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How to fight functional illiteracy through eLearning

How can eLearning promote the acquisition of new skills for functional illiterate employees?

September 8th is **International Literacy Day**. Western countries, such as Italy, can remain calm with a literacy rate close to 100% of the population, far from the 31% of some of the poorest countries in the world, such as Niger (World Bank data). Yet, even in the most advanced democracies, there is a problem linked to adult literacy: **functional illiteracy**. What is it and how widespread is this phenomenon in Italy and the rest of Europe? How does functional illiteracy affect work skills and productivity in the private and public sectors and, above all, how can it be combated? Can eLearning be the answer?

What is functional illiteracy?

Functional illiteracy is defined as the difficulty that adults who are perfectly capable of reading, writing and calculating have in understanding the meaning of texts and quantities (from newspaper articles to bills to public administration communications) related to daily and working life and in using information in written form. According to Skills Matter, a PIAAC-OCSE survey of 2013-2015, Italy has the sad record in Europe, together with Spain, with 28% functional illiterates, second only to Turkey and its 47%. In the Scandinavian countries and Denmark the average is 9%.

Functional illiteracy and productivity

According to a paper presented at the ICCHP conference, half of the functionally illiterate people in Germany (7.5 million people) are in employment. For Italy there are no official data on this subject, but to understand the impact that functional illiteracy can have on the world of work, we need to cross-reference other data concerning the level of education and key digital skills:

- The **2019 PISA** data speak clearly about future prospects, since only 1 student out of 20 of 15 years old is able to understand a written text.
- Graduates are only 27.6% of the Italian population, against 40.3% of the European average (Eurostat 2018);
- **Computer literacy** (ability to use the internet and new technologies) in Italy concerns only 21% of the active population and places it in third place among OECD countries (Skills Outlook 2019).

All this makes the present and future workforce vulnerable to the new opportunities and challenges of the ongoing digital transformation in the public administration and Italian companies. For this reason it is necessary to intervene immediately with traditional and new tools.

Combating functional illiteracy: eLearning between education and continuous training

The quality of education is clearly the only way to prevent functional illiteracy: reading and reworking texts of different kinds can help improve understanding and written expression. For adults, the key is **continuing education**, which still affects a low percentage of workers, 30% against 43% of the OECD average.

In a country with a high rate of functional and computer illiteracy, how can online courses be the solution?

Actually eLearning has all the potential to support continuing education and training:

- It **stimulates you to use the Internet**, your smartphone, tablet or computer in a different way than going to social networks;

- It offers playful methods to learn through **gamification and simulations**, helping people with reading and writing difficulties to understand real situations and make decisions;
- It gives the possibility to use the same content in different ways: **text, video, audio**;
- It distributes the **cognitive load** that could hinder the learning of employees no longer used to the study, dividing the topics to be learned into micro-contents;
- Promotes proactivity and self-learning by giving students the opportunity to choose what to learn, when, where and for how long;
- Helps to track **training needs** before, during and after training with detailed **statistics**;
- Makes corporate compliance more engaging and stimulating with blended, social, live learning formulas.

Understanding the content of texts and documents of all kinds, being able to assess the numerical variables of everyday life and using technology and the internet for professional purposes are fundamental skills for social and working life in the new millennium. eLearning helps to ensure that everyone achieves these skills thanks to its ability to involve every type of student in an interactive and flexible way.

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