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Introduction:

The issue of human resources development has been one of the hot issues in Saudi Arabia in the last few years. With more than 60% of population under the age of 15 years, the developing Kingdom is facing a critical challenge of educating, training, and hiring its young population. In addition, the emergence of the World Trade Organization rules to the Kingdom which recently joined the WTO, has put more pressure on the training organizations to deliver better training for much more trainees. Given these facts, the need of introducing the use of technology to enhance the quality and quantity of training and education has been demanded. In particular, the internet evolution has been viewed internationally as an evolution that had changed and would change the way people communicate and exchange knowledge with each other. Inspired by some international initiatives, few Saudi public and private organizations have decided to transfer to "e-learning-oriented" organizations. Such organizations started the process of enhancing their quality and quantity of work through the concept of e-learning. The oil giant Saudi Aramco[1] has a successful e-learning video-conferencing system utilized in its training center where the need for reliable video-conferencing system is essential with the numerous number of sites which managed by Aramco. As another example, in the public sector, King Abdulaziz University[2] is one of the largest government universities that offer online degrees through it e-campus. In this report, we present a general review of the Elearning Initiative of the General Organization for Technical Education and Vocational Training (GOTEVT) in Saudi Arabia[3].
Objectives of the Initiative:

The elearning initiative of GOTEVT aims to enhance both quality and quantity of education and training through the use of computer and internet in the teaching, training, and learning process.

Why Elearning Initiative?

GOTEVT has decided to introduce elearning in its training colleges for many reasons. We can summarize them as follows:
1- Elearning has proved to be major factor in enhancing the quality of education and training. Number of research papers, industry reports, and case studies asserted that fact.
2- Elearning cuts costs: Although the debate of such claim is not over[5], the GOTEVT elearning initiative aims to benefit from elearning to reduce the overall cost of education through the partial replacement of instructors by elearning systems. The second track of the initiative (see below) promises to attain such goal.
3- Diversity of teaching and learning methods: Elearning has the advantage of expanding methods and tools to deliver knowledge from the instructor to the student. Such expansion will open to our students new frontiers for better learning. Video, animation, and interaction are some examples of the nature of diversity added to the learning and education process.
4- Transforming Towards Electronic Society: Elearning is a major portion in the e-society. In developing countries like Saudi Arabia, there are many national initiatives to transfer to the e-government era. Introducing elearning is a major factor to speed up that transfer process.
GOTEVT Elearning Initiative Tracks:

The initiative has many dependent/independent tracks. We can summarize them as follows:

1- Track 1: The establishment of the Elearning and Training Center. This center has been established in 2002 in one of GOTEVT Technical Colleges. The aim of this center is to act as the technical leader of the elearning initiative. The center [6] has developed some elearning materials.

2- Track 2: Adopting an elearning system to train students on basic computer skills. In this track, GOTEVT has been in a strategic alliance with international elearning company (ElementK) to deliver an online Arabic Computer Skills training[7]. Such training has been conducted in 10 GOTEVT technical colleges in Saudi Arabia. The track started early 2003 and since then, more than 13000 students benefited from the elearning system.

3- Track 3: The production of elearning courses for GOTEVT colleges: In this track a sample of 6 academic courses has been chosen. An ongoing project is underway to produce e-courses to be published in a suitable Learning Management System(LMS). These courses are being developed to comply with the SCORM standards as a method to ensure quality and portability of developed models. All produced courses are in Arabic.

4- Track 4: The production of self learning electronic materials. In this track, more than 300 training videos owned by GOTEVT will be transformed into elearning packages where each package will contain a topic in technology. Each package will contain an illustrative video clip about a certain technology topic accompanied with needed text and interactive assessment tool.
5- Track 5 : The establishment of Self-Learning Centers (SLC): As a major track of the GOTEVT elearning initiative the establishment of SLC will serve as an attraction center for both students and teachers in each college. In 2003, a module SLC has been established in one of the colleges[6]. The center contains a network of 12 powerful PCs connected to a server where more than 100 self learning CD and program are stored for the public use in each campus.

6- Track 6: The design of the Elearning Strategic Plan: Given the above tracks, GOTEVT is in a need for long term elearning strategic plan. A main task force has been formed to design that plan which will include the above 5 tracks as well as long term schedule to apply them.

Possible Obstacles:

To present the complete picture, the implementation of an e-learning system may face some obstacles which must be identified to be overcome. These obstacles are:

1- Low bandwidth: although broadband internet has become popular, there is some time needed to move the country from low-bandwidth internet to broadband and higher. Possible alternatives are providing internet through satellite which is about to be legalized by the government.

2- Lack of Strategic visions: Like any place in the world, the desire for change is there but few know how to implement change. This is a serious issue in our initiative where a clear roadmap has to be drawn to assist decision makers to support and fund the initiative.

3- The language barrier: Most courses and training packages in GOTEVT are in Arabic. Thus, arabization of both contents and LMSs is a must. Currently, the elearning and training center of GOTEVT is
working in arabizing an open source LMS to be the standard GOTEVT LMS.

Future Work

The initiative in its early stages, yet, we can summarize the following points as future work of the project:
1- The establishment of an elearning Portal for GOTEVT. Such portal aims to serve as the starting point of different GOTEVT population who would benefit from elearning.
2- The adaptation of elearning Quality System to ensure that the developed learning materials are complaint with international industry standards in elearning quality.
3- The evaluation of the effect of elearning on the learning process. The project that has been applied in the second track of the project is a good case study for such evaluation.
4- A flexible efficient training programs in elearning. Such programs are important due to the few number of people in the Kingdom who has the experience to implement and run elearning systems. This priority could be profit-making project in the recent future.

References

Ron Kurtus, "Return On Investment (ROI) From eLearning",
http://www.school-for-champions.com/elearning/roi.htm

[6] Elearning and Training Center at BCT,
http://www.elearning.edu.sa

[7] "Element K Middle East to initially provide e-Learning to over 20,000 GOTEVOT students"