THE OPENING OF THE FIRST MICROSOFT INNOVATION CENTER IN ROMANIA WITHIN THE ROMANIAN – AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Virgil Chichernea, PhD
Romanian – American University
virgil.chichernea@rau.ro

Abstract: On January 30, 2008, at the Romanian-American University, the Microsoft Innovation Center was opened, in the presence of Mr. Szomogy, state secretary at the Telecommunications Ministry, Mr. Silviu Hotăran, general manager of Microsoft Romania, prof. univ. dr. Ion Smedescu, founding rector of the Romanian-American University, teaching staff, students and representatives of prestigious companies in IT. On a global scale, there are, at present, 110 Microsoft Innovation Centers working in 60 countries, Romania joining, now, this network. With this opportunity the Contract of Collaboration between Microsoft Romania and the Romanian-American University was signed, which marked de creation of the first Microsoft Innovation Center in Romania, its goal being the increase of students abilities in business applications.

Key Words: innovation, e-campus platform, quality characteristics, business

1. Microsoft Innovation Center opening at the Faculty of Computer Science in Business Applications

At only one year after the inauguration by Bill Gates of the Global Technical Support Center in Bucharest, the local Microsoft branch has opened the first Innovation Center in Romania, at the Romanian-American University.

The Microsoft Innovation Center is the result of the fruitful collaboration between the Managerial Informatics Faculty of the Romanian-American University and Microsoft Romania, with the goal of increasing students' abilities in business applications. The Managerial Informatics Faculty, well-known and recognized in Romanian IT, has responded with promptitude at the exigencies for a quality higher education imposed by the European Union with the Bologna program and it has, at this moment, reaccredited according to the ARACIS methodology, both the license and master programs in the field of Economic Informatics.

By creating this center at the Managerial Informatics Faculty, the first Microsoft Center in higher education in Romania, the following goals are targeted: the creation of connections between academic studies and real world professional abilities to help the students gain the necessary informatics knowledge to be successful in the present day jobs market; the offering of a world level technological program, to help the students gain working abilities in relevant high end technologies and offer on-line learning resources on the Microsoft platform. Some of the targeted goals are the design, build and implement of an

e-Campus platform; the organization of classes, workshops, labs and seminars in accordance with international academic teaching standards; the direct involvement of companies in students practice activities.

The Microsoft Innovation Center at the Romanian-American University constitutes a competitive environment for students to meet and engage the business applications domain from our country and offers real opportunities for the rise of the quality of the teaching process in IT by being the institutionalized place of meeting between students and prestigious Romanian IT companies.

It is a center dedicated to CRM and ERP type applications, where the basis for learning these software architectures are now built with the help of a world class technological program, fact that will help students acquire working abilities for higher level technologies. Further on, these students, along with their teachers and industry companies will be able to carry on research projects here, the results of which will improve the competitiveness of Romanian projects in the field.

The Microsoft IT Academy Program is conceived to help academic institutes which offer high level educational programs for Microsoft technologies substantially increase their professional and academic potential. This program allows academic institutes: to offer a world class technological program to help students acquire working abilities for higher level technologies, to provide abundant on-line learning resources for anytime and anyplace learning, both for direct student learning and instructor professional abilities development; to create connections between academic studies and real world professional abilities to help the students gain the necessary informatics knowledge to be successful in the present day jobs market; to create a well prepared working force for employers so that the candidates with the adequate abilities and training to be part of the available working force; to put students and instructors in contact with Microsoft for a continuous engagement which will have the goal of developing their professional and personal technological abilities. The program has two levels: Advanced (this level offers benefits to institutions that teach IT classes for Microsoft Certified IT developers and professionals) and Essential (this level offers benefits for institutions that teach Microsoft Office classes). The specific benefits offered for each level are special and can be structured according to: schedule, software and resources, instructors' professional development, marketing resources.

"In Romania we got used to talking for years about the huge opportunity we Romanians have thanks to the community of information technology professionals, says Silviu Hotăran, general manager of Microsoft Romania. But today we notice that this opportunity is somewhat held down by the lack of work force. I wouldn't exaggerate, everybody is afraid more than they have to, but still it is good to address this problem. Already the salaries, which were said to represent an advantage by their low level, are rising rapidly so we have to ask ourselves what other advantage we can find to attract foreign investments".

For what quantity is concerned, it is clear that it is not enough and it will create big problems, but the lack of work force directly affects the quality. But we are living in a world which globalization is making flatter and flatter and in which the difference cand only be made by innovation. Innovation which has at its' base the quality of education. You cannot create if you are not educated and you cannot be competitive if you do not know how to monetize what you create, to generate, in fact, new economical projects and work places.

