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IT literacy not restricted to elite segment of society

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RECENTLY, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad launched the National IT Awareness Campaign themed "IT As a Culture".

While most Malaysians are excited about this whole idea of MSC, Cyberjaya, etc, we must not allow ourselves to be caught in this wave of technological hype. I feel that many Malaysians have failed to grasp what the Prime Minister said.

His aim is to mobilise society, the young, the old, the urban and the rural people to join arms in supporting the nation's initiative in harnessing information technology.

However, this cannot be said of the present society. Dr Mahathir's message was clear - IT literacy is not restricted to an elite segment of our society, it must reach the masses.

The Government has played its part but public response is anything but satisfactory. It is important for the public to understand the fundamental need for IT literacy and what is expected of them.

Having said that, it would be misleading to define IT literacy in a broad sense since it varies from one to the other. For example, today's executives must be able to e-mail and do word processing. These two skills are the minimum that an executive must accomplish before he or she could term himself or herself computer-literate.

On the other hand, sales executives who often give presentations should be capable of using and mastering presentation software such as Microsoft PowerPoint or Lotus Freelance in their day-to-day activities.

Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen, president and CEO of Mimos Berhad, in an interview with Management Times (NST, Oct 28), revealed an excellent benchmark with respect to creating an IT-literate society. He stated that there were essentially four levels of IT literacy - operational literacy, information literacy, knowledge literacy, and social and cultural literacy.

The Government's initial target is to achieve the first level which is operational literacy - the ability to operate a personal computer, the network and send mail via the Internet. In addition to that, the operational level of literacy should also encompass the need to acquire additional skills along the lines of technological advancement.

The ultimate goal towards creating an IT-literate society was well summed up by Dr Zoraini Wati Abas, chairman of the Malaysian Council of Computers-in-Education.

She stated that one must have the ability to understand and take advantage of IT to come up with innovative applications that convert into cost savings or productivity increases for the organisation. She also stated that more than anyone else, those in management need to have the "feel" towards IT.

When we talk about creating an IT-literate society, an issue that crosses our minds is education. Education is undoubtedly a key element in shaping our society with respect to IT literacy. Malaysia's overall IT manpower requirement is expected to grow at 10 per cent over the next five years. All universities in the country offer IT-related studies. Many colleges and institutions also offer short-duration courses and degree programmes.

The currency problem should not be a stumbling block for those intending to pursue their studies in IT-related fields. It does not mean that going

abroad will make one any better than one studying locally.

Many colleges and all the universities in the country have the facilities and expertise to provide quality education. For instance, an IT institution, Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology - a joint venture between the Malaysian Government and Sapura Holdings - was awarded the MS ISO 9002 in recognition of its quality education.

Malaysians must have a common vision. A vision that is best quoted by Shaifubahrim Saleh, chairman of the Association of the Computer Industry Malaysia. He argued that we Malaysians would have realised our IT potential "when kampung folk design their Raya cards using a PC, when the taxi driver stops at a public kiosk to get the latest traffic situation, when our children turn on the interactive TV to do a virtual chemistry experiment, when the fisherman uses the community PC to inquire about sea conditions, when our IT professionals are called to virtual international forums to discuss how to informatise developing economies, when local businessmen go into big-time IT exports leading to their companies being listed as overseas technology counters, when we co-operate with remote teams to write world-class software, when a Malaysian studio gets credit as part of the Disney animation team, when a Malaysian IT device takes the world by storm".