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MSC 2.0

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NEWS of moves to take the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) to the rest of the country must have been greeted with both enthusiasm and scepticism.

While the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC) has a tendency to quickly point to the 900-odd MSC-status companies as its measure of success, many local ICT industry observers are quick to note the lack of local champions in technology and multimedia.

Furthermore, technocrats are asking questions on patent filings, original idea development and access to various support services in helping technopreneurs. To the sceptics, the Entertainment Village debacle is still fresh in their minds, although it wasn't entirely the MDC's fault.

The Second Phase of the MSC will see the creation of 300 additional smart schools. There is also a plan to extend the MSC to the whole country. Surprisingly, at press time, there isn't any official blueprint or press statement from the MDC on the Second Phase. This is baffling as a plan as significant as this appears to have been a rushed affair. mb-e spoke to some IAP members and representatives for their views on the Second Phase. Read inside what they have to say on the plan.

This year, the MSC International Advisory Panel (IAP) bid their farewell to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. However, most who expected to witness a symbolic handover of the MSC leadership went away disappointed, as it was strictly business as usual in the multimedia capital of the country.

There wasn't any ceremony to mark the transition in leadership, although the Prime Minister did mention that he would be willing to help in the MSC in any capacity the leadership deems fit. In some sense, it was vintage Dr Mahathir, downplaying the significance of the leadership transition, choosing rather to focus on the business at hand.

Unlike last year, at this year's meeting the Prime Minister did not clearly specify the areas that the MDC will be looking under the microscope. However, it was quite clear that lack of cooperation among local universities and the ICT industry did dominate the discussions held behind closed doors.

The Prime Minister did acknowledge that it is a problem that needed to be addressed quickly.

Local university-industry cooperation appears to have hit a snag and is plodding along the road towards Multimedia Utopia. This is especially critical as IAP members have stressed this point at their powwows over the years, but there has been little significant progress.

Open source software, which was a hot topic at last year's meeting, became almost a whisper this year. To Craig Mundie, chief technical officer of Microsoft, it must be fait accompli. He must be feeling gratified to have prevented open source software from making significant inroads within the Government machinery.

Strengthening the ecosystem

Datuk Dr Mohamed Arif Nun

CEO, Multimedia Development Corporation

`MDC does realise the fact that technopreneurs need all the help that they can get. That is why we are setting up various support centres and infrastructure to assist them in various ways. These centres are set up throughout the country. We have also been working on various options to

further strengthen the technopreneurial ecosystem. For example, we are looking into further grant schemes that could be used as a catalyst to further boost the number of technopreneurs in the country.'

Create demand-driven products

Professor William F. Miller

Professor of Public and Private Management Stanford University

'The MSC project has helped create a solid pool of technical workers who are able to learn and utilise the best technologies. If one walks into the operations of MNCs in Cyberjaya, I believe we would realise that today Malaysian technical workers are doing sophisticated work with applications and systems. In contrast, earlier they were merely manipulating machines. So, the level of sophistication has increased and this augurs well for the country.

However, the technopreneurship environment is something that can be improved upon. Sometimes there could be a tendency to market products that are not demand driven. This is a common problem of many technopreneurs around the world. The best products are worthless if there is no demand for them. So, product development must be customer focused. Technopreneurs should also be able to market their products in the most innovative manner. To do this they need to undergo learning and training. Venture capitalists and management consultants can carry out such training and learning. These experts can play their part in helping technopreneurs to successfully connect to their global marketplace.'

Sound leadership

N.R. Narayana Murthy

Chairman and Chief Mentor

Infosys Technologies Ltd

'One of the first things that struck me when I joined the IAP Advisory Committee last year is the amount of time that the Malaysian head of government allocates for the proceedings. It is incredible that a prime minister takes ICT issues so seriously that he spends three days, as in the case this year, to liaise with ICT executives on high-technology matters.

This is something that all heads of state/government should emulate as ICT can become a major engine of development if harnessed right as Malaysia is proving.

With the backing of the government, the project can't but succeed. The important aspect of the MSC project is that it strives to export the technological innovation that is developed in Malaysia. This means that the nation is constantly benchmarking itself towards the global best and to the taste of the global market. A mixture of great leadership and great infrastructure would mean that Malaysia would probably reach developed status much earlier than anticipated.'

On building a Technopolis

John Gage

Chief Researcher and Director of Science

Sun Microsystems

According to Gage, critics of MSC should realise that the Government has done so much in such a short time. Infrastructure and various flagships established have helped a great deal to progress the MSC closer towards its goal.

Nevertheless, he points out a major flaw in the education system, which needs to be addressed. Gage says that the lack of cooperation between local universities and the local ICT industry is a problem that needs to be tackled urgently. Silicon Valley has its own Stanford and UC Berkeley. Unfortunately, this is a weak link in the MSC, says Gage.

'We must recall that when a small band of Malaysian dreamers came to

Silicon Valley to sell the idea of MSC, they were initially met with scepticism. Persuading people to go into business they have not heard of is hard.

Silicon Valley took 50 years to build. But today, we see this entire impressive infrastructure and it is a testament to what the Government has done.

Everybody is building a Technopolis these days. Everybody can do 3D imaging. It is the breadth and depth of it all that matters most.

Technology is the easy part. It is the people (soft skills) that are the difficult part. However, there is still room for change. Malaysian kids are still going abroad to study. This has to change. Malaysians must have a desire to go to local schools.'

No breakthrough in education system yet

Craig Mundie

Chief Technical Officer

Microsoft Corporation

Microsoft executives can sometimes sound like a broken record playing the same tune over and over again. By his own admission this is true of Craig Mundie as well. 'Yes, I may sound like a broken record, but these issues are important,' says Mundie, referring to open source software and software piracy.

'Intellectual property (IP) protection in Malaysia is quite weak. While the rate of piracy is under 70 per cent (in comparison with other countries in the region), the rate of improvement is not very good.

The open source rhetoric has somewhat calmed down compared to a year ago. I disagree that open source software spurs innovation. Open source software has not resulted in any breakthroughs. There is now more focus on IP and patent filing in the MSC has increased.

If Malaysia wants to move up the food chain, it needs to move beyond manufacturing. I think education issues will come to the fore very quickly. Malaysia is not better off or bad in terms of highly trained technical people. But there is nothing that makes me believe that Malaysia is a head above the other countries, especially the United States and India.

My sense is that Malaysia has not yet broken through in terms of emphasis on education. There is a great need for people to be trained as computer programmers.

Now that you have the entire infrastructure in place, what's next? I predict that the things that other countries struggle with are the same issues that Malaysia will struggle with. I feel that the next phase should be the ability to capitalise on the huge mass of interconnected personal computers.'

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