"For this reason, the educational system in Romania needs all of our support, of all of us, industry, non-governmental organizations, all of society, Silviu Hotăran added. And what we are doing with this Innovation Center is very important, because we are bringing education and research closer to industry. What will happen next is up to us. It is very important for this pleasant moment to turn into a durable and pragmatic partnership. It is very important how we will manage, together, to make this center durable."

At this point, the Microsoft Innovation Center Network numbers over 110 centers in 60 countries all over the world. The fact to be mentioned is that on the waiting list there are still countries like Austria, Finland and Hungary. The purpose of the one in Romania is to increase students' abilities in business applications and, this way, MIC is the place where Microsoft industry partners will be able to work with these students, to share their experience, but also to develop together new applications and test programs

on diverse architectures. This way innovation can be accelerated, process which should result, in the end, with the realization of the much desired connection between the academic environment and industry.

"All the results obtained in this center must be quantified, showed Paula Apreutesei Business Strategy Manager, Microsoft Romania. They will be measured and put into the international system of the network. We will report the number of students and teachers that will be involved in activities in this center, the number of licenses, classes and PhDs generated here. It's about interest and finality!"

On a short term, all the students that will pass through here will be able to answer the two main questions that each employer asks: "what can you do?" and "how well can you do it?", said Virgil Chichernea, dean of the Managerial Informatics Faculty from the Romanian-American University which hosts the Bucharest Center. This will be a competitive environment for students to meet with the business applications domain and the quality of the IT learning process will increase.

This cannot happen without the help of industry partners. They are the ones who know best what the requirements in the production activity are and they can generate the research projects which can be carried on in the space that Microsoft and the Romanian-American University are offering. They are the ones expected to start the things. "For us it is a huge step forward, because we finally have the chance to work hands-on with the business applications, showed prof.univ.dr. Ana Maria Preda, dean of the Management and Marketing Faculty. It is a big difference between making a virtual presentation of business applications and having a fully functional ERP system to work with. Until now we could only reproduce the business context virtually and you cannot do mass training this way. Now we can go further, we can transform these applications and capitalize what we are doing here. In addition, we can create the background for research projects development in collaboration with industry companies. Students will have the ability to be graded directly by both the beneficiaries of their work and their future employers. It is a sort of rethinking of the practice activity."

The opening of this first center was appreciated by the Romanian Authorities, in the person of the state secretary of the Communications and Information Technology Ministry, Zoltán Somodi, as being a remarkable success of the private environment that has yet again managed to act faster than the ministries. But this thing could be compensated by the support of the ministry in opening more centers like this in public institutes. But this is not the only reaction of this type by the Romanian authorities. Two days later, Anton Anton, the president of the Romanian Authority for Scientific Research, acknowledged that education is missing the innovation component. But as a result of talking to Microsoft, the authority has decided to financially support the participation of Romanian students at Imagine Cup, the most popular international competition for students with a passion for technology. For this year, 1000 students (forming 120 teams) have already signed up. The grant approved by the authority, of 4000 lei, is addressed only to those who reach the final, the future entrepreneurs in high end technology.

"We intend to support the opening of such centers in as many universities as possible, because this will help the students adapt very fast at the requirements of the market at a European level. Furthermore, we would like these centers to be opened to modernize public institutions." - Zoltan Somodi, state secretary for IT.

"One of the biggest problems of faculty graduates in Romania is answering very clearly, when employed, the fundamental questions about the relevance of the accumulated knowledge. This is because, sadly, the connection between the academic environment – in regards to the university curriculum – and the real professional life is still very weak. But the ones that will pass through the Microsoft Innovation Center will no longer be confronted with this lack." - Virgil Chichernea, dean of the Managerial Informatics Faculty.

2. Innovation in Education

One of the main questions that traditional education is trying to answer now is: if and how the application of the new technologies of IT&C in education and training could offer an alternative for traditional education in an educational context characterized by role fluidity, didactic measure centered on the student, distributed resources, virtual collaboration structures and asynchronous lessons.

The usage of the new IT&C facilitates the transition from the traditional model of class training to a greater personalization of the content and a greater control for the one who is learning of the training process. Also, the fact that the utilization of the new IT&C facilitates the establishing of new relation between institutes, teachers, community, work place, family and the person learning is visible. The global balance of education has shifted from a closed pedagogical approach, attributed to institutions and tightly controlled by the teacher, with passive students and minimal involvement of the parents and community, to one that is open, transparent, integrated in society, which supports the initiative of the student, facilitating collaboration, request / questioning, interrogation, competences and continuous learning.

