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Embracing the world according to nerd

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C.P. SNOW once wrote a book on The Two Cultures about the misconceptions which the scientists and literary intellectuals had about each other. Today, the cleavage is rather between nerds (or netizens) and the rest. IT applications ramify so rapidly it seems only a question of time before they take over everything, or most of what's worth taking over, in the business world.

The papers and news magazines are full of their doings. Everyone is interested, and rightly so, since computers have become so much a part of our lives. It would be too tedious to try to enumerate the tasks, both great and small, which data processing has now made so commonplace, if a little bemusing at times.

The IT news anyway is less about the philosophical and sociological aspects of the change than of the new economic opportunities opened up by this modern genie with its limitless potential to crunch numbers and data to accomplish all manner of routine, as well as complicated, tasks - faster, cheaper and more reliably than human effort ever can. At higher tech levels, as in computer-aided design, virtual reality animation, and so forth, IT even surpasses human capacity for such work.

What this means is that the workplace as we know it is rapidly being made over. Many school-leavers will have to be computer-savvy to land jobs. Whence the question of whether our education system is adapting enough to this radical change in working conditions everywhere.

The sixty-four dollar question is: where to find enough K-workers to sustain the transformation? Foreign recruitment and repatriation incentives for Malaysians trained overseas can only be palliatives. The catchment is limited anyway because of the competition for such staff worldwide.

In the long run, we have to look to our own educational and training circles to fill the need. A lot of activity, or ferment, is going on but will it merely produce much froth (like regurgitating old chestnuts as I have done above), but not enough pati?

There is no quick fix after all: working habits and attitudes are difficult to change overnight.

Yet change there must be: out with the old, in with the new. But vested interests - sometimes referred to as iron rice-bowls - are a kind of protected species. Any change to their established order is likely to be deeply resented, hence resisted.

So while the computers are setting a cracking pace altering the rules of the game, the working parts of the social order are falling out of step, in effect, dropping behind. Only the other day, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said that half the civil servants in the country do not want anything to do with computers.

This is not at all surprising. Many grown-ups have a mental block adapting to the linear reasoning and irksome drill of computer manipulation, whereas youngsters seem to take to it like ducks to water. So this window of (learning) opportunity in the young must not be lost.

The rules of market economics are also changing. Reduction or elimination of tariffs under Afta (Asean free trade agreement) is well under way, and more liberalisation in the wake of WTO negotiations, not to mention Globalisation, will make it a free-for-all in international business. In particular, countries with lower costs will ease out our

labour-intensive products.

Our industries have therefore to move upmarket and innovate - or go under.

Meanwhile, the pace is hotting up. Changes are being made to the change agents as well. Japan has gone from WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) to DoCoMo, or 3G, third generation information technology, extending e-commerce capabilities. A Malaysian network has caught up at so-called 2 G level, with its GPRS (General Packet Radio Services) system.

Most of us have only an inkling about what is going on. Just as we use only a tiny fraction of the potential of our PCs, reluctant to click on all those tantalising icons and sub-menus, or go on to the more sophisticated programs, because of our crass IT ignorance.

The Government has continued to build up infrastructure, and will be issuing another blueprint for the New Economy soon. Top-down planning may inspire glowing visions but tends to fall short on the nitty-gritty about follow-up business strategies.

Some limited but clear statement of objectives and action plans by an informal think tank of doers - IT professionals who earn their keep in the private sector - would be helpful.

One pressing priority would be to set the stage early for the children to get used to working with computers. There are certain things which only youngsters can do well: learning how to keep one's balance (at roller skating, acrobatics) is one; mastering a new language, another. It is even claimed that yet-to-be born babies in the womb can learn in response to appropriate external stimuli.

Computer training, or at least exposure, for the tiny tots is available here and there, and the Government also has its own ideas. A whole new horizon is thus opening up for pre-school education.

At another level, frontline experts will be needed to monitor the evolving IT environment. Many dotcom ventures have failed and e-marketing has not been too easy to get off the ground, so venture capital investors, as well as anxious parents, would want to know where to place their bets.

Let us give the slogans and pop songs about loving IT a rest, and go for more action oriented ways to produce results.

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