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## Blueprint in strengthening HR development

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THE Eighth Malaysia Plan (8MP, 2001-2005) officially tabled in Parliament on April 23 by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is a blueprint for the future.

The Plan incorporates a seven-point National Vision Policy which, among others, includes "developing a knowledge-based economy as a strategic move to raise the value added factor of all economic sectors and optimising the brain power of the nation" and "strengthening human resource development to produce a competent, productive and knowledgeable workforce."

In his speech, Dr. Mahathir made frequent references to "productivity", "competitiveness", "value-added", "globalisation" and "sustainable development."

The 15th Asean Labour Ministers' Meeting held in Kuala Lumpur on 10 and 11 May has also endorsed the Prime Minister's view in its joint communique by emphasising on "improving educational standards, skills training and retraining, life-long learning, and consultative industrial relations among the social partners."

It further states that "human capital is the most important determinant of any successful transition to a knowledge-based economy."

I would like to think that "transition", in this context, refers to two types - macro-economic and functional.

The macro-economic type pertains to a shift from a planned or command economy to that of a market economy, while the functional type concerns the movement from a previously production-based economy to that of a knowledge-based economy.

Both these "transitions" have their own fair share of challenges which "crave wary walking" by national policy makers.

Before we get into any discussion on a knowledge-based economy, we should first of all clearly understand the term "knowledge worker".

The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) World Employment Report 2001 defines knowledge workers as "those whose work involves not merely the use of knowledge, but who generate ideas and new knowledge."

If we were to extend this logic a little further, we can actually categorise all occupations into two main groups, namely non-information (or "analogue") workers and information (or "digital") workers.

Information workers can be further sub-categorised into those compiling and utilising information (data workers) and those generating ideas (knowledge workers).

While unskilled and semi-skilled job creation has increased arithmetically in Asean, knowledge job creation has increased geometrically (though not concurrently) in the US.

More than 2.5 million - or 18 per cent of all new jobs created - in the US between 1990 and 1998 were knowledge jobs, thus firmly placing the US at the forefront of a knowledge-based global economy in the future.

Notwithstanding the prevailing economic slowdown in that country, it is envisaged that the multiplier effect of a knowledge economy, spearheaded by American multinational enterprises and supported by developing host countries, will eventually percolate through Asean, though there may still exist certain "knowledge lacunae" as a direct result of the varying levels of technological advancement, and corresponding socio-political preparedness, in Asean member states.

I personally do not see this as a limitation or setback for Asean,

but a mere "blip" in an otherwise over-enthusiastic Asean to embrace "the new deal."

The 8MP expects to fill these lacunae by expanding the usage of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), widening the scope and functional dimensions of Research and Development (R&D), improving students' academic performance with special emphasis on Mathematics, Science and English, encouraging the growth of ICT-based small-and-medium sized industries (SMI), liberalising tertiary education and training by encouraging twinning and distance education arrangements involving public and private higher education institutions, and enabling greater accessibility to affordable high quality education by providing need-based financial assistance to eligible students from low-income families.

The advent of knowledge work is expected to be accompanied by structural changes to the very concept of job itself.

New spheres of job creation, and by extension job enrichment and career development, will eventually redefine the scope and functions of jobs.

The Prime Minister foresees the need to effect appropriate amendments to the Employment Act 1955 to expand the scope of the Act in order to include "new modes of working such as teleworking, part-time work and job-sharing" to address this new development.

Though part-time work may not be new to us, tele-working and job-sharing are novel concepts awaiting the test of time.

With them come new uncertainties in the realm of work - challenges that have to be faced in close cooperation with the social partners.