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## Need for Smart Partnerships in developing IT infrastructure

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IF this past week proved anything about Information Technology, it proved that ordinary people can and should seize the opportunities in IT to empower themselves and their communities in a way far more meaningful than just singing about it.

True, Governments may enact cyberlaws, give incentives and declare policies about leapfrogging from one age into another, occasionally leaving some people bewildered, perhaps, as to what relevance all this has to them.

However, the recent multitude of IT-related events and announcements drummed home the point that all around the world, it is individuals and local communities which are spearheading social initiatives through IT.

The power of the community has been recognised to such a great extent that there is even an on-line international competition for creative community IT ventures - Sweden's Global Bangemann Challenge (<http://www.challenge.stockholm.se>) - ranging from areas such as culture and education, to traffic and the environment.

The week's most glamorous event, of course, was the visit by Microsoft CEO Bill Gates (interview on Page 10) and his meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to "reaffirm his support" for the Multimedia Super Corridor.

Less in the limelight were Mimos Bhd's preparatory meeting for the Second Conference on Global Knowledge and some comments by the Association of the Computer Industry Malaysia (Pikom) on the upcoming InfoTech exhibition and conference, as well as Microsoft's own Empowerment 2001 Summit which coincided with Gates' visit.

Together, these events raised salient points about developing an effective IT infrastructure, be it for a school, a company or a country, about public access to the Internet and about governance in the information age.

The Microsoft Summit itself, aside from its expected "you-need-building-blocks, we-sell-them" flavour, made vibrant predictions about IT's pervasiveness and the synergistic power of Smart Partnerships.

With euphoric figures like "the US\$253 billion global IT industry" tossed around, however, it is jarring to consider what a small proportion of the world's population actually has access to personal computers, let alone the Internet.

Less than 15 per cent of worldwide office workers have PCs and less than 10 per cent of these PC users have e-mail, Microsoft's Regional Director for Southeast Asia, Blas Garcia-Moros, said at the summit.

"In fact, less than seven per cent of worldwide PC users have real-time Internet access, and less than one per cent of the world population has any kind of Internet access at all," he said.

This leads to the paradoxical dilemma faced by many nations, Malaysia included - a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots in terms of IT skills and access, and at the same time, a critical shortage of skilled workers in this burgeoning industry.

The United States, for example, is in need of an estimated 190,000 skilled knowledge workers, whereas Malaysia will need to produce more than 20,000 such workers within five years.

Undoubtedly, the largest single player in a country's foray into IT is its government, as governments are usually a country's largest business

and service provider.

Rather than expect the government to supply an Internet-wired PC to every home, however, the consensus is that governments should be "innovative in sharing the load" by building Smart Partnerships to equip departments, agencies, commissions, libraries and even schools with IT.

In fact, as a Microsoft brochure puts it: "Providing schools and libraries with computers are our best bet for broad access."

However, jumping on the IT bandwagon means more than just buying PCs; it means getting technology which is appropriate for one's needs, easily integrated and Internet-wired.

It also means ensuring that all potential users will be able to get access to, and training for, applications that they need.

Whether one is running a family, business, school or country, technology should allow one to run a more effective organisation, whether in increasing the quality of one's life, work, products and society, or analysing and reacting to environmental changes.

Schools have been found to have huge potential in cultivating an IT culture not just among a generation of young schoolchildren, but in entire communities.

This may sound far-fetched for Malaysia, given that about 1,000 of our schools are still without electricity and a sizeable segment of our indigenous population does not even have ICs.

Yet, this transformation can and is taking place worldwide. And the catalysts are schools and local communities themselves, sometimes in ventures with the Federal Government, sometimes with businesses.

Costa Rica, an agriculture and manufacturing-based country with a 95 per cent literacy rate, is now installing computer labs in all public high schools and at least half of its grammar schools. By the end of the year, every public high school student will have an e-mail address and access to the Internet.

The Highdown School in Reading, the United Kingdom, has created an information hub which goes beyond providing Internet and e-mail facilities to teachers, parents and students; it actually helps the British Government give IT training to interested adults at night and on weekends.

The school charges for this service, and the money goes towards maintaining and expanding the school's IT system.

Malaysia, too, is seeing a number of local community-centred IT training initiatives, among others under the auspices of the Sathya Sai Central Council of Malaysia and the Action for the Betterment of Community group.

Who knows, perhaps the projects described in the Global Bangemann Challenge web-site will inspire some Malaysians to come up with creative, applicable IT-based solutions for community problems.

Only then can we truly talk about any Malaysian, whether a senior citizen in Sungai Petani, a Punan in Miri or a techno teen in Subang Jaya, being able to use IT in a "meaningful" way without only singing about it.

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