Chapter XVI
Motivators and Inhibitors of Distance Learning Courses Adoption:
The Case of Spanish Students

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this chapter is to present an in-depth study of the factors influencing asynchronous distance learning courses purchase decision. We analyse the impact of relations with the Internet, distance course considerations, and perceived shopping risk on the decision to do an online training course. A convenience sample of 111 students attending classroom-taught postgraduate and management training programmes were used in March 2005 to obtain the information necessary to test in the Spanish market the conceptual model proposed by applying logistical regression. The results show that perceived course utility, lack of mistrust in the organising institution (service considerations), and satisfaction with the use of Internet when doing this type of training (relations with the medium) determine the asynchronous distance learning course purchase intention. Finally, the authors consider a set of recommendations for company managers.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are bringing radical changes to the world of work, culture, interpersonal relationships, the way knowledge is shared, and teaching-learning processes (Pagliarello, 2007). This, in turn, presents many challenges: challenges for employ-

ment because new jobs and new qualifications are required; challenges for culture as Internet-centred developments of new services which affect cultural practices are sometimes seen as a threat and sometimes as an opportunity for Europe's cultural and linguistic diversity; and challenges for education, especially to ensure that technological innovations are really serving education and are relevant from the pedagogical point of view and educational in very different learning contexts, respecting linguistic, cultural, and social diversity (Escarré & Barros, 2007; Hennecke & Cerny, 2007).

In the sphere of teaching-learning, ICT provide new methodological and didactic opportunities, encouraging universities, companies, and institutions in the training sector to develop alternative pedagogical methods to the traditional classroom. Training must aim to develop skills which favour flexible adaptation to the changes which are occurring in the information society (Bruder, Beyerlein, & Blessing, 2007; Butrimiene & Danilevicius, 2007; Hasan & Dunn, 2007).

Distance learning has been an alternative form of education for years for people whose personal circumstances (because they are working, have little time to attend class, etc.), geographical location (training centres are far away and, therefore, involve travel and in some cases a change of residence, which is a significant cost in terms of time and money) lead them to choose this option because they feels it suits them better than traditional training.

Originally, the focus was on autonomous, independent learning, with very little participant-teacher relations and none between participants (Williams, Paprock, & Covington, 1999). Distance learning is currently considered equivalent to "no classroom attendance," "online," or "e-learning," and is based on technological networks which contribute to participants' intellectual development (Macknight, 2000), providing the stimulus to create work teams, encouraging critical thought (Muilenberg & Berge, 2002), and mutual support

for collaborative work (Salter, 2000). This teaching methodology is based therefore on a didactic dialogue between the teacher and the student who learns independently but also cooperatively and collaboratively. The dialogue takes place through a technological bidirectional communication system which can be addressed to a mass audience and replaces personal interaction in the classroom by the joint, systematic action of various didactic resources and the support of an organisation and tutoring which provide the students with independent and flexible learning.

This new method makes learning more convenient, eliminating space and distance barriers and providing cost savings (E-Leusis, 2004; Favretto, Caramia, & Guardini, 2005; Hannum, 2001). It also offers other methods of communicating with the teachers which are more flexible, graphic, and fast and compensate for the shortfalls in the classical method of distance learning. E-learning has new interactive tools which make it convenient and simple for the student to assimilate the content, building a more appealing form of training.

In this way, e-learning, conceived as the use of new multimedia and Internet technologies to improve the quality of learning, emerges not only as a channel for facilitating learning processes but also as a privileged mechanism for articulating information, management, and training systems. It makes it possible to integrate the different components which influence continuous training issues and the factors arising from the use of the new technologies, contributing to promote the teaching-learning process and also favouring the acquisition of skills for working in virtual environments (Cenich, 2006).

The advantages in terms of flexibility, interactivity, and accessibility of distance courses are turning e-learning into one of the main methods of training in higher education (Graff, 2003). In this context, the perspectives point to exponential growth opportunities in the distance course market. Since the University of Phoenix offered the first distance course in 1989, the distance course

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