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Taking Malaysia into the new millennium the IT way

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IF PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has his way, there will be at least one personal computer in every Malaysian home, but not necessarily only nerds in front of each of them.

Unlike many people his age, Dr Mahathir has embraced information technology (IT) with great enthusiasm and sees it as the way to take the country and Malaysian society into the next millennium.

But with low PC penetration and a largely computer illiterate and even technophobe society, bringing Malaysia to that vision will be like swimming against the current.

And unless Malaysians can grasp, much less master, IT, they will drown in the wave of information that is already sweeping across the globe and be overwhelmed by the lifestyle of a borderless global village.

To ensure that Malaysians do not get lost in cyberspace and to change them from couch potatoes into mouse manipulators, the Government has initiated the National IT Agenda; a serious name no doubt, but one it hopes will get the people to take full advantage of the Net and to start exchanging hardware notes like guys comparing engines.

At the centre of it all is of course the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) - 750 sq km of prime real estate to attract the world's best IT brains, companies and investment. The MSC has been designed to be the dream work environment for every computer nerd and IT company in the world.

Several concessions have also been given to investors, ranging from relaxed visa requirements to the absence of mandatory Bumiputera equity participation; all designed to pull in the best the industry has to offer and in the process help Malaysia develop a global industry.

Already 24 companies are firmly committed to set up operations in the MSC, while another five are in the process of doing so.

First mooted in 1994, the MSC has now become one of the top IT investor destinations, ahead even of Singapore, following promotions of the idea abroad.

For the nation, the MSC will be a testbed to see how the bounds of IT can be stretched to develop the Malaysian society as it will contain everything that is required for a future modern lifestyle; one that is based largely on access to information for everyone.

For this reason, it is only appropriate that the National IT Agenda is adopting as its theme, "turning ripples into tidal waves", in an effort to involve Malaysians in IT.

Other water-related metaphors the agenda is using are "recognising the sea change", "initiating the ripples", "generating resonant waves", and "growing webs locally, making waves globally".

But again, it is just the start for Malaysians. The number of cybercafes that have popped up in Kuala Lumpur seem to be patronised more by generation-Xers trying out the latest games or chatting, often in less than civil tones, with a fellow global villager, than by baby boomers. As Dr Mahathir said: "It is still in the ripple stage."

The framework for the agenda will involve the people, infrastructure and applications. These will involve strategies to develop education, skills development, laws and regulations and indigenous software.

The target is by 2005, there will be smart schools throughout Malaysia, multimedia universities, electronic distance learning and on-line information services; but more importantly, all this will be achieved

against the background of strengthening traditional values.

A major concern of the IT wave is that traditional Malaysian values will be eroded by the flood of undesirable information through the Internet and satellite transmission.

The agenda represents an approach towards preparing Malaysians for the IT Age and is part of the strategy for national development and nation-building, and the creation of a civil society.

A unique feature of the agenda is the development of the Knowledge Imperative Index and the Multicultural Index to monitor and evaluate the performance of the agenda itself and the progress being made to create a civil Malaysian society.

Like with the country's Second Industrial Master Plan, the feature represents a built-in self-evaluation process where shortcomings can be quickly identified and addressed, and new measures introduced when necessary. In essence, both strategies are based on the fact that a fluid environment requires a fluid approach. More water metaphors?

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