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Comitted to computer technology

Helena Fernz

MEET Darryl Carlton. He's the chairman and chief executive officer (CEO) of Datek Sdn Bhd, the first Multimedia Super Corridor status firm to launch a Made-in-Malaysia software development tool, Batavia.

Early in May, Datek achieved a coup of sorts when forty million viewers across the US and Canada got a virtual tour of its software development facility in Petaling Jaya. NBC, a major US television network featured Datek on its "Technology Today" show.

Carlton, with 23 years in the computer industry, is unafraid to speak his mind on such issues as the use of local expertise and software piracy.

Batavia, the first software development tool written in the Java programming language to come out of the Multimedia Super Corridor, was developed by a team made up largely of Malaysian software engineers.

Carlton stresses, "If I were in Silicon Valley I would still use the same expertise that I have now."

And as for software piracy, he quipped, "The American firms who are screaming the loudest about software piracy are the very ones who charge 50 per cent extra in Asia for their products, which are also very difficult to purchase here."

The 42-year-old CEO, who is "totally opposed to piracy" also voiced his frustration over the inability to purchase software via the Net. He said that quite a few major corporations will not accept credit cards issued in Asia.

Carlton who hails from Melbourne, did not learn about computers and software in the cloistered halls of well-known technical institutes but rather from being on-the-job.

He in fact comes from a family where three generations have been in the newspaper business. It's not surprising then that he said, "I worked for one year with the Melbourne Age when I was 17 years."

In some ways, Carlton's link to the world of print continues, for he has written quite often for Computimes. These days, he writes less frequently due to growing business responsibilities.

Datek's boss started working in the computer industry at the age of 18 as a trainee computer operator in 1975. "The first computer I worked on was from GE," he said, adding that "it had no keyboard, no screen, and used punched cards and punched tape."

"I started my first business in Australia in 1980 and that lasted two years," he said. In 1990, he began his second business that was operational until he moved to Malaysia in 1996 "when I transferred all of the assets and intellectual property of that business to Datek".

He has personally invested RM10 million in the Malaysian company, proof of his belief in the nation's Information Technology (IT) commitment and he waxes enthusiastic about Malaysia's "forward-looking" stance.

Carlton says, "Compared with Australia, Malaysia has great vision."

"How many countries actually have a stated corporate strategy for the country?" he queried.

"The fact that Malaysia has Vision 2020 is a dramatic improvement over those countries that don't have one. Most politicians in the world have a vision to win the next election and that's about it.

"Here you have a country with a government that actually has thought about the future."

When relating why he chose Malaysia to base his company, he said, "I can

give you a host of business reasons as to why Malaysia is a really good place to operate but the reason I gave Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was that the food is better here."

In a more serious vein, Carlton added, "The reason I came here was - this is a growth economy and the country is committed to IT and it's committed to moving away from manufacturing and tourism.

"The country's also committed to creating a sort of environment, where if you are a business person with ideas, you have a better than reasonable chance of being successful with those ideas."

He added that that is all a business person seeks. "No one really wants guarantees," he said, "no one expects guarantees ... no one cares about handouts, what they want is the ability to do their best and this is what Malaysia provides."

Prior to his coming to Malaysia, he said, "I was doing business process engineering for very, very large corporations around the world and increasingly more and more of my business was coming from Asia.

"But everytime I did work in Asia and got on a plane to go home ... I was losing business."

He continued, "So I had to make a decision. In order to do business in Asia, I had to be in Asia. The next challenge of course, was well if I'm going to be in Asia - where and why?"

He downplayed the MSC as being the main inducement to set up business here. "We decided to come here before the MSC took shape. We came here because the Government in Malaysia was already committed to technology."

He said, Vision 2020 creates a very different climate. "You have a climate in the main," Carlton said, "where businesses are very forward-looking, in the main where the Government is very forward-looking and people are looking to the future and what it means."

Commenting on current economic woes, he stressed that in Malaysia, the economy will get worse before it gets better.

"The economic problems here will drive out those companies which are basically badly-managed today and have been able to be successful because of the economy's general growth."

As a result of the downturn, he said, the badly-run companies will not survive and "therefore when the country does recover, it will recover in a dramatically better state, a higher quality state than it was previously in".

As a manufacturer of intellectual products, which Datek is, the depreciation of the ringgit provides cost advantages to the firm in the world market, said Carlton.

The tightening labour market, he said frankly, boosted his ability to hire high quality staff and retain them at lower rates. From an investment point of view, he said, the tough economic situation improved many aspects of Datek's business.

"It provides us with the opportunity to basically be a 'contrarian investor' ... we are dramatically increasing our investment. Now is the time to build products and export products ... not to hunker down in your shell and protect yourself."

And this is precisely what Datek is doing. "We are coming out with a couple of new products," says Carlton. "We are re-engineering Batavia as a workstation product."

"The next version (of Batavia) which will come out in September will be the enterprise edition," said Carlton, adding that the enterprise edition will not be sold on the Net but directly and will be available from Datek's distributors. It will cost about US\$10,000.

"What we expect from our website is to make fairly healthy sales (of the first Batavia version) and generate awareness of our products," he said.

The firm will also introduce accounting software called 'eXacct Financials' at the end of July.

Touching briefly on the disadvantages of current economic problems, Carlton said as a result of this "there is less liquidity in the market if you decide to go public".

And as for Asia's problems, he said in his forthright manner, the "economies must and will survive".

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