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No serious venture, no big gain

AS announced by Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding, research and development projects in areas that can reduce imports and enhance agricultural production will be given priority for government grants. This is indeed a propitious time to strengthen the exports- and food-based industries. Apart from rising to the national cause to bring home earnings and reduce the trade deficit, they should create Made-in-Malaysia brands that can withstand the heat of global competition. But will they rise to the challenge and seize the opportunity?

It is not simply a matter of parading patriotism that the country's private sector should focus on the development of indigenous technology. The truth universally acknowledged is that long-lasting economic prosperity hinges on the country's ability to maintain a competitive edge. But competitiveness is a virtue earned from a conscientious commitment to research and development.

Our exporters should realise the urgency in adopting, adapting and innovating new technologies that would give their products a competitive edge in markets, both old and new. Unfortunately, not many companies are wedded to the idea that R&D go hand-in-hand with fast and competitive growth. It has been voiced out by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad before that the sector does not conduct research and is less inclined to use research by others. A more telling sign of the sector's lackadaisical attitude towards R&D lies in the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers' 1996 Chief Executive Officers' survey where 55 per cent of the respondents said they do not conduct R&D.

It has become the culture of the sector to take the easy route of acquiring technology instead of developing it. Where technology transfer is concerned, our companies rarely do anything beyond adapting lock, stock and barrel the know-how of a foreign company. Many buy foreign technology without bothering to try out equally good, local technology. There have been very few takers of commercially viable research findings of universities and government agencies. We suspect much of the problem lies in the fact that R&D is rarely spearheaded by the CEOs. But innovativeness should permeate the entire company from the boardroom to the way it manufactures, designs, markets and distributes the products. It should translate into an uncompromising "can-do-it" attitude which sees tomorrow's success germinating in today's research investments.

Our ability to leap-frog so well in numerous areas explains the successful transformation from an agro-based economy into an industrial-based one. But continuing and greater success will elude us if the private sector fails to nurture a tradition of research, propelled largely by a compulsive need to be on the forefront of innovation. We cannot possibly claim a sizeable stake in the global economy if we remain as end-users or worse, as mere imitators of technology that will eventually fade into obsolescence. Japan and Taiwan, too, as seen in Acer's case, started off by aping Western technology but today, their technology prowess stands undisputed.

Our success in producing outstanding research in rubber and palm oil is evidence of our potential to build indigenous technology. But the initiative to harness this capacity must come from the captains of the industries. They who sow the seed will reap the harvest.

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