LUISS Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali

UNDERSTANDING
THE ADOPTION PROCESS OF ICT IN PRACTICE:
SMALL ENTERPRISES AND THE ICT "LEGO-ERA".

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of
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Doctor of Philosophy in Management XXIII Cycle

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this exploratory work is develop a deeper understanding of the *adoption process* of information and communication technology (ICT) in small enterprises. SMEs are the majority of businesses in Europe and ICTs are often seen as potential enablers for their long-term organizational sustainability. However, statistics report small enterprises as being traditionally slow in keeping pace with technological advancements. Are they only lagging behind? The lack of research on this theme suggests the following question concerning SMEs: *How does the adoption process of ICT take place in practice*?

The RQ is sharpened through an incremental research design in that the SMEs, ICT and Organization literature are examined and combined with confrontation with experts. This study, informed by interpretive research assumptions adopts an exploratory and qualitative research design with the aim of obtaining thick descriptions on the phenomenon under study. Two case studies are developed in the Italian context: a pilot case on the adoption of a *non-core* ICT (e-Invoicing) in a small manufacturing firm and an in-depth one on the adoption of a *core ICT* (website) in a small publishing firm. These are then analysed through the lens of a double theoretical framework: Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory (as overarching theory) and Leonardi's Theory of Imbrication (for in-depth insights into the dynamics of organizing). The analysis focuses specifically on the process of adoption in time and sheds light on the concepts of *re-invention*, *previous practice* and *technology clusters*. In doing so it provides an account of the organizational implications of organizing in the era of "lego-like" ICTs. Although limited by its exploratory nature, this study contributes to the literature in the field of Information Systems by directly addressing with the theoretical dimension of technology. It also contributes to the literature on SMEs and ICT adoption in that it engages with the specificities of SMEs rather than with critical adoption factors only.