issue that arises, known as digital divide, is the possible marginalization of those human groups that will be unable to adjust or be incorporated in the new setting. For example, observers noted that people

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-942-7.ch009

with higher Internet access had greater access to education, income and other resources that help people get ahead (Bucy, 2000; Strover, 1999).

European Union policies highlight the importance of a balanced approach to the development of information society including the construction of broadband infrastructure in both central locations as well as in remote, rural ones. Specific projects reinforce the capacity of regional authorities to plan, manage and implement Information & Communication Technologies (ICTs) strategies, supporting thus, EU policy objectives within the digital divide context. In this direction, the role of learning and education is vital: better educated rural citizens of all ages and backgrounds, with ample life-long learning opportunities and access to information society and knowledge economy assets, can protect the natural resources of their countryside regions, resist urbanization tendencies, understand the new challenges and respond with flexibility, initiative and new proposals.

Various international forums and agreements on information access and technological capacity have acknowledged the importance of technology sharing, especially throughout under-developed or developing areas. Accordingly, this study focuses on digitally isolated rural areas, under the consideration that it is relatively more difficult for rural people to keep up with the revolution taking place in technology and management, and that they need better access to information, capital and dexterities in order to implement innovations and improve their professional and social status.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

The term digital divide or digital gap is the distance, in terms of socio-economic factors, among individuals, families/households, enterprises and geographical regions with regard to their opportunities for accessing Information Technology and Communications (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities (OECD, 2001) –translating into their difficulty in entering a wide spectrum of activities (Gurstein, 2003). The majority of studies define three general categories:

- The world divide between developed and developing world (James, 2005; Wade, 2004): technologically and industrially developed nations versus countries with lack of elementary infrastructure.
- The divide between countries: strategic advantage acquisition in sectors such as economy, army, energy etc. The result is the creation of specific strong political or economic lobbies in decision-making and policies implementation.
- The inter-social divide within a state -it is also referred to as the 'technological divide' or 'the lack of digital inclusion' (Rice, 2001): differences between big urban centers and rural regions (Rao, 2005); or, between educated and not educated people, upper or lower class, financially independent or dependent, men and women etc. Age, sex, location, culture, social position and personal or political beliefs are, in general, parameters that can cause an individual to abstain from or not, to be given an option for or not, in technological evolution.

The digital divide affects the growth of individuals, social groups and countries disproportionately (see Table 1; Africa, for instance, accounts for about 14% of the world's population, but only 5.6% of its population can connect to the Internet). However, digital gap is a multifaceted issue and someone cannot attempt to confront it univocally. Van Dijk (2006) claims that the digital divide cannot be understood without addressing issues such as attitudes towards technology, the channels used in new media diffusion, educational views of digital skills, and cultural analyses of lifestyles and daily usage patterns. We pinpoint that even