

EB Challenges and how to overcome them in Dubai

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Abstract

On their way to success and the achievement of benefits in the e-business arena many companies worldwide are to overcome inhibitors that this area of business is facing nowadays. The best way of overcoming those is the identification and evaluation of so-called critical success factors that can act as the solution for the inhibitors encountered. The research reported in this paper addresses e-business inhibitors, success factors, and benefits in large corporations in Dubai. The findings from this research indicate that encountered challenges include: 'laws and regulations,' 'integrated payment gateways,' 'acquiring loyal customers,' 'managing changes' and 'delivering reliable information'. On the other hand success factors of e-business include: collaboration with traditional business, technology upgrading, risk management plan, quality customer services, and training staff.

1. Introduction

Dubai has already initiated the latest technology, and has become the 'playground' and the first initiator of an Internet City and eGovernment in the region (Aladawani, (2003). Oliver (2000) reported that all the countries in the region are talking about e-business; however, Dubai has made progress towards it. One of Dubai's major aims is community outreach: 'We have to let the world know what we have to offer because our drive is to bring in business' as stated in Molaski (2001, p2). In 1999, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, and UAE Defense Minister, stated that 'Tomorrow's world will be driven by the Internet. It will be driven by innovative ideas and Dubai will be a significant global player in the dot com world' (Hameed 1999b, p1). Within one year of this date, from the desert, Dubai Internet City (DIC) was established (Kettmann 2001). According to AlGergawi (2001, p2) and Binbyat (2001) Internet City is viewed as the base for the new economy as it will give companies the ability to create new opportunities not just within the region, but also internationally (Binbyat 2001).

2. Literature review

According to Oliva (2000, p56), "Firms in business and industrial markets increasingly recognize that taking charge of their own channel disruptions and transformations is an imperative. They cannot just 'let things happen' and assume they are immune from e-business challenges. Even if their products or services have little connection to the digital world today, the digital content of everything

increases as we move toward a digital/networked economy".

Some of the habits that customer are used to in the traditional market provided challenges to the online business. Some people for example, feel safer in having the traditional method of shopping where buyer and seller know one another, and have face to face contact (Hoffman and Novak 1999; Schwartz 1999; Mutz 2005) and where trust issues have no impact on transaction processes (Mutz 2005).

Other challenges identified in the literature are cultural challenges (e.g. personal and communication), managerial challenges (e.g. management support), business challenges (e.g. customer services), legal challenges (e.g. law and regulations), and technological challenges (e.g. payment systems). In order to overcome, or avoid these challenges and achieve ongoing success, a number of key success factors that are critical for electronic business need to be considered.

To overcome inhibitors on their way to success Dubai companies had to identify and evaluate various success factors thought to be the possible solutions for their problems. Success factors are defined as those that are essential to the future development of electronic business and if these are managed well, then the organization will remain competitive (Rahman and Raisinghani 2000).

(Zeng and Reinartz 2003, p9), "success depends on how well companies can match their business model with the real value added of the Internet to their customer." Moreover, ongoing success is to 'quickly, completely, accurately, reliably and efficiently' fulfil orders (Baron, Shaw et al. 2000, p16; Ozer 2005). Applying new technologies and simplifying processes can lead companies to achieve success, add value to them, and save users time and effort spent online (Lee 2001; Totty 2003).

Implementing a business strategy is an essential process in converting to e-business, and in maintaining e-business success (Peeples 2002; Bajgoric 2003; Gibson, Lin et al. 2003; Nguyen and Harrison 2004; Tang, Yasa et al. 2004b). The Internet is only a tool, and no matter how desirable the tool is, the business strategy is the prerequisite for success (McGrath and Heiens 2003). As stated by Srinivasan and Moorman, (2005, p194) "A retailer's decision to enter online markets represents an important strategic commitment" and e-business executives who think strategically would appear to be successful in conducting e-business. This is because they tend to focus on customers, markets,

internal operations and competitive position (McGrath and Heiens 2003; Ozer 2005).

