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Indus entrepreneurs: Get the soft infrastructure right

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EXCELLENT physical infrastructure alone will not be enough to boost ICT adoption in Malaysia and propel it into the K-economy era. This is the message that was driven home by members of The Indus Entrepreneurs Association (TiE) when they were in town recently to open the Malaysian chapter.

According to Kanwal Rekhi, the president of Global TiE, soft infrastructure will complement the excellent physical infrastructure in Malaysia. 'In the K-economy, soft infrastructure is crucial,' he says. Among others, he says, Malaysia has to look into its culture and education sector to further strengthen its ability to turn the country into a K-economy.

For example, Kanwal says that in Malaysia, as in many other Asian countries, the society at large does not provide adequate support and nurturing to technopreneurs. 'We must understand that the 'ecosystem' has to be conducive not only in terms of access to funds and skill but also recognition and respect for technopreneurs to flourish,' he says. Kanwal, the founder of IT company Excelan, which eventually merged with Novell, says that there is a tendency for technopreneurs to be shunned by Asian society because a steady job is seen as the way to go.

Furthermore, he notes that generally there is little tolerance for failures. 'This is a bane for the growth of technopreneurs in the country,' he says. Asians are usually more concerned about matters such as 'face' when handling failures, Kanwal notes. In contrast, in Western countries, failures are treated with respect. 'In fact, failures are seen as a badge of respect because they denote daringness,' he says.

According to him, even venture capitalists are keen to deal with the so-called failures because they are experienced individuals who would have learned from past mistakes.

But, Kanwal admits that entrepreneurship is not alien to the Asian culture. In fact, I believe the Asian culture, barring a few minor traits, is highly suitable for encouraging technopreneurs. For example, one of the primary factors that encourages the growth of technopreneurs is support from the community, especially in terms of advice and mentoring. 'This trait is highly prevalent within the Asian community. That is why Asians in foreign countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom are flourishing as entrepreneurs and technopreneurs,' he points out.

Another area which should be given emphasis is the education sector. According to Apurv Bagri, president of TiE United Kingdom, establishing the proper educational system is the key in creating a large pool of entrepreneurs. 'The era of rote learning is over. We must now teach our kids to think for themselves and creativity should be encouraged,' he says.

Apurv, however, admitted that it is not possible to make these changes quickly. 'This is definitely a generational issue but that doesn't mean that no improvements can be achieved in the meantime. As we have seen, Malaysia has done extremely well in whatever it has sought to do and rest assured it should be able to achieve its desire to turn the country into a K-economy,' he adds.

Apurv is the managing director of Metdist Group of companies and the son of Lord Raj Kumar Bagri, the chairman of The London Metal Exchange Limited and the founder of Metdist Group of companies.

TiE is promoted as a not-for-profit organisation that was set up in 1992 in Silicon Valley by entrepreneurs and business executives of the Indus Region. Its philosophical base is a blend of the Silicon Valley culture of economic value creation through entrepreneurship, and the ancient Indian tradition of Guru/Shisya or Teacher/Disciple relationship.

TiE's objective is to create a pool of intellectual capital in which entrepreneurs worldwide can share, create wealth and help the society at large. TiE's affiliated individuals have created business with an estimated market value of over US\$200 billion since 1992. As such it is open to both Indus and non-Indus individuals interested in entrepreneurship.

Currently it has more than 800 Charter Members, including some of the world's most notable Indus entrepreneurs. It has presence in 40 locations, which are handled by 25 chapters with 10,000 members. There are plans to form another 15 chapters. The Malaysian chapter is the latest to be formed. The Malaysian chapter targets 1,000 members with 50 Charter Members.

The local chapter is headed by Westport Malaysia chairman Tan Sri G. Gnanalingam. Its members include Ralph Marshall, CEO, Astro; Tengku Azzman Shariffadeen, president and CEO of MIMOS Bhd; Mirzan Mahathir, group chairman, Konsortium Logistik Berhad; Datuk Paul Low, president, Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers; Butt Wai Choon, managing director, Microsoft Malaysia; and Francis Chia, managing director, Unisem Bhd.

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