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It takes two to transfer technology

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TECHNOLOGY transfer, as in tango, involves two parties. On the one hand, those with the technology must be willing to share their knowledge. On the other, the recipient must be prepared to receive it, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says.

"We are very often against transfer when we have the technology but when others have the technology we would like them to transfer it to us," Dr Mahathir said when moderating the third session on "Technology for Emerging Economies" at the Langkawi International Dialogue (LID '97) in Langkawi yesterday.

In Malaysia, for example, the bomohs or practitioners of traditional medicine know how to cure people but will not disclose their methods.

"They will keep it to themselves because it is a secret, because they have discovered it and they want to make something out of what they discovered," Dr Mahathir said.

Sometimes the bomohs do transfer their knowledge to their children, but most of the time their technology dies with them, Dr Mahathir added.

The Prime Minister said fortunately views are changing and there is growing acceptance that those with the knowledge should share it, write in journals, hold discussions and help make full use of the technology.

"Because the West has now devised proprietary rights and things like that, even if you transfer technology you can still make money out of what you have discovered, through royalties and the like. So I think we have to change our mindset about this," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he hopes that in terms of attitude there will be no more "Malay bomohs" in the country, although he himself has been seen as one because of his medical training.

"But I am quite happy to transfer whatever technology I don't have to people who have," he joked.

Earlier in his welcoming remarks, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia has shifted its focus to high-technology industries in view of the tight labour market in the country.

This has meant that the workers will need to be more receptive of and responsive to new technologies, he said.

"They are no longer going to do things themselves, assembling, manipulating or shaping things with their own hands... rather they will be maintaining and servicing robots and automated machines which will do most of the work."

Dr Mahathir said it is a progressive process. From merely putting things together, and doing things manually, or operating machines which assemble things, Malaysia has advanced to operating and servicing machines which will do the work. Eventually the country will produce these very robots and automated machines.

"It is not possible, I think, to leapfrog from a very low-technology state of development to a very high-tech environment. We are of course very ambitious here in Malaysia, but we know there is a limit to what we can do," he said.

During the dialogue, several companies shared their experiences in technology co-development in the automotive and telecommunications industries, and in smart partnerships in industrial and agricultural automation.

Dr Mahathir, who also sat in during the round-table discussions, said he

was able to gain some insight into problems faced by various countries.

"One of the things that was asked of me was how the transfer could be effected more quickly. We seem to forget that it takes time to transfer technology. You can't do it overnight. We have to be patient," he said.

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