

Meeting Industry Needs

Youth e-Skills filling labor gaps in high-growth Romanian regions

Mark West
Northwestern University

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Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

This paper is part of a project at the Center for Information and Society to broaden and deepen our understanding of the impact of Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD).

Our intention is to choose examples of ICTD implementations carefully and to write about them in such a way that each one, individually, illustrates important aspects of the featured settings and so that, taken together, the examples describe and reveal larger themes about core aspects of ICTD. It is our hope that by being systematic at every stage in the research process we are able to expedite the accumulation of credible and accessible information about the impact of ICTD on individuals and communities.

The ICTD field is filled with success stories extolling the benefits of access to Information Technology. As these often rhetorically powerful and memorable stories describe what can be achieved under the best of conditions, they may distort our understanding of what is achieved more typically, or may fail to describe aspects of their settings or strategies that were crucial to success.

Each setting in which ICTD projects are implemented is unique, but our experience is that with careful attention to the idiosyncrasies and commonalities across settings, patterns soon emerge which reveal more general themes about the qualities of settings, people, and programs that make a difference.

While tension may exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, we believe that a methodology built on intensive questioning and attention to detail can yield stories that uncover and communicate an accumulation of credible evidence about why individual programs and larger strategies succeed and fail.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools, and by promoting these techniques among NGO managers and grant makers, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the needs of NGOs and donors, with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities, accumulating evidence that serves the ends of rigorous analysis while publicizing good work.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape. It is supported in large part by a grant from Microsoft Community Affairs. Direction, guidance and leadership has been provided by Andrew Gordon of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. Joe Sullivan, staff researcher at the Center for Information and Society, is the lead editor for this project.

Center for Information & Society
University of Washington
Box 354985
Seattle, WA 98195
+1 206.616.9101

cisinfo@u.washington.edu
www.cis.washington.edu

Like many European twenty-somethings looking for work, Carmen faced a decision: a secure job with an immediate payoff, or delayed gratification with further training with hopes for a better job. In her hometown in western Romania, the main industry is an automotive parts factory, the Delphi Packard Corporation, which employs thousands from the town and surrounding areas. Carmen Pragai had to decide whether to pursue work on the factory floor or in the office support department. Line work is “hard, manual labor” Carmen explains. Plus, the difference in pay is like night and day – where the sun shines on those with e-skills.

Knowing her limitations and opportunities, Carmen enrolled in an intensive ICT training program offered by a local NGO in her hometown of Sannicolau Mare. Supported by a national network of telecenters under the guidance of EOS – Educating for an Open Society – the local, job-focused ICT training program kept Carmen in classes for five months. When she completed the eight training modules, she applied to Delphi and was hired by the factory’s office support department as a quality control professional.

Feeding Economic Growth

Sannicolau Mare has been both blessed and challenged by the economic prosperity of the past few years. New factory and service jobs have multiplied; an accompanying challenge is a shortage of skilled workers. Addressing this labor imbalance is important for the Delphi factory to demonstrate to investors that it is workable and profitable, feeding future expansion and support. The labor shortage is particularly acute because other, smaller growing businesses in the Sannicolau community also need workers with ICT fluency.

To meet the needs of industry and up-skill the current workforce, the local EOS partner has developed a network of ICT training programs that target different audiences. These computer classrooms are spread across the local learning community: a small lab in a kindergarten, a large lab at the local high school, another large lab in a neighboring school serving Roma youth, and a fourth lab in the main telecentre office.

Carmen studied in the main Sannicolau telecentre. Five months of coursework were spread out over



At a time when millions of young people have left Eastern Europe in search of work in the West, Florin Paun (left) and Carmen Pragai traded their new e-skills for secure jobs in their hometown – contributing ICT fluency to the booming economy of Sannicolau Mare, Romania. Here they share a traditional meal with the CIS researcher.

most of a year, covering Microsoft Word and Excel, as well as the more advanced database skills needed for programs like Access. Carmen was fortunate to have the good graces of her parents who paid her tuition and enabled her to dedicate her time to learning. But with the support of EOS, and its grant of Microsoft Unlimited Potential Community Learning curriculum, the training programs are also affordable for others. Carmen’s investment paid off, and she is now earning nearly twice what she would have made on the Delphi factory floor, and she has health insurance, a pension, eligibility for higher

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bonuses, and the possibility of promotion.

The benefits are not only for Carmen, but for Delphi too. An Austria-based firm, the automotive parts factory is one of two in the region operating at full capacity with three round-the-clock shifts of thousands of local workers. The Delphi Romania country director, Cristian Gulicska, explains that ICT training is essential to the factories' continued success. During a recent factory tour, Cristian pointed out that some positions on the floor require ICT skills – more than sixty line positions use computer work stations to monitor the precision of the assembly process. With three shifts each day, that makes nearly two hundred line workers in need of advanced e-skills, in addition to one thousand office staff.

