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Microsoft reaffirms its commitment to MSC

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MICROSOFT Corporation, arguably the biggest name in the multi-billion dollar computer software industry, has thrown its considerable weight behind Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's successful recruitment of Microsoft chairman and CEO Bill Gates to the MSC's International Advisory Panel was not only a boost to the corridor's viability, but also a public relations coup that instantly put the MSC on the world map.

Yet a veil of secrecy still surrounds exactly what shape or form Microsoft's investment in the corridor will take. Benedict Lee, Microsoft (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd's general manager, will only say an announcement can be expected before the end of the year.

"We are currently in discussions with the MDC (Multimedia Development Corporation) with regard to our application for MSC status. We are making progress and are hopeful that when Bill comes in March, he can help iron out some other areas. The feedback so far is very positive," Lee said.

Microsoft has made other moves to make its commitment to Malaysia and the MSC clear. The corporation's Southeast Asian regional headquarters is based here, while Gates is known to touch base periodically with Dr Mahathir on the MSC's progress.

"He is very excited by the MSC so he wants to come here personally to catch up on its progress and convey Microsoft's support and commitment.

"Given the technologies we have come up with, he thought it would be useful for him to share them with a broader community here, including the business, education and government sectors."

Gates' March 18 visit will have him addressing a conference of some 3,000 people on the some of the latest information technologies on the horizon.

Advancements such as Digital Nervous System and Connected Communities is part of Gates' vision of the future, which will change the way people, students, business and government relate to each other.

The benefits include making government services more efficient and more easily accessible to citizens and providing access to knowledge from all over the world.

"Let's take education as an example" Lee said. "Right now the only involvement parents have is largely limited to signing report cards and seeing the teacher when they get a letter.

"But if parents are brought into the technological infrastructure, they can easily monitor their children's progress. It gets them involved.

"Students also will no longer need to learn by rote. They can explore the world, grab information, analyse it, make their own assessment, piece it together, share it with other students, even with other schools around the world."

That kind of technological connection can be extended to other aspects of daily life - from vacation planning to accessing the local library - that will offer more choice and generally improve the standard of living.

Lee is confident that people, even the older generation who may now feel alienated by the rapid pace of change around them, will learn to adapt to such a system because of the promises it offers.

"Technology is getting easier and easier and there is really nothing to fear. If six-year-olds can do it, there is no reason why 60-year-olds, with that many years of life experiences behind them, can't do it too."

Microsoft Malaysia is working towards this vision through a business model that sees technology transfers to local partners, who can build their own businesses using Microsoft technology.

"This means our partners can really understand the technology - they are able to design it, implement, operate and maintain it and they can train customers on how to use it," said Lee.

"For example, we have a subscription programme, whereby customers and partners who subscribe get a CD-ROM monthly containing information on how to use the technology. There is a real transfer of knowledge, and we don't insist on a royalty," he added.

Lee said that ultimately, it was important for Malaysians not just to be consumers of software, but makers of it as well.

Software piracy however, a rampant problem here, constantly threatens to sap any initiative in that direction. Lee believes it is a national problem that could have dire consequences if left unchecked.

"If you understand the Government's drive to transform the economy from an industrial one to one based on information, then you understand that we need to build a new society that can create software.

"But if piracy is prevalent, then how are we going to attract our younger generation into software development? They will think that there is no revenue in it at all."

Is this argument persuasive enough for the average person on the street, who may be perfectly happy buying pirated software at a fraction of the original price?

"The basic issue they need to understand," Lee said, "is that in essence, they are robbing their children of the ability to earn a living in creating software."

Cursory followers of the software industry may be puzzled by how this image of a socially-motivated Microsoft differs so jarringly from the picture of a fiercely competitive and monopolistic company so often projected in some news reports.

Microsoft Corporation's current sparring with the US Justice Department over its business practices hasn't helped.

Prosecutors have accused the software giant of using its dominance in the operating systems market to stake out a monopoly in the separate Internet browser sector.

Lee said the legal manoeuvres in the US haven't affected the corporation's Malaysian operations, and he took pains to explain what he believes is a misconception about the corporation.

"I think it reflects the energy and zest we bring to our technology. We are aware that we have a lot of competitors in the software industry, which is unique in that any intelligent person with a creative idea can build an excellent product.

"Unlike hardware, where you need investments in microchips and factories, in software, if you are smart and have some smart friends, you can build a world leading product. So you have to be on the tip of your toes ... always."

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