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Public Libraries – Facilitators of Information Society and e-Inclusion in Latvia

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Abstract

The economic growth and national competitiveness is closely correlated with the development of information society. In the last few years the role of public libraries has significantly increased and libraries have greatly contributed to the improvement of information society in Latvia. The usage of library services had never been as high as they were in 2011 – 42% of the population were active library users and 90% of them used the Internet. Nowadays, the public library network in Latvia provides a powerful network of information, knowledge and community centres and they are highly demanded by society.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, the economic growth and national competitiveness is closely correlated with the development of information society. E-Inclusion is one of the most important cornerstones of the development of information society in order to be sure that all social groups are included in the reducing of the digital divide.

In Latvia, e-Inclusion is fostered by a number of stakeholders representing different sectors. The successful development of information society in Latvia lies in the fact that all of more than 800 public libraries are connected to the Internet; all librarians are trained to use information and communication technologies (ICT), as well as trained to help people work with computers and search for relevant information on the Internet or in databases. The great advantage of libraries is their ability and willingness to collaborate with all stakeholders in order to reach all social groups.

2. The Development of Information Society and Economic Growth

The usage of ICT is one of the main drivers of change within society and business for more than a decade. An inclusive European information society is one of the priorities of the strategic EU framework *i2010 – a European Information Society for growth and employment* as well as one of the pillars in *Digital Agenda – the flagship initiative under the Europe 2020 strategy to deliver smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*.

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There are several indicators that characterize the development of information society, such as percentage of individuals using the Internet, number of households with Internet access and number of households with broadband access. The economic development, however, is characterized by both gross domestic product (GDP) and national competitiveness.

The Global Competitiveness Report 2012–2013 allocates countries (economies) into three stages of development: 1st stage - factor-driven economies; 2nd stage - efficiency-driven economies; 3rd stage - innovation-driven economies. Any countries falling in between two of the three stages are considered to be in transition. (Schwab, 2012)

There is a strong statistically significant linear correlation between the percentage of Internet users and the natural logarithm of GDP which confirms, as previously mentioned, that the usage of ICT is one of the main drivers of change within society and economic development.

From the graph we can see that the percentage of Internet users differs for countries in different development stages. This finding is also supported by the results of the analysis of variance which shows that the average percentage of Internet users differs between all five groups. There are four statistically significant homogeneous subsets divided by the average percentage of Internet users which indicate also four homogenous groups of countries with different levels of development of information society (see Table 1).

Table 1. Average percentage of the Internet users and development stage of economy

Development stage	Number of countries	Subset for significance level $\alpha = 0.05$			
		1	2	3	4
Factor-driven (Stage 1)	38	9.9			
Efficiency-driven (Stage 2)	33		33.0		
Transition from Stage 1 to Stage 2	17		33.3		
Transition from Stage 2 to Stage 3	21			57.5	
Innovation-driven (Stage 3)	35				76.7

Factor-driven economies have the lowest average percentage of Internet users - 9.9%, as well as the lowest GDP per capita. Innovation-driven economies have the highest average percentage of internet users - 76.71%, as well as the highest GDP per capita. There is no statistically significant difference between Internet usage for efficiency-driven economies and for countries in transition from factor-driven to efficiency-driven.

3. e-Inclusion – an Important Component of Information Society

The Latvian economy is in transition from efficiency-driven to innovation-driven. There are 71.7% of individuals who use the Internet in Latvia. The Internet usage level is much higher than the average of the corresponding development group: for efficiency-driven economies this percentage is 57.5%. The analysis of the Latvian GDP growth rate and the percentage of Internet users shows that the proportion of Internet users increased even during the period of recession in 2008 and 2009 – although the GDP rate rapidly decreased, the percentage of Internet users continued to increase, just slower (see Figure 2). Therefore we can conclude that in Latvia aspects other than the GDP had greater influence on the increase of Internet usage.

In order to fully participate in society, people now need to be competent and willing to use ICT tools to access information and engage in social processes.

One of the aspects of successful development of an inclusive information society is access to the Internet. If we consider the indicators of Internet access availability and quality in Latvia we can see that the quality of the Internet in Latvia is even higher than in average in Europe – the share of fixed broadband lines equal or above 100 Mbps is 15.5% (average in EU only 1.3%), 3G coverage is 99% (in EU – 89.9%). At the same time we are below the Europe's average number of households with Internet access and number of people who can access the Internet through a mobile phone (see Table 2). There are several reasons for this. First of all, we have insufficient Internet

access coverage in rural areas; secondly, not all households in Latvia have a computer. The latter is economic factor, but here a significant role plays access to Internet secured by public libraries in Latvia.

