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## MSC requires more K-workers

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VIRTUAL meetings, cyber doctors, online schools ... it was a whole new world inside an expo held last week to showcase the Multimedia Super Corridor's achievements and potential.

Right now though, it's really the potential that is being touted. For what's inside the hall is starkly different from the real world outside, whether in Malaysia or elsewhere.

But Malaysia is making a huge effort, through the MSC, to get launched into this new world and not to get left behind. For as the Prime Minister said, Malaysia would be very backward indeed without the MSC.

The MSC vision, he said, had given Malaysia a focus and direction.

It is a project which seems to have been well received by a number of rather important people in the world of technology.

The Who's Who in technology, who were here for the annual International Advisory Panel meeting last week, were full of praise for the MSC.

Twelve from the IAP glittering membership and 17 of their representatives spent three days reviewing the MSC's progress and offering their advice for the way forward. MSC, hearing them speak, is well on track and well on time.

But on the other hand, there are those who take a very different view. Of late, MSC has been compared very unfavourably with its competitors especially Singapore.

It has been seen as being very slow, a major sin in the Internet world where speed is of essence. It has also been seen to be bogged down by bureaucracy especially in the funding of local technology companies.

The harshest criticism came from Asiaweek which, in its July issue, concluded that the MSC had become "just another infrastructure project". The title of the article was stinging: Forget Infrastructure. It's the Software, Stupid!

Critics note that the big names are not coming into Malaysia in a significant way, dotcoms and venture capitalists are rushing into Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea instead.

Major problems, according to them, are slowness and the lack of ability to attract, train and keep "knowledge workers".

These views are, in fact, not entirely out of step with the concerns raised by IAP members who were, however, far more constructive in their advice and far less dismissive in their conclusions.

Parkside Group partner Gilbert Amelio, who runs a venture capital business in San Francisco, said countries like Singapore and Taiwan had begun over 10 years ago to get to where they were now.

"What I see in terms of progress made (in MSC), is truly incredible. What I would to remind you is that relative to Singapore and Taiwan, they started more than 10 years ago to get where they are now. I hope you don't think that all that happened overnight.

"Given that frame of reference, the MSC has done a remarkable job in building the momentum and if you continue to have the tenacity and patience, you will get large dividends," he said.

The other IAP members agree that MSC had progressed very fast in four short years to get to where it is and to be able to put together unique technology applications.

They were hugely impressed by the Government's commitment to the project which did not falter even during the trying economic crisis.

The MSC's most enthusiastic advocate, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, showed a level of commitment which is hard to match. He went straight from the airport to the meeting room at Cyberjaya, with only a quick detour home after a week-long visit to the United States.

He spent three days devoted wholly to the IAP meeting.

Prof William Miller, Emeritus Professor of Stanford University, said the MSC had progressed faster than any other such project but the difficulty now lay in maintaining its pace.

And this is where the IAP members' concerns converge with those of the more virulent critics. Among others, they are concerned about the shortage of knowledge workers such as software engineers.

Miller who pinpointed the development of talent as a vital issue, said MSC's future lay in the hands of the talented.

Compaq Computer Corporation president Michael D. Capellas agreed.

"We are all aware that to develop the information technology sector, we need capital, infrastructure rolling out and great ideas. But the constraining factor is the shortage of skilled people," he said.

To Bob Bishop, Silicon Graphics Inc chairman, this is a major challenge as knowledge workers are in demand globally. Many Malaysians, he noted, had been wooed away to Singapore and the United States.

He said besides technical skills, there was also a need for Malaysian enterprises to learn to sell themselves especially to venture capitalists.

The IAP members also talked about attracting venture capitalists to Malaysia and helping start-ups to raise funds through venture capital. This is an area which Malaysia has acknowledged that it is lagging.

Acer Group chairman Datuk Dr Stan Shih said Malaysia must make more efforts on this front as this was fundamental to the MSC's success.

He said the Government should offer tax incentives to venture capitalists to develop the capital market, adding that locals should be committed to provide and manage funds.

There were also suggestions that the MSC prioritise the areas of focus, choosing those where it would have an edge, rather than spreading too thin.

Many of these are, in fact, issues which had been raised by the Government itself time and again. The need to lure the best minds to Malaysia, to stem the brain drain, to attract venture capital ... Malaysians have heard numerous speeches on these issues by national leaders.

Obviously, there is a clear understanding of what needs to be done. But it has to be done speedily, with a sense of urgency and without being sentimental. For even as the IAP met, Malaysia's competitors are already moving.

Leaving aside the competitive headaches, another point was brought up by the sole woman on the IAP and favourite interview target, International Communications Studies senior advisor Diana Lady Dougan.

She said while technology was good, the challenge was benefitting from it.

"Don't get carried away by technology but focus on how it can be used to improve the quality of life," she said in a timely reminder on the tendency to become besotted by technology for technology's sake.

It's a down-to-earth reminder after a walkthrough of the MSC Expo which had a rather intimidating array of super high-tech demonstrations which, for now, bear little resemblance to the real world.

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