

MEASURES OF BUSINESS DIGITAL DIVIDE: COMPARATIVE STUDY OF US AND EUROPEAN SMEs

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on findings of a comparative study of business Digital Divide conducted among small and mid size businesses of Central California in US, five regions in Poland, Region Norte of Portugal and Comarca de la Mancha region of Spain. A study focused on the scale, dimensions and causes of so called business “Digital Divide” understood as a technological and productivity gap in utilization of ICT between technology savvy large corporations and SMEs.

Among many aspects of Digital Divide experienced by the SMEs three will be discussed in this paper: barriers to implementation of ICT as perceived by SMEs in different countries, uses of ICT across applied business processes, and approach and format of used ICT training.

Methodology of this study in progress is based on mailed questionnaires (Europe) and structured interviews (US) applied to statistically sound samples of SMEs. Preliminary conclusions are based on analysis of descriptive statistics with more in-depth inferential analysis planned for the next stage of the study.

The study shows that perception of barriers for ICT implementation differs between US and European SMEs. For instance Portuguese and Polish owner-managers saw fewer barriers to implementation of ICT based solutions in their companies than Spanish and American managers. Moreover, a common ranking of barriers for three surveyed European countries showed that the most important perceived barrier was lack of financial resources, the second one - lack of skills and knowledge, while lack of the Information System Plan was the fourth one. On the other hand - American entrepreneurs perceived ICT implementation barriers as more substantial, viewing lack of the Information System Plan as the greatest barrier, lack of financial resources as the second one, followed by lack of long term strategy and knowledge and skills among workers. This difference may be attributed to maturing perception of IS as a major resource also by the American owners-managers of small and mid-size businesses. The use of ICT to support different business processes used by SMEs exhibited interesting similarities e.g. indicating puzzling low level of use of Internet by all SMEs in the area of marketing and promotion.

On the other hand there were glaring differences between European and American SMEs when it comes to a scope and format of employees ICT training with conspicuous absence of e-learning as a mode of delivery of ICT training in European as compared to American market.