“Does Delphi have an IT deficit?” asked a CIS researcher. “Yes,” Cristian admitted. A young and highly motivated manager, Cristian is speaking not only of the ICT needs

at the pair of current factories, but also of his plans for a third. He must keep the first two operating at full speed and optimal efficiency, while he and the Austrian head office negotiate the logistics and local workforce readiness required to build a third factory.

Multiple Access Points, Multiple Student Needs

The smart, strategic decision to co-locate the EOS-supported computer lab in the Sannicolau high school provides an important link to formal education. Bogdan Suvar, who participated in the training, was hired to design a human resources database for Delphi during the summer after his junior year. The training both built his skills and raised his visibility. Cristian, the factory director, was so pleased with the work that he offered Bogdan a full time position after graduation.

During the winter visit to the factory, young Bogdan – now a high school senior entering his final semester – met up with his old boss Cristian in the factory lobby. The director called out to Bogdan, “when are you going to come back to work for me?” Young Bogdan replied with a curious mix of sheepish confidence, “not for four more years, I’m off to university next.”



When high school junior Bogdan Suvar completed the EOS-supported ICT training in Sannicolau Mare, he couldn't wait to graduate to start work. So he took a summer job designing a human resources database capable of tracking the 7,000 workers at the local Delphi auto parts factory. Next stop, university.

A Growing Number of Options

But Delphi factory jobs are not for every Romanian youth. Florin Paun, a young man in his twenties, had left home to try his luck in the job market in Italy. After a year he returned to Sannicolau. Florin enrolled in the same eight-module training course as Carmen. Soon after graduating, he too found work: as a PC operator and administrator at a local Net Club, the Sannicolau version of a cyber café. He has been working there for three months now and is happy with his lot. Asked whether he would like to try his luck at the Delphi factory, Florin smiled with a quick “no.” He likes the freedom of working in a cyber café, and his role helping others with their computer skills. With the growing attractions and possibilities of the worldwide web – social networks, gaming, and the hunt for jobs – graduates like Florin can act as private sector gatekeepers and guides for the broader community. The match is a good one for the town’s cyber needs: Florin is one of at least three young ICT graduates to find work in the local Net Clubs in the first year of the training program.

Bogdan, Carmen, and Florin represent three types of ICT graduates in Sannicolau. The training programs supported there by EOS are new, having begun under the leadership of local NGO director Laura Rusu in early 2007. The programs teach fundamentals, as well as advanced training, such as Visual Basic, which was essential for Bogdan to build the Delphi database. In their first year, 117 have graduated, and Laura expects more young people to follow the paths of these three. Because of the diverse reach of the training – from kindergartens to factory-sponsored job training – the programs are able to target different pockets of learners, and are attempting to adapt to the rapidly changing needs of Sannicolau. In this town, ICT skills are part of growing prosperity.

The town Vice Mayor, Denis Groca, praises the work of the training programs, and how they contribute to the fast growth of Sannicolau. “We have the lowest unemployment rate in Romania,” Vice Mayor Groca says, explaining that Sannicolau has 12,000 jobs, but only 14,000 inhabitants; people come from fifty kilometers away to work. With such an explosion of economic development, Groca highlights that it is important to make sure that individuals are not only getting work, but also keeping work. Dana, one of Laura Rusu’s trainers, says it’s a matter of necessity: “with the economic growth, we have to learn how to keep up.”



Based in the western Romania city of Timisoara, the EOS team supports ICT training through a growing network of partner telecenters in diverse communities across the country that are trying to “keep up” with economic growth..

AUTHOR

Mark West is an ethnographer whose international research and work in the development field is based in South Asia and in Central and Eastern Europe. Mark's fieldwork has centered on the use of critical ethnography to bring a more participatory connection between local communities and international development projects.

In South Asia, Mark's research and work focus on the resistance networks of rural Dalits, or "untouchables," with a particular interest in the grassroots campaigns of barefoot lawyers. In Central and Eastern Europe he has worked to improve the transparency and communications of newly developing court systems. Since 2007, Mark has begun conducting fieldwork with the CIS on the economic and social impact of ICT programs in marginalized communities around the world.

Mark has served as a rule of law consultant with the United States Agency for International Development in Eastern Europe, and as a Human Rights Field Mentor with Stanford LawSchool. He holds a J.D. from the University of Washington, and is a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Communication and Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University.