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Employment concerns of the future

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, while tabling the Eighth Malaysia Plan in Parliament on 23 April, has indicated that the Employment Act would be amended "to include new modes of working such as teleworking, part-time work and job sharing".

The Government's intention is to enlarge the scope of employment to encompass all segments of Malaysian society, such as married women with tertiary education, many of whom are currently homemakers looking after their young children.

The advent of information and communications technology (ICT) has brought about new forms, ways and perceptions to the working world.

Contrary to popular opinion, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) or the Asean Free Trade Area (Afta), which accord legal recognition for the liberalisation of trade, have little in common with the creation, development and promotion of ICT.

However ICT does complement the efficiency and capacity of trade liberalisation under the aegis of the WTO and Afta.

There is a visible, albeit gradual, shift in emphasis in the employment scene, with assembly-line, production-type jobs either being downsized, frozen or phased out, and being replaced by knowledge jobs.

Knowledge jobs need not be performed in a formal working environment, as the multiple possibilities of ICT enable knowledge workers to perform work from a location of preference or choice.

Though part-time work is not new to us, teleworking and job sharing certainly are.

I would like to think that part-time work, teleworking and job sharing may, in themselves, combine and give birth to yet another new series of work-related concepts wholly unknown to us at this point in time.

The permutations and combinations that are possible from these "secondary sources of work" are almost unlimited, with compensation and benefits, time, technology, market orientations, customer expectations and corporations' business priorities acting in tandem, or perhaps even in conflict, to effectively influence the change process.

The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) World Employment Report 2001 identifies five core issues with regard to the impact of ICT on the world of work:

- * Trade policies with regard to governmental policy initiatives on national ICT sector growth;

- * Migration of skilled workers and training policy development;

- * Retraining of older workers;

- * New workplace concerns such as stress, intrusion of privacy, intellectual property, right of access to communications media, labour market policies and labour laws; and,

- * Application of ICT to traditional (or "hard") industries such as agriculture, mining and fisheries.

The report states that in addition to 160 million workers currently unemployed, the world of work will have to accommodate 460 million new, young job-seekers.

With 500 million workers already unable to earn enough to keep their families above the US\$1 (US\$1 = RM3.80) a day (global poverty line income), we are actually looking at 1.2 billion people, or 18 per cent of the world population of 6.6 billion, joining the ranks of the unemployed

and underemployed. Very grim statistics indeed.

In Malaysia, it has been estimated that job creation will have to be gradually increased and stabilised at an annual average rate of 2 per cent in order to accommodate the national average annual population growth rate of 2.4 per cent.

Education, training and human resources development, particularly in ICT, will have to increase quantitatively and qualitatively to take our demographic requirements in its stride.

The trade union movement's concerns in the context of these "new deals" are particularly important.

Workers' rights, job security, social protection, career development, education and training, safety and health, productivity growth, sustainable income and enhancing national competitiveness through value-added production are issues that have to be collectively addressed by governments, employers and the trade unions.

These are matters that require tripartite attention and cannot be dealt with in isolation.

Personally, I foresee the possible future growth of "knowledge clusters" with teleworking, part-time work and job sharing complementing one another in fast developing countries like Malaysia.

This would result in the sharing of knowledge work, and by extension knowledge workers, through intra-operational and inter-sectoral approaches.

Cross-priority and inter-disciplinary technological applications, for instance, the simultaneous use of laser technology in manufacturing as well as medical practice, will become the norm.

Knowledge workers, the "carriers of technological wisdom", will cut through the ranks and service the specific needs of their employers, be it locally or abroad, on highly varied terms and conditions of work and remuneration.

Trade unions, which traditionally draw their collective strength from the standardisation of terms and conditions of work through collective agreements, will find the growing individualisation of work particularly in the knowledge work sector an organisational and leadership challenge.

Legal and procedural safeguards spearheaded by proactive and firm governmental interventions would help mitigate the undesirable effects of such uncertainties in the world of work.

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