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## MASTERCentre offers quality training

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COMPANIES that do not possess certain technological capabilities and those that wish to upgrade the skills of their workers are getting a helping hand following the establishment of the MASTERCentre at Technology Park Malaysia.

Set up to promote and increase the use of factory automation in industry, the centre was launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in February.

Vice-president for technology development Annuar Mohd Saffar urged companies to use the MASTERCentre for training, especially since the cost was fully financed under the Human Resource Development Council.

Offering various courses in FA using state-of-the-art equipment, MASTERCentre has trained some 140 people to date, and expects to take another 27 batches of students until early next year.

MASTERCentre also does manufacturing for companies that do not have the high-technology machinery required for precision work.

Commenting on the level of technological capabilities among local firms, Annuar said it was still lower than multinationals in the country. And convincing companies to send their staff for training was still quite a task.

One major stumbling block is companies' concern that their skilled workers will be pinched by other companies.

Another factor is the short-term plan of some companies which promotes use of foreign labour.

"But if these companies think long-term, automation must be looked at, to be able to compete globally," Annuar said after a tour of the MASTERCentre last Wednesday.

While the technology park has been around since 1996, many companies are unaware of the competitive rates it offers compared with the high costs companies will incur if they were to conduct research, produce, or go for training abroad.

In terms of its training facilities, the MASTERCentre offers 18 courses, all of which are accorded approved training programme status by the HRDC.

The courses are divided into five categories - robotics and programmable logic controller trainer; computer-aided design and computer-aided manufacturing, and computerised numerical control trainer; industrial robots; CNC machines; and flexible manufacturing systems.

Annuar said the centre offered one-on-one training and its cost was very competitive, ranging from RM1,100 to RM1,300. There are seven trainers at the centre.

"We will have 27 batches of students until March next year from various companies, but we can actually take more students.

"People should come and use the facilities here rather than sending their staff abroad because with the HRDC it is even cheaper."

As for the production centre within the MASTERCentre, companies are encouraged to use the many precision machines to produce components, moulds and dies, instead of having to go abroad.

Annuar estimated the cost of doing production in the centre to be between 10 and 15 per cent lower than others in Malaysia, and up to a third cheaper than if industries were to go abroad.

The main customers of the centre are small and medium industries and vendors of multinational companies.

One main advantage of using the centre is rapid prototyping, which allows perfection of the design before going for production.

The production centre is available for manufacturing in small quantities but is also capable of producing large quantities, such as orders from companies that do not want to set up their own manufacturing line.

Annuar said the MASTERCentre was already starting to recoup its costs but declined to disclose any figures.

The park itself is ready to launch the second phase. It has 313.5ha, of which 73ha has been developed under the first phase at a cost of RM130 million.

The second phase will include a multimedia centre which is a cluster of intelligent buildings to service the multimedia companies or providers to the Multimedia Super Corridor.

The park currently comprises, among others, innovation centres, incubation centres, enterprise centres, and research and development lots. It has 83 tenants.

Tenants are only allowed to be on one level, for example incubation level, for a maximum of four years before they have to move on to higher technology areas.

The main criterion for companies that wanted to locate in the park was that they must be involved in R&D, and innovative projects with commercial potential, said Annuar.

Technology Park Malaysia was started to provide the best in infrastructure, facilities and services related to the development of knowledge-based industries. In future, it expects to focus its activities in three broad technological fields. They are manufacturing and industrial engineering; information technology and multimedia; and biotechnology emphasising R&D, commercialisation and human resource development.

Annuar said the park did not receive good response at first but the MSC project had given it a tremendous boost and it now had to reject applications.

"It was hard selling at first but since the MSC... I even had to reject up to 25 applications at one time," he said, adding that a majority of the tenants were involved in multimedia such as in smart cards, software development and internet kiosks.

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