Chapter 4.9
The Adoption of the Internet to Support Arab Academics

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the adoption of Internet applications by an Arab Student Association in North America (ASANA)[1]. ASANA uses the Internet to integrate its members, promote the Arabic culture, bridge with the American society and transfer knowledge to its native country. It delivers these services through websites, email service, electronic payment systems, online conferencing, file sharing tools and other digital resources. These online services build social capital, accrue intellectual capital, and cement mutual understanding between Arabs and the American society. However, these e-services are not widely adopted due to the lack of awareness of their usefulness, the absence of suitable IT culture, poor service quality, instability of leadership, and inadequate incentive system. Improving the adoption of ASANA e-services requires stable leadership, supportive IT culture, assessing provided services, and providing incentives to members to participate. This chapter provides insights and conceptual details that help Arab academic communities to use the Internet to participate in the overall socioeconomic development of their societies.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is perceived as the second best invention, after the written word, for encoding, saving, disseminating, and sharing human knowledge. In fact, its applications have revolutionized the way individuals, communities, organizations and governments conduct their business. Academics, in particular, benefit significantly from Internet applications and online resources. They can access open-content journals, articles, textbooks, tutorials, presentations, and simulators. In addition, most colleges and universities have adopted

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information technology in their education process and offer electronic learning opportunities through distance or online courses. In fact, you might have taken one of these online courses. A noteworthy utilization of the Internet in the realm of academia is Wikipedia which is a collective authorship site developed and revised voluntarily by individuals (Forte and Bruckman 2008). The novelty of Wikipedia stems from providing individuals the opportunity to be learners, authors, editors and educators at the same time. These enormous learning opportunities have transformed the Web into a virtual dictionary, encyclopedia, reference, library and classroom. These opportunities help learners to develop faster, teachers to teach better and scientists to explore swifter. International students are one of the academic communities that benefit extensively from online resources. They use the Internet to search for reputable schools, scholarships, admission requirements, tuition fees and more. They can also connect with their families and peers through email tools, chatting venues and VoIP applications.

The Internet has become a venue where individuals and organizations can build intangible assets such as social capital, intellectual capital, and human capacity. *Social capital* is a broad term that encompasses the norms and networks that facilitate collective actions (Woolcock 1998). Social capital has become a key concept in social science, politics, economics, organizational behavior, and information systems. The term *intellectual capital* refers to the sum of intangible assets that determine the value and competitiveness of an organization (Johnson 1999 and Magrassi 2002). This includes know-how, knowledge, information, intellectual property, competences, and relationships. The term *human capacity*, in this context, describes the ability of individuals to provide, learn, communicate and lead.

The Arab society has severe shortage in durable natural resources. Therefore, they need to adopt online resources and electronic facilities to invest in intangible assets such as intellectual capital, know-how, knowledge, trust, reputation, and social capital. Investing in these intangible assets is important for them to sustain socioeconomic development. Fortunately, Arabs are growingly adopting the Internet for delivering and/or accessing a wide range of social, political, personal, and commercial services (Hofheinz 2005).

The question is what factors affect the adoption of these emerging information technologies by Arab academics?

Scholars do agree that the adoption of information technology is a function of technical, behavioral, cultural, and economic factors (Davis 1989, Zakour 2004; Agarwal 1999; and Brynjolfsson and Hitt 1998). Yet, there is a lack of agreed upon wisdom on this topic that applies to the Arab context. To shed more light on the mentioned factors, this chapter uses a case study approach to provide anecdotal evidence on the motivations and the challenges of the adoption of the Internet by an Arabic Student Association in North America (ASANA) to deliver a number of services to its members. In so doing, we describe the managerial structure of ASANA, identify its services, and explore their usefulness. We will also discuss how ASANA serves as a venue where members broker and develop intangible assets and resources. In addition, we discuss the challenges facing the adoption of these e-services and provide suggestions for improvement.

Before we carry on, it is important to remember that the realm of the Information Systems discipline lies at the confluence of people, organizations, and technology. Specifically, it is concerned about the roles, capabilities and characteristics of people. Regarding organizations, this emerging field brings in strategy, structure and culture of organizations. It also crosses over infrastructure, applications, communication architecture, and capabilities of technology. We will show how the case of ASANA presents a unique and smart confluence between the three pillars of information