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Time for people to create ripples within the national IT agenda

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BY appointing "community interest" advocates to the National Information Technology Council, the Government has underscored the importance of the people in its efforts to develop a knowledge-based society.

Since the National IT Agenda was launched almost two years ago, it has been repeated time and again that "the national strategy for leapfrogging Malaysia into the IT Age hinges on empowerment of the people".

"From the start, NITA has given strong emphasis to the three public, private and community or voluntary sectors, to bring the transformation about," said NITC permanent secretary Tengku Datuk Dr Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen.

"The public sector is responsible for establishing law and order, the private sector for business and wealth creation and the community interest sector for ensuring quality of life."

On Thursday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad drove home this emphasis on community when he named representatives from consumer, health and safety, environmental, women's interest and media groups, to the NITC for the 1999 to 2001 term.

The previous 20-member panel, appointed in 1994, had a 50:50 ratio of representatives from the public and private sectors only.

New members include Prof Hamdan Adnan (Federation of Malaysian Consumers' Associations), Datuk Lee Lam Thye (National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health), Martin Khor (Third World Network) and Prof Datin Dr Sharifah Hapsah Shahabudin (National Council of Women's Organisations).

Dr Mahathir, who is also chairman of the NITC, also selected young cyberpreneurs like NeuroNet (M) Sdn Bhd president and chief executive officer Al Ishsal-Ishak and Hitechniaga Sdn Bhd chief executive officer Cheong Yuk Wai to the panel.

Hopefully their input and efforts will go far in diminishing the perception - widely held by Malaysians - that locals lack the capacity to produce world-class software.

In the previous panel, too, private sector representatives came overwhelmingly from IT-based industries, such as microelectronics, telecommunications and computer technologies.

This time round, the NITC will have the benefit of input from Shell Malaysia Ltd chairman and chief executive officer Datuk Megat Zaharuddin Mohd Noor and Southern Bank Bhd chief executive officer Datuk Tan Teong Hean, whose industries are not IT-based but have adopted IT in a way which others would do well to learn from.

Other encouraging developments are also taking place to help more Malaysians get access to IT, and avoid getting left behind in the leap into the Information Age.

Applications for the Demonstrator Application Grant Scheme, for example, have been encouraging and the first batch of recipients under the RM50 million scheme will be named within a month.

The DAGS provides funding for "bottom-up" innovations which use indigenous design, local content and IT or multimedia technology to benefit local communities or respond to local needs.

"We have seen some exciting proposals which have both good ideas and strategies for implementation.

"To have the idea and build the application is easy. It is more

difficult to create a community which can learn it," Tengku Azzman said, adding that this is why the first batch will consist of only a "handful" of companies.

According to the NITC's first-term report, released on Thursday, more than 7,000 primary and 1,500 secondary schools in Malaysia had made computer literacy a part of the teaching-learning process, as early as 1992.

However, universal access is still not a reality, as many schools still lack electricity. The telephone penetration rate for rural areas is only 5.5 telephones per 100 people, as opposed to the urban rate of 24.8.

Acknowledging this, the NITC pledged ongoing focus on issues like universal access and identifying key groups who could benefit from and contribute through IT, like senior citizens, non-working women and the disabled.

"Among measures on the drawing board are media campaigns to demystify IT, promotion through groups like Residents' Associations, and setting up of cybercafes in smaller towns, villages and economically depressed areas of cities throughout the country."

The NITC has also set up a network between itself and the State IT Councils to enhance Federal-State collaboration in promoting and realising NITA.

So far, 10 States - Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Penang, Perak, Perlis, Sabah, Sarawak, Selangor and Terengganu - have submitted IT development plans, reflecting the nationwide eagerness to move into the IT arena.

NITA, which was launched with the theme "Turning Ripples into Tidal Waves", has seen rapid progress with its first "ripple", the Multimedia Super Corridor, with 175 companies already granted MSC status.

With the increased emphasis on community involvement and empowerment of the people, as reflected by the NITC's new panel and the findings in its report, Malaysians should take the time to come together and make the other "ripples" come true, too.

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