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Preparing for another switch

TO a large extent, the first stage in the large-scale introduction of information technology (IT) in Malaysia via active promotion of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project has been successful. So active has the promotions been that everyone seems to want to know more about the project and its underlying principle. Malaysians outside the city limits are beginning to ask what the Internet is all about and how it could benefit their lives and the general well-being of the country. Thus, plans by the Government to conduct a nationwide IT awareness campaign could not have come at a better time. The Government must capitalise on the momentum of interest already generated to push its IT agenda ahead. Through the MSC, the Government has decided on the leading role the new technology would play in Malaysia's future. Although initially the project only encompasses the designated area, the ultimate goal is to wire up the entire country. Thus, the whole population must be prepared to embrace the idea of IT so that will benefit everybody.

At present, the level of general preparedness is far from adequate. The majority of Malaysians, especially in the rural areas, is still in the dark about IT. Views on the subject still tend to be confined only to computers. The time has come for the dissemination of detailed information on IT, on how to adapt to it and, more importantly, how to fully benefit from it. In short, after moving ahead with the MSC project, the nationwide IT awareness campaign would serve as an educational platform from which the entire population can prepare to embrace IT as an important part of their lives. As with effecting any major change, to promote the use of IT in the everyday life of Malaysians would not be easy, for they have been so used to their present ways. On the individual basis, many Malaysians still do not trust IT-active methods - no matter how user-friendly. Take electronic banking, for example. Many customers continue to prefer queueing up at the bank counters and dealing with friendly and sometimes not so friendly human tellers. The use of electronic mail and other computer-based communications tools is also still very low although they offer faster and more efficient means in undertaking some of the tasks.

For business concerns, especially small-scale ones, reliance on computers in stock and inventory management is also at its very early stages. Many continue to maintain scores of ledger books when a single computer programme and a trained personnel would take care of their client lists, inventories, accounts, staff matters and daily schedules. The idea of advertising through cyberspace has also not quite taken off, despite the obvious reach of the medium. All this must change and the nationwide campaign on IT awareness is expected to provide the kick-start. However, the campaign must not end after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad goes on air to explain to the country what IT is all about. In fact, that should be the beginning. While the Ministry of Information would be spearheading the campaign, the move towards IT is a national agenda. Other ministries and government agencies must follow up once the designated period of the campaign is over while the private sector must support the initiative and undertake to play their roles in promoting the use of IT in their daily operations.

Malaysians will not adapt to IT by learning its principles alone. They must let the technology be part and parcel of their everyday life. Although it may not be easy to move away from conventional methods,

Malaysians have done that not too long ago, when the country made the fundamental shift from being an agriculture-based economy to one driven by the manufacturing sector. Today Malaysia is a successful trading nation and one that is poised to make another major switch - to an economy that is knowledge-based. With the valuable lessons learnt from the earlier economic transformation, the challenge that is before all Malaysians today should not be too much of a hurdle.

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