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## Matching workplace skills with technology renewal

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, while tabling the Eighth Malaysia Plan in Parliament on April 23, has stated that a strong human resource base to support the development of a knowledge-based economy and enhance productivity and competitiveness will be one of the key strategies in ensuring that the nation is able to face the challenges of globalisation and sustain economic growth.

Malaysia's macro-economic policies have facilitated the country to undertake a gradual shift from resource-based, through production-based to knowledge-based activities over a period of 44 years.

What does this policy approach hold for Malaysian workers?

It holds that our 9.5 million workers will have to become an inseparable part of the national paradigm shift that emphasises brain over brawn in the country's untiring efforts, spearheaded by the Prime Minister himself, to become a developed nation by 2020.

If one were to take a quick look at our foreign investment scenario, it would become evident that one of the underlying criteria for the Government's issuance of operating licences to multinational enterprises through more than 35 years of bilateral cooperation is the eventual transfer of their sophisticated technology to the host country through a series of planned and well-coordinated training programmes.

The moot point is: have these plans actually been implemented or are they at best ad-hoc, cosmetic efforts aimed at pleasing the establishment?

It is difficult to be judgemental on this, as there are great variations in the manner, extent and sincerity in the efforts of multinational enterprises transferring their technology to us.

At one end of the scale, we have those that have provided funds to equip public and private educational institutions with sophisticated training facilities while at the other, we also have those that have only transferred their profits, in foreign exchange, to their respective home countries and have done little in developing local human resource capabilities.

While we are still on the subject of technology transfer, let us also take a look at technology renewal as they complement one another.

Technology renewal has been defined by United Nations training experts as a series of planned and carefully coordinated changes brought to the methods, scope and manner of product design, operations and production processes to ensure competitiveness and to be relevant to and consistent with prevailing market expectations.

Therefore, technology transfer and technology renewal can be deemed as twin-carburetors that will eventually energise a successful knowledge-based economy. Since technology renewal is a moving target (the telecommunications industry is a good example), technology transfer has to be ongoing, reliable and quality-directed.

Neither can it be independent of the needs of the social stakeholders, in this case the workers.

As organisations undergo gradual structural transformation from functional, through divisional, matrix and now virtual (the dotcom and e-business companies serve as good examples) to be in step with the dynamics of contemporary change, it is almost obligatory that their workers too follow these trends as closely as possible to successfully accommodate these new landmarks in their respective careers.

Quite obviously, they will not be able to do so on their own, not without corresponding inputs, in terms of resources, growth opportunities and time, from their employers with the Government performing a facilitating role.

The resultant benefits from these initiatives will most definitely enrich all three parties, provided such efforts are undertaken with prudence, sincerity, good conscience, transparency and efficiency serving as key indicators.

The trade union movement has been relentlessly pursuing the objective of training and development as complementary initiatives to its primary functions of representing, protecting and sustaining the collective interests of workers.

Skills matching and technology renewal are two clear markers that have been recently made on the national training map.

Their successful implementation is obviously influenced by the performance of national and regional economies.

A fast-growing young population in Asean (Association of South-East Asian Nations), with even faster technological change, necessitates a holistic approach on the part of policy-makers to ensure that skills matching and technology renewal effectively complement one another without any intermediate distortions caused by the unplanned, and often unwarranted, recruitment of migrant labour.

The temporary gains, mostly in cash, derived from migrant labour that will be quickly and permanently lost through decreased regional and global technological competitiveness in the absence of viable on-going skills training and human resource development programmes.

The Malaysian Government has a pivotal role to play in this regard, all the more so as many of Malaysia's Asean neighbours are undergoing visible socio-political changes impacting on their very national sovereignties.

Measures aimed at promoting, persuading and patronising skills matching with technology renewal have to be initiated by the Government in collaboration with enterprises, be they local or foreign.

Such initiatives could bear more fruit if they were dovetailed with appropriate tax concessions so that enterprises do not perceive resource allocations for training as irretrievable cash outgoings.

It is, by any measure, a long and arduous process, but one that has to be seen to be done, not just said.