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Boosting MAS' competitive edge through IT

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MALAYSIA Airlines' new executive vice-president (information technology) Rodzlan Akib Abu Bakar is quite the man on the local IT scene.

Rodzlan, who began his term as executive vice-president on Nov 17, was previously the country general manager for IBM.

He is also a member of the National Information Technology Council. The council, chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is responsible for outlining a strategic IT framework for the country and overseeing the development of the industry, including addressing strategic issues and formulating national IT policies.

Rodzlan is also a frequent lecturer at the Institut Tadbiran Negara and the Malaysian Institute of Management.

Prior to joining Malaysia Airlines, he was managing director of Korn/Ferry International, an executive search firm.

So, how did he end up in the airline?

"I was actually looking for talent for MAS and had met Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli (chairman of the airline) to discuss that. But at some point in time, Tajudin asked me to join MAS!" says Rodzlan.

Tajudin was extremely persistent and, as Rodzlan puts it, "the hunter became the hunted".

His first few days on the job has been "pretty interesting. There is so much to understand and so many people to talk to in order to understand the situation in MAS, which is very complex because there are so many components".

He sees tremendous potential for IT utilisation in the airline industry.

"In fact, that application will be at two levels. Firstly, at the level of competitive necessity, and secondly, that of competitive opportunity."

Competitive necessity, he explains, would be to enable Malaysia Airlines to compete on even ground with other airlines.

"We have to invest in a significant amount of technology to provide the functionality that competitors are providing."

As for competitive opportunity, this would be necessary for Malaysia Airlines to be a leader in IT application, even going as far as redefining the way the national airline delivers value-added services to customers.

"IT can redefine what an airline is," he says, adding that IT can be used to deliver other peripheral services to enable people to make the decision to fly Malaysia Airlines.

Rodzlan sees his role as an "agent of change", to "facilitate the organisation's change using technology".

He talks of his 22 years with IBM with great fondness. Having started out in systems engineering, he moved on to marketing, general management and consulting till his last posting as country general manager.

The only reason he left was because he felt it was time to do something different as he was approaching the "second half of my economic life".

IBM, he says, provided him with a number of things. "It provided me with a global perspective early in my career. It also had an environment based on merit. As long as you were willing to work hard, you were given recognition."

There was also a conscious effort at IBM to provide a clear framework within which to work and make decisions. Most importantly, the company taught its employees the value of doing business ethically.

For him, there is no huge difference between Malaysia Airlines and IBM.

"Both are global companies, both are undergoing significant change because the marketplace is changing, both are competitive industries where customer demands are changing."

One of the reasons Rodzlan is a major player on the local IT scene is probably the fact that he joined it 22 years ago, way before the Multimedia Super Corridor and IT boom in Malaysia.

How did he get into IT and why?

"It's funny how things happen. I was a government scholar at Universiti Malaya reading applied economics. After that, I was bonded with the Government and worked with the Ministry of International Trade and Industry. But I wanted to do something else. Marketing was my ambition."

So, he left the ministry and applied for jobs with the private sector. One of his applications was to IBM, another to Malaysia Airlines.

"I received a reply from IBM and accepted its offer. A few days later, I also received an offer from MAS, but it was too late to change my mind."

Now that he has joined Malaysia Airlines, the irony is not lost on him.

As a member of the National Information Technology Council, he is completely committed to the MSC, which he describes as the "economy of the future".

He does not see the current economic problems in the region as a setback for the project.

"The investment made in the MSC is based on returns which will be derived in the future and the perception of that future potential has not changed."

Although there may be some effects on the time-frame and funding, he does not see any serious impact on the MSC project.

His main interest is reading, particularly, keeping abreast of management and leadership issues. His three areas of interest are change management, technology management and technology management, which he spends a lot of his spare time on.

"The rest of my time is spent with my family. We believe it is important to do things as a family. So, most of my weekends are spent with them."

Wife Norhizan Ahmad was a teacher but gave up her job when they started a family. They have four children - Mohd Radzi, 16, Siti Mariam, 14, Mohd Ismail, 13, and Siti Aminah, six.

"They are the reason I don't play golf! I would rather spend time with them."

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