

European E-Society and the Web 2.0

1. E-Society and knowledge uptake in the EU

Technology is the highest contributor of productivity growth. We might state, that the cultural-institutional role of technology uptake is a key element where the EU as an institutional entity and as a cultural facilitator should demand a decisive role.

Innovation is an ability of research and the capability of applying new solutions. It is obvious that IT determines innovative capability, although innovation might stem from various fields. It has been proven a major policy simplification that more connectivity is equal to more knowledge uptake. Although most of the EU countries have done tremendous efforts in extending their broadband infrastructure, a new era is emerging where competitive advantage does not stem from the differences in Internet penetration but from the collective capability of knowledge creation and innovation.

2. Economic aspects

Since IT enabled companies to operate globally, it has been a unstoppable and overwhelming that companies relocated their operations from the EU. It can be foreseen that as multinationals move to India and China, in time this will involve that the management and ownership will move to these countries too. As transactional costs of locating production and services processes to various areas decrease, business environment globally is expected to equalize. Thus the EU has to find and create new elements of competitive advantage in order to keep up with the global competition.

In our point of view, European competitiveness lies not on mass production but on flexible specialization. It can be stated that IT is responsible for sustaining the ability for flexibility within the economy. IT solutions facilitate the market players with the ability to permanently optimize supplier network, production network, client network, patent network and technology-cooperation networks.

3. IT and labor: two sides of the coin

When the connection between IT and employment-challenges is discussed, the issue is frequently limited to distant work. Although it is an important issue in certain industries, IT has a more general and more profound impact on our working environment. IT based work is the technical connection between the changeable business environment and the society that is increasingly forced to adapt to market changes. Faster adaptation is required from companies; therefore human resource has to increase its flexibility too. This might break the European society to smaller groups with gradually increasing gaps among each other. IT adds to the heterogenic character of the labor market, temporary jobs and distant work can facilitate adaptation to the changeable market requirements but on the long term, they might increase social segmentation. In this segmentation, certain groups that can not sustain their adaptive capabilities instantly lose their social position.

On the market of distant work, Europe has to cope with global competitors already. The increasing demand for distant work is expected to rapidly become a global market similarly to the phenomenon of global relocation of production. In this field, India is already a global supplier. Although Europe has enormous growth potential in this field too. In the EU it is common that the 25-40 age group provides the bulk of production. This has to be changed throughout an EU strategy aiming at enabling older generations of using technological assets for work. It would have be a tremendous effect in absorbing generational tensions by decreasing social segmentation deriving from generational differences in IT use.

E-society enables its members to create links within the community of connected people but the gap between the connected and not connected will increase in a many dimensions way. Therefore strategic efforts should be carried out to target social flexibility shortages and social segmentation.

A European E-Society Strategy might contain a conscious preparation for the rapidly changing knowledge-demand of the economy via educational programs and available problem-solving counsel. The EU might have a decisive role in facilitating the decrease of unemployment in the 40+age groups. The strategy should not only focus on unemployment-management but on a general capability to adapt to the rapidly changing demands. The

strategy should have built-in solutions that utilize the vast social energy unleashed by the Web 2.0 that opens unseen space for citizen's contribution and freedom for shaping their own lives.

4. The EU the Web 2.0

As broadband Internet access gradually penetrated the international society and as mobile devices became eligible of replacing computers in certain fields of services, a complex phenomenon occurred that is called Web 2.0. It is a mixed result of the improved and commonly accessible infrastructure and a new kind of culture. The cultural dimension can be characterized by a sort of "active citizenship" as a combination of free participation, initiative attitude, solidarity, trust and entertainment.

Without further describing the Web 2.0, a few well-known brands are to serve as examples in order to throw light on the economic, social and intellectual power of the citizen (consumer) network: Second Life, E-Bay, IWIW, YouTube, Wikipedia, Googlemaps etc. Although the business segments they are in are different, it is common that all of the enlisted business models are based on the consumer as a value holder and value contributor. They act as hubs for the customers, who are demanding but also willing to contribute their own knowledge, experience and personal network.