Table 2. Access to computers and Internet in Latvia and EU, 2011

Indicator	Latvia	EU 27
Share of fixed broadband lines equal to or above 100 Mbps	15.5	1.3
3G coverage (as a % of total population)	99.0	89.9
% of population accessing the Internet through a mobile phone via UMTS (3G)	3.7	11.8
Households with Internet access at home, %	63.6	73.2

Source: *European Commission (2013)*

Another aspect is digital literacy. In the last few years in Latvia we have had significant progress in digital literacy. The percentage of individuals with medium or high Internet skills increased from 18.7% in 2005 to 60.9% in 2011 (in comparison to the average in the EU - 22.3% and 42.6%). Latvian Internet users are one of the most active social network users in the EU – 55.1% of the population (average in the EU is only 37.8%) or 79% of all Internet users in 2011, as well as one of the most active in online job seeking – 27.1% in 2011. (European Commission, 2013)

In the context of the development of information society, it is necessary that all groups of population benefit from the use of ICT and that no one is left behind. E-Inclusion means both inclusive ICT and the use of ICT to achieve wider inclusion objectives. In Latvia as in most EU countries, e-Inclusion is fostered by a number of stakeholders representing different sectors: national government, local governments, businesses and non-governmental organizations. All of them collaborate in order to achieve the main objectives of Latvian e-Inclusion policy. (Balina, 2012)

4. The Role of Public Libraries in e-Inclusion

In recent years people more and more gain from access to the Internet. At the same time Internet access and digital skills inequality expand the digital divide. The challenge of information society is to motivate and educate people from all society groups in the use of new technologies. Libraries provide an important alternative means of access for disadvantaged people, although the neediest people are not necessarily the ones who use library computers. (Kinney, 2010)

Public libraries in Latvia have greatly contributed to the improvement of information society – in the last 6 years public libraries have faced transformation from traditional library operations to the use of modern technologies. The reason why people visit libraries has also changed.

This transformation started in 2006 when the Global Libraries initiative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was initiated in collaboration with Latvian government and local authorities. The goal of this public library development project «Father's 3rd Son» was to facilitate and promote the use of resources offered by free access to ICT and the Internet in libraries.

Another important aspect is that all librarians are trained to use ICT as well as trained to help people work with computers, search for relevant information and use public or private sector e-services. This initiative has certainly made a strong contribution to the increased impact that public libraries have on the quality of people's lives. This initiative also facilitates Internet and computer usage as well as increase the level of digital literacy. The influence was stronger in rural areas and for people in social risk groups.

Currently all 817 public libraries in Latvia (149 in cities and towns, 666 in rural area) have Internet access and public libraries in Latvia are in high demand as centres of information, knowledge and community.

Usage of library services has never been as high as they were in 2011:

- 42% of the population are active library users;
- the number of library non-users has reduced from 62% in 2007 to 9% in 2011;
- 90% of the library visitors use the Internet. (Balina, 2012)

The increase in these rates is caused by the social and economic benefits that people gain by using ICT, not the infrastructure or librarians alone. Research done in late 2011 confirmed that library users recognized the access to ICT in libraries as a significant service that improves the quality of their lives. 54.2% of the users admit that Internet in libraries helped them to access the labour market (job search or employee search). For 53.8% it helped to improve their communication with relatives and friends. 45.4% of the users admit that they have saved money by accessing ICT at a library. 45.3% pointed out that Internet at public libraries improved access to state and municipal e-services. (Centre for Culture Information Systems, 2013)

By analysing the habits of library Internet users in the past 12 months the research shows that 84% also take books, newspapers or magazines to read at home, 74% use printing, scanning or copying services, 43% consult librarians in the use of computers, Internet and databases. (Centre for Culture Information Systems, 2013)

The most common answer by 80% of respondents why they use the Internet in libraries was that this is done because Internet in the library is a free of charge service. More than 2/5 of the respondents used the Internet in the library because the library has a pleasant environment (52%) and in a convenient location (46%). 45% of Internet users in library mention also use of other necessary equipment (printers, scanners, etc.). Importance of librarians' assistance and advice was important for 42% of Internet users, 19% said they use the Internet in the library because it is not available elsewhere. Analysing tendencies of the previous years the conclusion is that the role of libraries increase – people more and more use services in libraries and value them (see Table 3).

Table 3. Why people use the Internet in the library (percentage from Internet users in libraries)

Reason	2011	2009	2007
Free of charge service	80	73	63
The library is a pleasant environment	52	23	28
Availability of other equipment (printers, scanners, etc.)	45	21	23
Librarians assistance and advice	42	15	21
Not available elsewhere	19	21	18

Source: Centre for Culture Information Systems (2013)

Percentage of inhabitants for whom library is the only access point to the Internet has increased from 18% in year 2007 to 21% in year 2009 and then decrease till 19% in 2011. It means that for those people library is the only place where they can benefit from information society.

Libraries also have an important role in the development of e-skills. Library Internet users increasingly use librarian assistance with computer use. Advice relating to the use of the computer in 2011 has been asked more frequently than in previous years – 33% of respondents in 2007, 27% - in 2009, and then in 2011 this number increased to 48% of the respondents. There are two main reasons for this – the trust to librarians and their knowledge and their ability to answer the questions and to provide help to people: 98% of customers were satisfied with service and 94% with knowledge level of librarians. The satisfaction rate in paste years is growing. (Centre for Culture Information Systems, 2013)

This clearly shows how important libraries are for providing equal access to information especially in case when economic situation is changing.

5. Conclusions

The economic growth and national competitiveness is closely correlated with the development of information society. Latvia as a country in transition from efficiency-driven to innovation-driven economies has showed the importance of the information society and its effect to the economic growth. Latvia has been strongly affected by the

economic recession in 2008-2009, but one of the stimulators of the recovery of economics in 2011-2012 has been also the quality of the Latvian ITC infrastructure and society's capabilities to integrate in the information society. Significant contribution to this success has been played by public libraries having greatly contributed to the improvement of information society in Latvia and growth of the economics of Latvia.

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