By placing the student in the middle of this new training paradigm, a change of accent is seen in education from content (content-based learning) to the context of learning (context-based learning). We have to admit that these tendencies have been present in learning and training mediums, independent of using IT&C, but they are consolidated by the possibilities offered by IT&C. In these circumstances, at least two major action direction are imposed, with necessity, for the quality leap to a competitive alternative: the first is referring to the necessity of a theoretical construction that can offer the fundament for using the new technologies in education and the building of an efficient educational environment, the second referring to the role, attributions and competences of the teacher in the context specific to the new technological environment – through the point of view his particular position as a pivot of an opened and/or distance education system. It is obvious that, without a previous training of the teaching staff to utilize the IT&C efficiently in education, the quality of the teaching / learning process cannot be guaranteed. But still, even if this idea is largely accepted and promoted, it's reflection in practice is, at least for now, pretty unclearly contoured. The new IT&C is changing the perspective on educational practice; the successful implementation of these becomes one of the acute problems of this century. The IT&C strategies for schools, universities or vocational training facilities must have in mind the professional development of instructors and teachers and the acquisition by them of new competences about the development of the Knowledge Society. But, at the same time, it is necessary to implement some clear strategies to increase the professional degree of the providers of IT&C for education, who must have the necessary knowledge to understand and anticipate the requirements coming from the users of the new IT&C and offer them quality products and services.

The IT&C domain has become, for quite some time, the main actor in the world, being the sector with the biggest development, in which any technology has a life span of only a few years. The question that must be asked in this field is not "Could it be done?" but "When?". Naturally, this permanent dynamic needs a large number of specialists of experienced people, ready to take the research to the next level or to implement and administer the present technologies. The academic mediums have a great responsibility, and their role is becoming increasingly important and harder to achieve.

Microsoft, one of the most important leaders in the IT industry, has understood this challenge for education and has come to support it. By initiating a series of programs and partnerships with diverse universities and academies, but also with high schools and schools, Microsoft had a major contribution to the familiarization and training of pupils and students in using and programming computers.

Education transformation, innovation stimulation and the creation of new opportunities for work are the three pillars of the global vision Microsoft Unlimited Potential.

For 2008 Microsoft sets a goal for a partnership with governments and industry to facilitate this way the access to technology for the 5 billion people of the planet who do not enjoy the advantages offered by IT.

One of these educational programs is the Partners in Learning, which Microsoft Romania is undergoing with the Education, Research and Youth Ministry and the Communications and Information Technology Ministry. The main goals of the program are: innovative teachers, innovative pupils and innovative schools.

The main goals of the Partners in Learning program are: encouraging schools to improve the level of usage of IT for teachers and pupils, the stimulation of the creativity of teachers in the process of teaching in class, and the forming of a community of "actors" – teachers, pupils/students, parents for better communication and experience exchange.

"Microsoft always believed that education is the landmark of any measure and that the investment in education is the best way to help young people capitalize their own potential," said Bill Gates, Microsoft chairman. "Partners in Learning is one of the programs that Microsoft is undergoing with governments in schools all over the world to help teachers use technology in class to make the learning process attractive and relevant for the 21st century."

"The active integration of technology in the classroom means more than PCs; the process needs the involvement and cooperation of those who have the expertise, the vision and the experience acknowledged in all the aspects of the educational process", said Cristian-Mihai Adomniţei, minister of Education, Research and Youth. "The partnership with Microsoft and the directions of the Partners in Learning Program were important tools for us in establishing our strategy of making a better education through IT and forming young people for a competitive economy."

Education is and will be an important factor in the development of an economy, and Romania has accepted and quickly adopted the concept of "knowledge based economy". Training based on modern educational principles and continuous forming has become a constant in the Romanian school. The efficient investment in education and innovation has become an imperative for any country that wants to get competitive advantages at regional level. Education is perceived today as a vital function of modern society because, through this, society perpetuates its' existence, by transmitting form generation to generation everything that humanity has learned about itself and reality.

From the modern school society expects everything nowadays: to pass on to young people a knowledge accumulated through the centuries, to help them accommodate to a continuously changing reality and to prepare them for an unpredictable future. Considered a key factor in society development, it supplies well prepared work force for all sectors of activity, favors progress, stimulates intellectual curiosity, adaptability, creativity and innovation for the individual, education is one of the most powerful tools we have to shape the future.

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