eSkills Week, 1-6 March 2010

eSkills standards for the future

The European eSkills Week provides an excellent opportunity to bring our attention to the complex issues related to managerial and technical education in a fast changing world.

Since its origin in the second half of the last century, the modern Information and Communication Technology has constantly increased its pace; moreover, a significant acceleration in the 1990's has made ICT so pervasive that it's now difficult to think of a human activity (either business-to-business, or business-to-consumer, or government-to-citizen, or even citizen-to-citizen) that has remained completely unchanged in spite of the digital technologies.

There's no doubt that this "digital revolution" has a number of positive effects, but on the other hand it creates some collateral damage, such as the digital divide and an increasing e-skills gap.

Both themes affect education policies, and in fact they have been in the agenda of the most advanced European countries for a decade, but only recently some awareness is maturing about the need to unite forces, so as to reduce the chaos resulting from thousands of different approaches and answers to the same issue.
The result of this new awareness can be summarized through two concepts:
i) the multi-stakeholder partnership approach, and
ii) standardization in the definition of ICT skills.

I'm not going to spend many words on the multi-stakeholder partnership approach: let me simply say it's a must in any country willing to have an effective eSkills policy without imposing a dictatorship.
The only viable option is then to build consensus, or in other words, *to provide a platform for ICT skills stakeholders, to develop a common view, to enable them to contribute by promoting their views, to develop standards, and to seek means of collaboration with other relevant bodies*.
All words in italics are literally defining the mission and purposes of the CEN Workshop on ICT Skills.

Between 2003 and 2009, this CEN Workshop approved 7 major documents (the so-called CWAs): four of them refer to the European e-Competence Framework (e-CF), intended as a reference tool aiming at transparency and mobility in the EU labour market, and as a benchmark from the ICT business employers' perspective.
The most recent in this series is CWA16052, describing both the current picture on professional ICT skills standards, and the complex relations between education systems and ICT industry certification in several EU Member States.
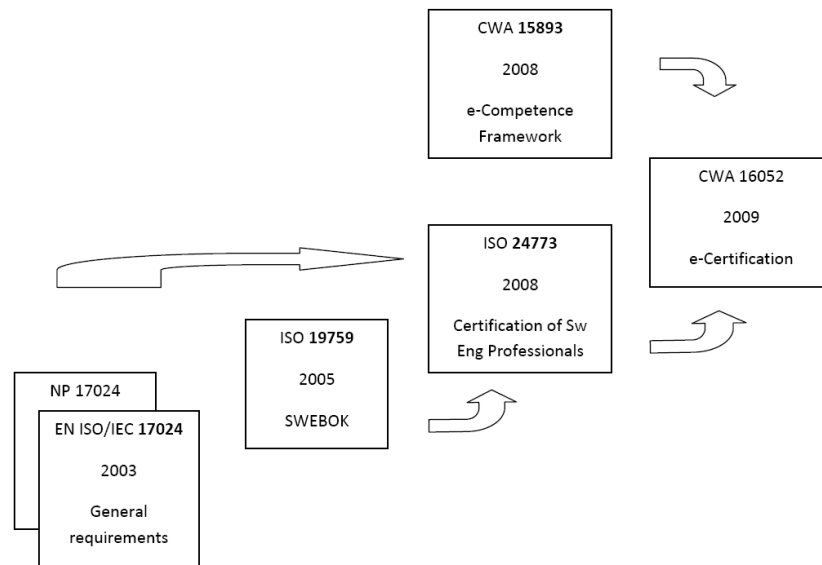
Figure 10 - ISO and CEN activities

The e-CF in its version 1.0 is however still the core product around which 2 projects are running and other 4 new are starting right now (March 2010).

The current projects on "End User e-Skills Framework" and "e-Competence Framework in Action" could intersect and provide together a comprehensive framework encompassing both user and practitioner skills.
Following the example given by ISO, this new and more comprehensive e-Competence Framework could even become a formal standard through a CEN Technical Committee.
In any case, innovation and e-business skills are yet to be explored and defined, and my personal vision is to consider this subject as our CEN Workshop's "new frontier".

Far beyond this frontier, the European e-Competence Framework could become practically available to organisations through a set of services built on top of it. According to previous work developed by Cedefop, skills definitions are useful, but they need to be completed by skills development and measurement methods, for instance through national qualifications frameworks, self-assessment tools, training & testing services, certification services. The European Commission is certainly not willing to override National Governments, nor to act as a market player offering such services!

On the other hand, some of the stakeholders are available to close the loop by supporting public and private organisations in getting the most from the e-CF through a complete range of such services.
In my country, Italy, the most important public and private institutions have already reached some good consensus around the EUCIP model for services on ICT professional skills and around ECDL for user skills certification.

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