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Conduit to fully tap creativity

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DATUK Dr Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen, CEO of Mimos, encapsulates the "can-do" spirit and enthusiasm concerning the MSC.

As one of the key movers of the MSC, his optimistic outlook envisages the MSC as a shining beacon in Malaysia's march towards the Information Age.

In his vision of the future, the MSC will become a conduit to fully exploit Malaysia's most important assets: its people.

He views the MSC not as an exclusive club where the key movers will be dull engineers in drab suits.

Instead, Tengku Azzman envisages a vibrant society where the MSC's main assets are the artistically inclined: Malaysia's Steven Spielbergs, Leonardo Da Vincis and Hemingways, creating the content and software using a new and infinitely powerful tool: computers as opposed to paintbrushes, chisels and hammers.

His enthusiasm and optimism paints a bright picture of Malaysia's future with the MSC, where even the fisherman will benefit, using multimedia to scan for the location of fish, weather patterns and suppliers.

Is this optimistic view justified?

I recently spoke to him about the MSC - its potentials and problems, after jokingly obtaining his guarantee to explain things in simple language as best he could.

How did the MSC come about?

"Mimos was asked to become the secretariat in the National Information Technology Council in 1994. The MSC started from that. We (Mimos) have been carrying the baby since then," he says proudly.

What roles will Mimos play?

"We are in the technology business. We are in the policy formulation business. Our job is research and development (R&D)," he reiterates.

The MSC, according to Tengku Azzman, "is a strategic plan. Driven by the PM at the top but supported from the bottom, this combination of "top-down" and "bottom-up" is the best way to achieve results as efficiently as possible."

With the general optimistic mood felt by the nation towards the MSC, Tengku Azzman bristles when presented with the analogy of the MSC to the United States' "moon race".

President Kennedy's push to send man to the moon resulted in new technologies developed and, unfortunately for the US, fed directly into the Japanese electronics industry, creating the behemoth we know it to be today.

Is history in danger of repeating itself with the MSC?

No way. Is Japan more competitive than America? "No, it's not. Why? Because America is more creative."

Silicon Valley is still the world capital of innovation. Is it Tokyo? Kyushu? Osaka? "No way. Your example does not hold water," he adds succinctly.

"What we want to own and create are not merely products like these," Tengku Azzman explains, pointing to my Japanese tape recorder.

"We want it also, but we also want the knowledge to create this product, the content which, over the life of the tape recorder, is more lucrative. This is what the MSC is all about," he stressed.

The MSC encapsulates seven "Flagship Applications" (see accompanying

story), avenues for which all the new software and content created will be channeled to.

Many are sceptical as to whether local IT companies, lacking a solid base and way behind their Western counterparts, can produce the leading edge software and content needed for these seven applications.

"You shouldn't be too condescending on local expertise," Tengku Azzman chided. "I give you the example of the six-inch wafer, where we developed the technology after transferring it from another source.

"We now have our own plant, even the capability to develop products based on it," he adds.

"We do not claim to be as advanced as the the IT leaders. However, we are also not starting from scratch. If IT were a 10-storey building, I would say that we are now on the fifth floor," he adds with a laugh.

"Never belittle or or discount our efforts. Look, here in Technology Park alone, there are currently more than 30 IT companies involved in developing cutting edge content and products," he gestures to the window with a broad sweep of his hand. "They're developing the SmartCard, Electronic Commerce, Web TV, macam-macam lagilah!," he confidently adds.

"Remember that in the MSC, the artistic side is as important as the technical. Film-makers, copywriters, people with writing and language skills-they will also create the content.

"The only thing is that this artistry must be encapsulated in electronic form. Our artists," he adds, "will have to move into this area."

"It's not that difficult. If you can operate a computer and software like `Macromedia Director', for example, you are most definitely `on'!", he reassures me.

"You say that Malaysians cannot do this? We have not even begun to exploit our artistic reserves and potential," he remarks.

Sceptics also worry aloud over the viability of the Smart School concept, which they claim is notoriously cost- and labour-intensive.

"First, let's talk about the cost. Certainly, it will cost money. Can the Government pay for it? Partially. I suspect that some of the money will be coming from the private sector.

"For example, if I have children in school X, I will then donate some money to the school to purchase the computers.

"The same would apply if I were an engineer - I would donate some of my time setting it up," he says.

"Now lets talk about the training. Some teachers do not view this positively. I would respond to this by saying that you shouldn't be frightened. The best teachers will always have a job.

"This is because under the Smart School concept, the role of the teacher would shift from the usual `chalk and talk' method - teachers will become mentors, because the student will now drive his learning,"

Tengku Azzman warned, however, that "if you are lazy and unwilling to change and adapt, you will be out of a job."

This warning does not only apply to teachers. "Within 10 years," he estimates, "we will begin to see the impact of this widely-changing environment. Those who refuse to change and adapt will lose out."

This point leads to the most important question of all - why would we need to change? Aren't we doing fine where we are now?

"The biggest problem we face is fear of change. I believe that Malaysia does not have a choice but to go full ahead with the MSC. The world is fast transforming into a global village.

"We cannot stop the influx of information and media, both good and bad. The plan is for as smooth and equitable a transition as possible," he adds.

"We have a `tiger' in front of us. We can ride it, or stand as we are.

In either case, the tiger is there for us to deal with.

I believe we must be brave and ride the tiger. With hard effort, I believe we will come out on top," Tengku Azzman concludes.