

Chapter 23

Improving the Workforce in Kazakhstan through Distance Learning Technologies

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ABSTRACT

Kazakhstan's emergence as an independent nation began with the fall of the U.S.S.R. twenty years ago. Increasing globalization has opened up new opportunities for today's students in the country to step into leadership positions in emerging and growing organizations. New policies at academic institutions have required lecturers to earn a diploma in their field. Both of these situations have created a need for training and the earning of a diploma by adults across the country. Since many of these potential students do not live within commuting distance to a university, distance education provides a method of meeting the educational needs of this 21st century workforce. The distance education program and its students at the University of International Business in Almaty, Kazakhstan are reviewed as a model for distance education in the region, and the results of recent research are reported. This research focuses on the demographics of these online learners, the perception of their distance education experience, and the implications for their lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

In today's global economy with internationally interlocking businesses and products, training a 21st century workforce becomes a complex web. The need for some knowledge and skills may seem universal but the specificity of what knowledge

and skills are needed where and the intersection of culture and politics with the attempt to meet those needs make this a challenge. These issues must be addressed against the background of emerging knowledge societies and ever more sophisticated technologies. Wilson (2005) notes that

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Since the 1980's, there has been a growing interest at national and international levels in the area of Human Resource Development (HRD) and its impact on economic performance. This interest and concern has been predominantly driven by globalization and the increase in international trade; unemployment levels; national budget deficits; international comparisons at levels of education and training; and the development of new technologies (p. 58).

Fedoroff (2012) comments that “Knowledge societies rest on a foundation of educational and research excellence. The Internet, advances in communication technology, and the rapidly expanding global fiber optic network are necessary, but not sufficient. It takes people to train, to educate, to collaborate, and to innovate” (p. 503). This chapter will explore the education of the 21st century workforce in one venue, Kazakhstan and one specific training methodology, distance learning.

Kazakhstan, with a population of 16,433,000 people and being a state with an impressive territory of 2,724,900 km², is the world's ninth largest country. Kazakhstan is formed by 14 regions, 86 cities, 168 districts and 174 settlements. Tazhina (2011) notes that there is a broad territorial division of the Kazakhstani population and a lack of closely located business schools.

The educational institutions located in this huge area are mostly concentrated in the largest cities and the majority of them are run privately; 89 out of 144 schools are private. Therefore the development of a distance educational system as a less expensive and a more accessible option for developing a 21st century workforce was an urgent need for the republic. This chapter will describe the national initiative for distance education, the development and details of the University of International Business (UIB) distance education program aimed at improving the country's workforce, and the results of research conducted at

UIB. This research focuses on the demographics of these online learners, the perception of their distance education experience and the implications for their lifelong learning, their plans for utilization of their learning in the workplace and their future goals as members of the 21st century workforce.

BACKGROUND

The Culture and Workforce of Kazakhstan

Socor (2010) describes Kazakhstan as a state recently created and built from scratch. He notes that “nineteen years ago, the Kazakh leadership had taken charge of a mere territory that lacked all the attributes or experience of statehood; a zone of Soviet economic and ecological disaster, in which the Kazakh element had been reduced to a minority, and where no political nation or civil society had existed” (<http://www.jamestown.org>). Tazhina (2010) explains that Kazakhstan's independence in 1991 and resulting globalization was the source of conflict between the infiltrating western thought and the traditional mentalities. This resulted in discomfort on personal, familial and organizational levels. She notes that market competition, the collapse of Soviet values, individualization, uncertainty of the future, and aggravated social stress as areas of conflict. For example, the previous Russian models of learning were no longer mandatory and a plethora of learning options became available.

During this period, there was strong evidence of Kazakhstan's emergence as an important political and economic entity in the geographical region as well as globally. Dorfman and House (2004) report that Kazakhstan participated in the first GLOBE research conference in 1994, where 54 researchers from 38 countries focused on defining and discussing organizational leadership as “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and

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