3. Methodology

This research has been accomplished in two major phases. In the first phase a comprehensive literature review has been carried out, with the emphasis on challenges, and success factors of electronic business. In the second phase interviews with electronic business leaders in 5 large corporations in Dubai were carried out (for the anonymity reasons these companies are referred to as companies A, B, C, D, and E). These 5 companies were from diverse industries including: airline industry, electronics, recruitment, B2B marketplace operator, and e-solution provider. The goal of the second phase was to investigate challenges, critical factors and benefits achieved by e-business leaders in the Middle East environment, as well as to provide a basis for a proper analysis by highlight the challenges faced, identify possible solutions and indicate benefits.

Thus, the main questions for this research were:

What are the challenges of electronic business encountered by the Dubai Companies?

What are the critical factors of electronic business perceived by the Dubai Companies?

Semi-structured interviews

As there is very little literature on e-business in Dubai, the Gulf and Middle East, it was necessary to use an exploratory approach (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2005) to investigate e-business issues. In the present research, structured and open-ended questions were used to allow for detailed responses (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2005).

Fifty companies engaged in electronic business were approached to participate, and five agreed to be interviewed. The number of companies participating in the interviews was sufficient for the purposes of this phase of the research thesis. As stated by Sekaran (2002) when an exploratory study is carried out using a qualitative approach like interviews, a small sample size is almost always used.

Interviews were conducted with senior managers in their workplaces, in five companies engaged in EB in Dubai. The participants were sent an interview script in advance before conducting the interviews. This script was designed based on the findings from the literature review. With the permission of the interviewees, all interviews were recorded on tape and later transcribed.

After conducting the five interviews, the recorded interviews were transcribed. The coding and analysis was carried out in order to understand and

interpret the collected data. According to Zikmund (2003) once fieldwork is completed, coding is carried out to interpret and categorize the obtained data in a way that answers the questions raised. The appropriate analytical technique for this phase of the research was forming a consistent outline and summarizing the relevant details revealed in the interviews. This was then formatted and categorized in a way that answered the initial research problem. The interviewees were then sent a copy of the interview transcript for their approval, to be included in the thesis findings.

The internal validity of the data collated from the five interviews had to be addressed. According to Zikmund and Babin (2007) and Ghauri and Grønhaug (2005) internal validity refers to the interpretation of the cause-and-effect relationships that might exist between variables. Whether obtained data from interviews can be used to generalize cause-and-effect relationships in the present research is however, questionable. However, to overcome the problem of internal validity for the purposes of this research, a solution that involved swapping between internal and external validity was deemed sufficient. Zikmund (2003, p273) defined external validity as the ability to generalize findings to the entire population under study. Therefore, the existence of the challenges and success factors of electronic business, identified in the interviews, as well as the relationships among them, will be examined in the wider context of a 100 Dubai companies engaged in electronic business, using survey. This is likely to enhance the quality of findings and allow generalisation beyond the data obtained through the interviews.

4. Findings

The structure of the findings from this research follows the structure of the interviews conducted with the leaders of participating companies. The corporations that took part in the research are from diverse industries, namely: Company A: Airline; Company B: E-solution provider; Company C: Main operator of B2B marketplace for the Middle East; Company D: Electronics Company; Company E: Recruitment Company.

In the following sections main findings regarding inhibitors, and success factors of e-business, are outlined.

Electronic business inhibitors encountered by Dubai corporations are classified as organisational, technical, and web-site issues

Organisational issues

Lack of skilled IT staff:

One of the main challenges that Company E faced was a shortage of skilled IT staff because of the .com boom in USA and Europe. Therefore, it was extremely difficult for the company to start its own operations. Management for a while was thinking of outsourcing but found this to be risky especially in

terms of the company's capacity to make changes according to user feedback and requirements.

Training of staff: Training of staff is an issue faced by some of these companies. Company E reported some difficulties in choosing the right programs and education courses for staff.

Organizational culture: A particular challenge was mentioned by Company B where employees were often hesitant to criticise e-solutions applied, either because managers did not care or because the employees did not have the courage to criticise.

Transparency: One of the challenges reported by some of the interviewees has been transparency. Company C is supposed to provide a transparent environment for buyers and sellers. Its online auctions, for example, need to be clear to all participants /businesses by stating the reasons for choosing a specific offer from one company, and not another. This must be done by the business that is initiating the auction.

