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Need for States to go slow

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THE unique aspect of the Multimedia Super Corridor is that many of its flagship applications could be available yesterday - a phrase in advertising parlance that means immediately.

This is due to the MSC project being largely concerned with content and services which are already widely available today - except that it will be offered in a different medium, which is electronic in nature.

The general populace would find many of the MSC applications familiar as they are to some extent already available over the global computer network Internet.

Services like electronic commerce, where one can buy products from retailers from around the world and pay for the transaction electronically, can already be done today.

New services like telemedicine and distance learning are not exactly unknown to most, but it is not generally available because it costs too much.

Given this scenario, it is not surprising that many private enterprises are keen to embark on MSC-related ventures quickly, with some State Governments already jumping on the bandwagon.

The perceived profit to be gained, as well as more efficiency in services, beckons gleamingly like the proverbial road paved with gold, attracting even the most hardened cynic to at least dabble in these new potentials.

But, like the Yin and Yang, there are also a lot of pitfalls in the new technologies - with abundant examples like computer hacking and pornography over the Internet today.

So, when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad - the prime mover of the MSC project - called for caution last week, it was a timely reminder for those had had been chaffing to get their MSC-related ventures going.

Specifically, Dr Mahathir said State Governments should wait for certain flagship applications of the MSC project to achieve success before implementing them.

This, he said, would prevent the States from adopting flagship applications which might not be beneficial or full of defects.

So far, there has been no response from the States which are embarking on their own mini-MSCs projects, which are now in the various start-up stages.

The two which had already made some degree of progress are Penang and Selangor, with the PenangNet and Selangor Networking (Selnet) projects.

After much bruhaha last year, PenangNet's launch was yet again delayed to possibly July due to certain technical, administrative and commercial hitches.

Selnet also has an Internet web page launched, and has linked up certain State Executives to enable them to conduct video-conferenced meetings.

Little is known if they have actually gone further to set up high-speed telecommunications links that will be widely available, or if their planned flagship applications have been completed.

There are also a number of other States which have made plans for their own mini-MSCs - including Negri Sembilan, Terengganu, Sabah, Perak and Johore. But, no details are available yet about these initiatives.

One of the main problems highlighted by Dr Mahathir is he need for

standardisation in equipment, quoting the example of the proposed national smartcard.

His further comments also provided a way out for these State initiatives - when he gave the example of passport issuance as one way to allow Government-related transactions to be carried out.

Dr Mahathir said: "We cannot wait to perfect this particular system because the number of Government transactions with the people are far too pressing and too many."

Prudence, which would cause some delay in the State MSC projects is, also due to the need to address two factors which are highest on the priority list - namely adequate legislative measures and support services.

Right now, the Parliament has already begun the first process, after the relevant regulatory parties had exercised due diligence in drafting the legislative measures.

Support services will however be another kettle of fish. All around the world, support service for computers and related products after they had been sold and delivered is not exactly well-known for being good.

Service quality again is not something that bureaucrats are well-known for, and local authorities are equally guilty of not being up-to-mark - and this is one area which will come under the world's spotlight with the MSC project.

There is also one other equally important aspect of prudence which is often overlooked - insurance policies which protect the massive investments to be made in relation to the MSC project.

As such, it was a welcome relief to discover that two local insurance firms had exercised the initiative to address this problem before it became too unwieldy.

The American Malaysian Insurance Bhd and Hong Leong Assurance Bhd, with the assistance of Tela Versicherung AG of Germany, launched two new policies which aim to protect electronic infrastructure in intelligent buildings, vessels and aircraft.

The protection is for the electronic control systems that are now seen as being standard fittings in most new buildings and vessels, and the coverage includes the likelihood of damage from "computer terrorism" or hacking.

The IB-Tronic Pro policy is for building automation systems, atmospheric temperature detection and regulation equipment, automated lighting, telecommunications networks, fibre optic cables and closed-circuit camera surveillance systems.

The same applies for the Satellite Navigation Aids and Vessel-based Electronic (SAVE) systems policy - which covers either aircraft or ships, giving protection on a worldwide basis.

Under the policies, the insurers will compensate the policy holders for costs relating to restoring the electronic control mechanisms and related claims, but not for the value of the data lost.

This is because it is always easy to calculate the value of the data lost, but the cost of replacing the damaged equipment and restoring the data and software from backed up systems is easier to ascertain.

Insurance policies are meant to protect calculable risks.

Admittedly, these policies cover only the tip of the iceberg of damages that could occur - for the quantum value of data lost could often be far higher than can be adequately measured.

Still, this is a step in the right direction for the experiences gained with these policies would surely lead towards more comprehensive insurance coverage in the future.

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