

STRATEGIES IN DEVELOPING IT SKILLS: NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES

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All of our IT STAR Member Societies have at least one common goal: the promotion of cultural and economic development through a wider and better use of information and communication technologies.

This might be expressed in different ways, stressing more the cultural aspects of informatics or the technological development, the pure research or the value of IT in various application domains.

In any case, one of the central ingredients (perhaps the most important) is the spread of IT knowledge and skills across the whole society: this is an extremely hard task, considering how small our associations are if we compare their size to our countries' population.

Moreover, it's somebody else's responsibility to steer the development: we have national governments, local authorities, international organizations such as the EU and the UNO...

On another side, there are large companies – both producers and users of IT – that have a strong interest in spreading the new technologies.

Last but not least, universities and schools are the primary public entities in charge of education and culture.

So, what can be the role of our informatics societies?

Looking at where the real powers are, our mission might look very pretentious.

Nevertheless, in the past two decades we decided to join our forces and we created at least two things we can be proud of:

1. IT skills certification programmes;
2. A large international network linking our societies.

Both these results come from our unique strength, which is – in my opinion – a specific focus on informatics. We're small but focused, and even if we have some problems with English, basically we all speak the same language: our common language is based on IT culture.

Let me describe briefly our two successes I've just mentioned.

Skills certification programmes, and in particular the ECDL/ICDL initiatives, are definitely the main reason why our societies are known to the large public.

Let's look at my country, Italy.

AICA was founded in 1961, and for more than 35 years it was a respected association that nobody knew in Italy, apart from a limited élite of computer scientists, professors, researchers and fans.

Our goals were always the same, including the progress in information processing, the divulgence of ICT knowledge and skills, the scientific and technological development of our nation in co-operation with other nations, and so on...

But in the first part of our history, we simply did not have the “gas”, we didn't have enough energy to launch initiatives that could really give a measurable contribution to our national society.

When we started thinking of a European Computer Driving License, none of us would have forecasted the tremendous success ahead; the idea was not so original, something similar existed already in Finland, and despite we called it a “license”, we all knew that it was just an option, and that no policeman will ever stop you if you use a computer without having the ECDL. I'm not going to tell you again the story of this success, you know it.

But coming back to Italy, the ECDL really changed AICA's position: we had an interesting and practical proposal to discuss with the Ministry of Education, in few years the business grew and reached 100.000 ECDL tests per month!

As a result, AICA had gained an enormous visibility and a financial strength it never had before.

Unfortunately, every medal has a reverse side: many professors and IT professionals started thinking of AICA as the company running the ECDL business, and some started blaming us for “betraying” our original mission; in their views, AICA was now simply competing with Microsoft and other private companies in the IT user certification market.

Our vision is quite different:

- ⌘ AICA is still a not-for-profit organization, and we use ECDL revenues exactly to pursue our cultural mission, just with more internal resources;
- ⌘ the ECDL business model in Italy is extremely open; we allow any credible organization to become an accredited test centre, we let them free to decide everything about training programmes, materials, and prices; the only part on which AICA dictates inflexible rules is quality assurance, and in particular the governance of examination procedures, as we must ensure that a certificate means something, it's not only a piece of paper for which a candidate has just to pay;
- ⌘ we are not competing with Microsoft or any other company; we let the market choose the technology platforms, but it's a fact that more than 90% of ECDL candidates are tested on Microsoft Windows and Office products; on the other hand, there's a clear overlap between ECDL and MOS certifications, but we are convinced that education is a delicate matter, and that our not-for-profit, vendor-independent, and open business model is preferable; Microsoft has a number of other things to do and products to sell, our focus is just IT skills development;
- ⌘ last but not least, we firmly believe that the ECDL business is fully compatible with our mission; it's not just a way to raise funds that we can then use to pursue our goals. On the contrary, the effect of ECDL is a very practical contribution to the spread of digital literacy: without it, most Italian schools would not care for IT training at all, or some would propose a number of different courses (as it was 10 years ago) with very limited value to their students. Our proposal, ranging from e-

Citizen to ECDL Core, Advanced, Specialised, and up to the EUCIP certifications, provide a comprehensive and sensible framework for any level of IT skills, both for users and for professionals.

If we look back a moment at IT professionals, they should not disregard the value of ECDL and even lower programmes, such as e-Citizen.

Having a high level of digital literacy among target users is definitely an advantage for any organization using ICT to support business processes.

For instance, all you know that traditional bank accounts cost a lot more than an internet banking service. Yet, the majority of bank accounts in Italy are still classic-style, requiring the client to go to the bank during office hours; one of the highest barriers here is clearly the lack of confidence from clients who are not familiar with web services.

A world with more IT-skilled consumers and higher performing employees would certainly recognize a higher role even to IT practitioners and professionals: this is why we think that high-end professionals should not underestimate the value of our digital literacy programmes.

Now, coming to the second merit, let's just quickly consider the value of an international network of informatics societies. This ranges from worldwide level, i.e. the IFIP organization, to CEPIS in all countries of the Council of Europe, down to "regional" level, as for our IT STAR organization.

Firstly, it's clear that the ECDL would not exist without CEPIS.

Secondly, there are not so many organizations that manage to represent the various countries in such a capillary way. Our member societies are not giants, I said it earlier, but still we are present everywhere with a real local touch.

Other international organizations, like the EU, really appreciate the value of our wide presence.

Our main weakness is probably that it's not easy to find a common position on every matter; but this is just a consequence of the fact that we have different faces and brains, and our cultural differences would better be regarded as richness.