Lack of business orientation: One of the major obstacles in working with businesses in Dubai is that they tend to be product-oriented rather than business-oriented. As noted by the Company B interviewee, organizations will often adopt and customise a technical innovation without ensuring that it fits their business needs.

Lack of EB strategy: Another major issue with EB organizations is that they often conduct their business online without a proper strategy. This normally leads to significant complexity, costs and difficulties later on as a result of the failure to follow a proper development process.

Lack of EB awareness in the region: The level of EB awareness in Dubai and the Middle East is still low as perceived by most of the interviewees. According to the Company C interviewee, many organizations as well as customers are still reluctant to use EB and consider it is still too early to conduct online business.

Lack of EB knowledge among decision-makers: EB is a new way of conducting business in the region, and consequently, there is often a lack of knowledge among decision makers. One symptom of this according to Company B is that managers may prefer to apply a product from a well-known brand and so avoid responsibility for any shortcomings in their EB processes.

Convincing decision-makers: Two interviewees reported challenges when trying to convince decision makers about the merits of EB. For example, Company B reported there were difficulties persuading managers that technology could only help to improve the business process, and not substitute as a business model. The Company D interviewee was able to prove the

usefulness of EB to company managers and decision makers only after a long process of convincing, encouraging, and developing the company's EB.

Technology cost: Technology cost was an issue when initiating EB, especially in terms of infrastructure and the funding of innovations, according to Company B, but cost has declined with time. On the other hand, for Company E technical costs in applying technology remain high.

Technical issues

ISP connection infrastructure: In Dubai, telecoms and ISPs exist as separate organizations with varying levels of capacity, and without clear guidelines for collaboration. Thus interconnectivity between ISPs, as reported by Company E, has become an issue affecting users' experience and system performance. However, improvements are beginning to occur.

Process integration: This issue rises when businesses try to shift their business online. While organizations like Company B believe that the offline process is easy to manage as long as consistency and adequacy are maintained, difficulties can arise when businesses insist on deploying the same processes, data and infrastructure they used in their traditional business.

Integrated payment gateways: Integrating payment gateways was one of the main issues faced by Company E. Such a process is under-developed as banking in Dubai tends to operate in favour of government entities, rather than business needs. Company E has had to cope with what is available as there are few alternatives.

Online Payment: Cultural reluctance to use online payment is another challenge. Although it can bring very significant benefits to businesses, the use of credit cards is still not popular in the region, according to the Company B interviewee.

Website issues

Online users: Transforming offline customers into online ones is counted as a challenge by most EBs. The interviewee at Company E believes that various business models have been introduced to the market in Dubai, with increasing numbers of website users, a phenomenon which may prove challenging for local e-businesses to master.

Delivery of reliable information: One of the challenges that Company E reported is the ability to find reliable information online. Therefore, the company has mainly focused on creating services that can deliver reliable information to its customers.

Loading time: Currently, loading time is a problem that as it may have negative impacts on the user experience of e-business. Company E is trying to minimize this impact, so that its website is not overloaded with unnecessary information and images.

Security issues: Addressing security and privacy issues is still problematic as reported by Company E. Security measures that are particularly important are those that ensure user authorisation, authentication and payment certificates.

Laws and regulations: Most interviewees are of the view that there are not enough laws and regulations to support electronic business, and that appropriate legislation to control the conduct of EB would lead to more confidence among potential EB organizations.

The summary of challenges of electronic business in all 5 participating corporations is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Challenges of electronic business found in participating organizations table title here

Challenges	A	B	C	D	E
Lack of IT skilled staff					*
Training of staff					*
Organizational Culture	*	*			
Transparency issues			*	*	
Lack of business orientation		*			
Lack of EB strategy		*			
Building team work					*
Lack of EB awareness		*	*		
Customer lack of EB knowledge		*			
Decision maker lack of EB knowledge		*		*	
Awareness of existing competitors		*			
Convincing decision makers		*		*	*
Website communication issues	*				
Technology cost		*			*
ISP Connections infrastructure					*
Process integration		*		*	
Integrated payment gateways					*
Online payment		*		*	*
Website users					*
Delivering reliable information				*	*
Loading time					*
Security issues			*		*
Laws and regulations	*	*	*	*	*

NB: The number of stars indicates the number of companies reporting the challenge.

