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First world technology, third world mentality

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IT IS always difficult to change the mindset of people in the way they do things. Old habits die hard, they say.

But with the rapid pace of technological change, a nation has not much choice but to adapt if it wants to progress. More importantly, its people must be receptive to the changes, especially those in government.

Thus, recent cases of enforcement authorities bungling up when carrying out their duties is a major cause for concern.

Some time ago, an officer from the Road Transport Department (RTD) actually fined a motorist for not producing his conventional driving licence. The motorist had, in fact, produced his smart card, which amongst others, contains information found in an identity card (IC) and a driving licence. The officer insisted that the motorist produce his driving licence and that the smart card was insufficient.

The fact is, motorists need not carry ICs and driving licences if that information is contained in their smart cards. The RTD officer obviously did not know that. He probably also forgot that the RTD had been provided with hundreds of smart card readers to be utilised when conducting checks.

Another more recent case involves the police. When they rounded up more than a hundred Indian IT expatriates on suspicion of being illegal, they failed to take along the relevant devices which could verify the authenticity of work permits. Thus, the passports of many of these Indians were defaced when the officers tried to check their validity manually by scratching their surface.

Both these instances beg the question: Why were these officers ignorant? Did they not realise that the Government had spent millions of ringgit to introduce the latest technology to assist in their enforcement activities?

Further, the repeated breakdown of the baggage handling system at the KL International Airport (KLIA) prior to the 13th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in February begs to address the question of maintenance. How is it that such breakdowns seldom occur at other such ultra-modern airports?

To be sure, even a seemingly technologically advanced country like the United States fares no better. A couple of years ago, a few of its immigration officers were stumped when Malaysians presented their latest machine-readable passports. They were confused and taken aback that there was even such a thing as a machine-readable passport! Now, thankfully, Malaysian passport holders are accorded special lanes in some US airports.

It perhaps boils down to a question of the attitude of those entrusted with the job. While Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is pushing for a higher level of IT in the country, there are civil servants who are resisting these changes, or are just plain ignorant. Their attitude is perplexing and disappointing, to say the least.

There are those who still prefer to do things the old way. They have first world facilities at their disposal but are unable to use them due to their third world mentality.

And sometimes, all the technology in the world won't help. In a recent Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) fraud case, a clerk confessed that she failed to check if the IC number of the applicant matched that of the account holder!

As Malaysia pushes towards achieving Vision 2020, there must be significant changes in the way we do things. There is no escape.

Therefore, those who are involved or who are affected must be adequately

trained and educated. Sometimes, it is not just a question of ignorance but also the fear of mastering new technology.

Ignorance is not bliss. It can have dire consequences.

It can even lead to a diplomatic spat, as the recent treatment of Indian nationals showed.

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