The Web 2.0 and the more critical and proactive attitude in the social patterns it involves, are challenging for all traditional government agencies that have always been isolated in a certain sense from the public they served. In the case of the EU as a whole and its institutions, the isolation from the citizens has been publicly criticized and negotiated frequently but in the new realm of Web 2.0 the democratic deficit is expected to irritate citizens even more.

There are two reasons why the EU has a tremendous potential in the Web 2.0:

- The EU is diverse
- The EU is democratic

Throughout the Web 2.0, citizens of various member states can form networks in order to articulate and accomplish their common aims. In China, the government sustains dictatorship

by suppressing civil movements. (Recently an example appeared in western media, that the Chinese citizens formed groups on the Internet in order to fight against slave labor.) In the United States, since the country has for centuries been far more integrated than the EU, the new kind of citizen to citizen cooperation does not have such a high potential for added value than in Europe.

5. E-Health

Besides education, healthcare is the other policy where IT can have a decisive boosting impact. Since the aging European societies face enormous challenges in coping with the tension between the technologically possible and the economically affordable, IT offers significant changes in the way we might think about public healthcare services. Most of the positive experience we have are the first results of patient-patient and patient-doctor connections enabled by the Web 2.0 culture.

Generally, e-health solutions decrease costs by monitoring individual condition and thus decreasing the number of very costly emergency room visits but virtual e-health communities enable even more.

As the access for healthcare information became easy through the Internet, it has become a popular information source. People with Internet access browse for medical information for themselves but mostly for other people living in their families. Virtual e-health communities have been very helpful for patients with rare diseases. The Internet has proved to serve as a powerful channel for online information exchange, social support and personal empowerment. E-health groups are very promising phenomena of the Web 2.0. They are expected to challenge traditional public health service workflow and structure. They are also appropriate hubs of patient-information that are vital for proper diagnosis and medical control. It is easy to imagine that the e-health communities would soon have a patient-orientation role based on consumer feedbacks and thus expressing an indirect quality control above the healthcare institutions.

In many cases, the medical information publicly available is too complicated for people to understand. On the other hand, the pursuit to elaborate digestible information occasionally

concluded to the creation of incorrect medical information as well. Most of the information distortion could be interlinked with the commercial interest of the affected information-supplier company.

The shortage of e-readiness of patients and medical workers has to be enhanced equally. In certain cases, a negative attitude towards technology of the medical staff was detected.

Privacy issues within the realm of e-health are extremely important. The more participating sites a user visits, the more detailed and interrelated becomes the personal portrait. Therefore this territory has to be strictly regulated.

6. Suggested steps

It is up to the European policy makers to prepare for harnessing new growth potentials and avoiding social tensions via the suggested next steps.

- **E-society strategy:** we enhance the importance of an EU E-Society strategy in order to design decisions aiming to avoid social segmentation stemming from the increasing and unfulfilled demand of flexibility while capitalizing on E-society potential for knowledge uptake.
- **Education:** European citizens should be facilitated with a culture of initiative behavior, innovation capability and flexibility. The intellectual empowerment should have a special focus on the age groups above 40.
- **EU institutions:** the EU institutions should elaborate strategies for channeling the citizen's initiatives, criticism and contribution regarding their field of work. These strategies might also facilitate the increase of institutional flexibility as a source of institutional competitiveness of the EU.
- The EU should elaborate its “**Common Public Administrative Transparency Policy**” that would be capable of absorbing information from both the member state governments and the citizens in order to openly compare government efficiency and progress made in accomplishing the EU strategic aims. This initiative could also contribute to EU strategic planning.
- **Common strategy for social security:** although social security issues are regulated nationally, the EU should demand a leading role in the strategic preparation for the

upcoming social security challenges. Within this effort, special role should be given to E-health issues that are closely linked to the challenge of the aging population.