Table 1 shows the most significant challenge, reported by all 5 participating companies, and is the need for e-business laws and regulations. The second most prominent challenges, which received three stars each, were convincing decision makers and online payments. Challenges receiving two

stars each include organizational culture, transparency, lack of EB awareness, lack of decision maker knowledge, technology cost, process integration, and delivery of reliable information and security issues. Issues receiving only one star each were training of staff, acquiring skilled staff, team building, customer lack of EB knowledge, organization awareness of competitors, communication issues, ISP connections infrastructure, integrated payment gateways, website users and loading time.

Electronic business success factors

Electronic business success factors identified by Dubai corporations are classified as cultural, business, economic, and technological.

Cultural factors

Management support: The interviewee at Company D asserted that EB success cannot be achieved without the support of all management, even if it is supported by the most powerful person in the organization. These business leaders must have a complete vision of e-business to support the implementation process.

Training of staff: Training and seminars are another key success factor reported by interviewees. Company A has developed a number of training programs for its customer service staff (including, basic Internet knowledge, the online customer interaction process, fulfilment procedures, and troubleshooting).

Quality customer services: Several companies interviewed reported the need to continuously support customers through quality customer services. This is managed in Company C by providing step-by-step online directions and an online self-help service. Company B endorsed the importance of feedback, and response to customer queries.

Developing trust: Most of the interviewees agreed that developing trust was important to increasing the use of online services and high returns on investment. According to the interviewee at Company B, "One of the main reason customers don't use online services is [that] they don't trust them".

Customer loyalty: Company A has maintained customer loyalty by providing special bonuses and services (for example, provide some incentives for their frequent flier members). Company D and Company C have built strong relationships with their customers which converts into loyalty to the companies.

Business factors

Business strategy: According to the interviewee at Company B, having a business strategy is the most

important success factor in an e-business. A company should first state the EB benefits it wants to achieve, then what it wants to provide to customers and finally, how it will combine its business process and strategy with the online services required.

Risk management plan: Several companies mentioned the importance of the risk management plan. For Company E, this is one of the most important tasks it conducts for any project, in order to anticipate all possible challenges. From the beginning, Company B considered the failures that might occur within the business, and maintains risk plans to avoid any losses.

Customer feedback: Customer feedback is another success element as reported by the interviewee at Company C. The company has several ways to get input from customers to improve their services and attain customer satisfaction. It provides a feedback section on its website where customers can send in comments.

Ensuring customer satisfaction: Customer satisfaction is vital in the creation of company credit. Company E strongly endorsed the importance of building customer satisfaction through applying and responding to feedback mechanisms.

Collaborating with traditional businesses: Collaboration and sometimes, complete partnerships with external organizations has proved useful for many e-businesses. For example, Company E initially experienced difficulties with traditional recruitment businesses or services, but resolved this through collaboration.

Partnerships: Companies A, C and D are certain that partnerships are one of the fundamental elements for e-business. According to the Company A interviewee, partnering with other agencies (e.g. technology, creative, or business development) in local, regional or even international markets is very important, as value is added for the customer in a joint effort.

Rules and regulations: Company A believes that the less rules and regulations there are, the more relaxed the business is in dealings with the market. However, regulation is very important in terms of creating better applications, and a fuller understanding of market requirements.

Economic factors

Studying the market: Company A is a rapidly growing airline and hence it is essential that they reach out to new markets. The interviewee from the company believed that by studying the market, it was more able to respond quickly to issues of language and cultural sensitivity which could impact on their business.

Reliable distribution: As reported by the Company A interviewee, a cost-effective, reliable distribution channel, was essential for the company's business. This is because its customers are used to a certain level of service, and hence their expectations need to be met.

Technical factors

Technology upgrading: One of the main success elements that Company E identified is a company's ability to adjust and adapt technology according to users' experiences.

Online contracts: Online contracts are also one of the important elements as identified by Company E. The interviewee asserted that having such contracts gives customers confidence as well as protecting company business.

Secure transactions: Security is a prime consideration for most of the companies interviewed. For Company C it is one of the critical elements in its business as it affects customer trust. To ensure secure transactions and customer trust, companies A and C apply advanced robot technology in their handling of data and information.

