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Our level of IT-literacy needs work, says Mimos chief

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START talking to him about information technology and it suddenly feels like you're in a wind tunnel, facing an onslaught of his ideas, thoughts and comments.

As someone who has witnessed and participated in Malaysia's ongoing trek into the high-tech world of computers, Mimos Berhad's president and chief executive officer Datuk Dr Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen has a lot to say about the country's future in IT.

Especially now, when the Multimedia Super Corridor is taking shape and seems to have attracted enthusiasts and sceptics in equal numbers.

"Can the MSC fail? Of course it can fail," he said dryly in a recent interview. "But the real question is, can we afford not to try?"

The Wall Street Journal called the project "fuzzy", Wired said it was "insanely ambitious", while Fortune magazine said the MSC merely mirrored what was going on elsewhere in the region.

All three have raised Malaysia's lack of experience in IT and its shortage of knowledgeable workers as possible obstacles to its ambitious plans.

But Tengku Azzman believes that the country's relatively late entry into the game is an asset, not a burden.

"Latecomers always have advantages. We are starting when many things have become standardised, so we have the latest infrastructure."

Countries such as the United States, he said, which currently top IT-literacy and capability surveys, are now losing out because their infrastructure is being overtaken by technology that is faster and has bigger capacities.

The response from global IT bigwigs to the project has also been impressive, far surpassing, Tengku Azzman admits, even our own leaders' expectations.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's relentless roadshows across the globe to push the project, which prompted Fortune to dub him "the supersalesman", has resulted in an International Advisory Panel populated by the biggest names in the industry.

"It takes an Asian to do it," Tengku Azzman chuckled. "Who else has ever gathered such an august group of people?"

Observers who are still cautious about giving the MSC a full thumbs-up, he said, should remember that Malaysia has triumphed over accusations of being overly ambitious before.

"Malaysia has one of the best track records in succeeding what it sets out to do. When we say we will deliver, we will. I don't think we are making empty promises here," he said.

But Tengku Azzman readily admits that the level of IT-literacy in Malaysia needs work. While more Malaysians have learned to operate computers, most still don't know how to obtain and use information from them.

Malaysians, he says, just aren't ready for the MSC yet.

"I don't think anybody is happy with the level of IT literacy in our society. About 10 days ago I was talking to a gathering of about 400 or 500 ulamah about the MSC and I could see they were interested.

"At least," he laughed, "they weren't falling asleep. But there was also a look of puzzlement on their faces, there's no doubt about that.

"Then during the Q & A session, one of them stood up and said, 'Your

talk has shown us our worldview is way behind the times.' He suggested programmes to overcome that, so it was a very positive comment."

Tengku Azzman sees this as symptomatic of a general ignorance about the promises of IT, and says Malaysia now needs to orchestrate what he calls "an acculturation programme" so people would embrace IT more readily.

"We've already come a long way. I remember the days when I was studying for my Masters and my doctorate, when computers were so strange that even the academics didn't know how to use them.

"Now we can see computers being used in almost every aspect of life, but they are being used in pockets.

"We are not too far behind the leaders of IT such as the US and Japan, but there computers are used more routinely."

Dragging Malaysians into a more high-tech mentality may be difficult, but not impossible, he said.

A similar metamorphosis took place when the country transformed itself from an agricultural to an industrial and manufacturing-based economy over the last 20 years.

"This," he said, "is just a new spin to that. We can't stay where we are now because industrial and manufacturing activities won't sustain us, and we will eventually become a third-rate country."

"If the MSC succeeds, we can come out on top," he added.

Ultimately, Tengku Azzman envisions a future that will mean more than just greater use of computers in everyday life.

He believes that IT can unleash untapped potential in groups of people now restrained by age, disability or family ties and allow them to participate more fully in society and contribute in its progress.

The ultimate goal, he says, is the creation of a civil society, made up of people empowered by knowledge and the ability to use it to their own advantage.

Mimos plays a role in achieving this scenario by acting much like the point man in a platoon; out in front, sniffing the territory and advising the leader on which turn to take.

The organisation started out as a research and development-driven government department. In 1994 it was made the National Information Technology Council's secretariat, after which it has graduated to playing a key role in policy formulation.

Mimos was also corporatised on Nov 1 last year, which explains its new plush office in one of the buildings of Technology Park Malaysia in Bukit Jalil.

Tengku Azzman said corporatisation had allowed Mimos to expand, re-structure, and hire people whose salaries had previously been out of the reach of the organisation's coffers.

Thirty-two new staff members have been recently hired, pushing overall personnel strength past the 400 mark.

"This has been a busy time. It's been a non-stop rollercoaster ride," he said with a sigh that seemed to signal a deep contentment at how well things have been going.

Tengku Azzman's efforts were recently recognised when he was named the winner of the Fifth Asean Achievement Award for IT.

The awards, which selects people from Asean countries who have distinguished themselves in various fields, is an annual event arranged by the Asean Business Forum.

Although he said he felt honoured, Tengku Azzman also admitted that he was initially a reluctant nominee.

With few Malaysian IT experts of his calibre and experience around, Tengku Azzman's name and face has increasingly become a fixture in the media and the public eye, especially now as Malaysia aggressively pursues

its high-tech agenda.

Colleagues and IT enthusiasts use words like "hero" and "role model" when they talk about him, which is not a situation he is comfortable with.

"I don't want to be an institution," he fretted. "When that happens then there are high expectations of you, and you can't always deliver because you have to prioritise.

"I don't have all the magic answers. I don't have magic potions," he added haplessly.

He sees his acceptance of the nomination as a recognition of Malaysia and Mimos Berhad. And what about Tengku Azzman, the man?

"Well, he said quietly, "I am only a symbol for the moment."

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