Secure online payments: Secure payment technologies are a key element to the success of the e-business. The payment system in Company A is an essential ingredient of company business and a complete solution, involving authentication, risk protection, and risk management modules, and is provided for every transaction.

Effective websites: Nearly all interviewees commented on the impact of effective website design on site visitors. According to Company A, effective websites lead to sales, but items such as usability, architecture, reliability and pricing need to be regularly checked. Similarly Company C is very careful to ensure that its online information is always up-to-date.

Electronic catalogue: As observed by the Company B interviewee, "One of the main features customers prefer in online services is the availability of such items as an e-catalogue where they can search and compare between products." For an airline company like Company A, the electronic catalogue is vital.

Transparency: The interviewee at Company D reported that transparency was one of the critical elements for EB success in Dubai. It is important however, to avoid reducing prices by prohibited means. Business people in Dubai and the region will need to undergo cultural changes in adjusting to the requirements of transparency, and this process will require patience and commonsense.

Integration: Company C and Company D are certain that integration (data or processes both within the

business, and with customers) is one of the success elements in electronic business. Integration saves time, reduces error and streamlines processes. Company C has integrated its customer systems with its own systems.

Online registration: Online registration as reported by the company B interviewee is another EB success element. It is an online form filled which provides very useful customer information. However, the online business must assure to customers that this is to provide more help and services to customers.

The summary of critical success factors of electronic business in all 5 participating corporations is presented in table 2.

Table 2: CSF of electronic business found in participating organizations

Critical SF	A	B	C	D	E
Collaboration with traditional businesses					*
Technology upgrading					*
Studying the market	*				*
Risk management plan	*	*			*
Online contract					*
Ensuring customer satisfaction					*
Quality customer services	*	*	*		
Training staff	*	*		*	
Secure transactions	*	*	*		
Secure online payment	*	*			
Effective website	*		*	*	
Reliable distribution	*				
Development of trust	*	*	*	*	
Loyal customer	*		*	*	
Electronic catalogue	*	*			
Partnership	*		*	*	
Rules and regulation	*	*			
Transaction transparency				*	
Integration			*	*	
Management support				*	
Customer feedback			*		
Business strategy		*			
Online registration		*			

From Table 2, it is interesting to note that the success factor most reported by interviewees is developing trust, which received four stars. The second most identified success factors, which received three stars each, include the 'risk management plan', 'quality customer services', 'training of staff', 'secure transactions', 'effective websites', 'customer loyalty' and 'partnerships'. E-business success factors identified by a maximum of two companies include 'studying the market',

'secure online payment', 'electronic catalogue', 'rules and regulations', and 'integration'. Finally, the success elements reported by only one company in each case were 'collaboration with traditional businesses', 'technology upgrading', 'online contracts', 'ensuring customer satisfaction', 'transparency', 'management support', 'business strategy' and 'online registration'.

5. Conclusion

The above research has provided the evidence that interviewed companies have experienced a majority of the electronic business challenges identified in the literature. These include 'the lack of skilled IT staff', 'training of staff', 'organizational culture', 'transparency', 'lack of business orientation', 'lack of EB strategy', 'building teamwork', 'lack of EB awareness and knowledge', 'lack of awareness of existing competitors', 'convincing decision makers', 'website issues', and 'technology cost'.

These companies have also identified a large number of the e-business success factors reported in the literature. These include 'collaborating with traditional businesses', 'technology upgrading', 'studying the market', 'risk management plan', 'online contracts', 'ensuring customer satisfaction', 'quality customer services', 'training staff', 'secure transactions', 'secure online payment', 'effective websites', 'reliable distribution', 'development of trust', 'customer loyalty', 'electronic catalogue', 'partnerships', 'rules and regulations', 'transparency', 'integration', 'management support', 'customer feedback', 'business strategy' and 'online registration'.

The contribution of this research to the existing body of knowledge and practice is significant. It will contribute to the intentions of forming a global EB and contribute to the development of EB as a mean of global trade and add an international dimension to the study of EB.

The findings from this research should be applicable to businesses over a much wider scope. Furthermore, the utilization of the inhibitors, and success factors of electronic business can assist businesses transitioning from traditional to electronic business.

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