

Flight without wings

Information Technology F. 108. 5.302
Mohammad Ayub Khan

For the past few years, the growth of Information Technology (IT) institutes and universities remained incredibly the one of the fastest ever seen in our country. Falling prices of PCs in the market and introduction to digital communication (Internet) probably proved one of the many factors responsible for this phenomenal high fly expansion other than the electronic media assault unleashed by developed countries for seeking new markets. Did we overestimate the potential of IT industry for the development of our sluggish economy, or do we need to re-evaluate this fast growing business around the world in order to put some sense in it and make it compatible with ages old expertise of our planners and decision makers.

Information technology consists of two different words. In Europe, the US and other developed regions and countries, the information is no less important and valued than any other wealth. In today ruthless multinationals competition, information is considered the real assets of an organisation. Ask America on Line (AOL) to negotiate its business concerns for sale or merger, and one would find them ready to merge or completely sell it out on the present strength (size) of their costumers and clients. At a smaller scale in our daily lives, information is all the time necessary to develop and manage the day today routine business.

For instance, you need to know where the hotel is, who sell pizza, and must know the price you can afford. Keeping telephone numbers or other costumers contacts in your hip pocket is your real business. Companies manufacturing household items rely on their sales agents who convince the customers through their information about the products and create the bridge between them and the producers. These sales agents are the hands and legs of any large or small company whose products reaches the clients and the money travels back to the accounts.

Another component of the IT is "technology", which in broad terms means doing something more precisely in the shortest possible time in whatever quantity it is needed. Technology as an expression can be suffix to any discipline of science. For instance, space technology speaks about all that progress in the form of human skill and machines we have achieved so far and is a vital source of our information about outer space. One can find many such examples to make it further elaborate; however, here the issue is to know the nomenclature of IT and the relationship between these twine words of information and technology. Using the available information in order to make an accurate decision is vital for the progress and prosperity of our country.

But do we have information? If so, can we rely on it? Next come the term technology, are we in a position to mix information and technology at the right level and use it to achieve the destination of higher growth of our slow-moving economy. We have seen that accurate

information is imperative for the sound planning which can show us the way to the higher level of growth in economic sector. Unfortunately, this is not true in Pakistan.

First there was (and is) a lack of confidence between the government and the business community and secondly, the format itself is more like an investigation rather than a questionnaire. The business community wanted to keep some of their information far from the reaches of income tax functionaries who could use these later on for reasons other than their official duties, while the government tried to make them reveal their real source of income and extract whatever possible.

This duel brought down the real idea of the planning division to a dead end and the country lost another chance to document whatever commercial activities we have. Did we forget that the government was penalised by the donors' agencies to the tune of 55 million dollars just because we provided them the wrong information about our budgetary calculations? For the best possible application of IT in the public as well as the private sector is the change of attitude and approach towards this new tool of development and management. In offices, computer systems and its related accessories are placed as show pieces for visitors, particularly in an executive's office. I have seen most of these executives even do not know how to switch it on, what to talk about to differentiate between hardware and software.

IT is basically the combination of any technology, be that electronic media (radio, television, satellite dish etc) or computers, communications and the information, we generate after going through certain levels of field investigation. We need to replace this centuries old paper work procedure with the new and dynamic mode of writing and storage facilities. Just step outside of the 200 years old style of office environment and start the day with a new thinking. You are here early in the morning at 8.00 O'clock till 4.30pm (in five day week system) to give back something to the organisation responsible for giving you salary at the end of each month.

Establishing IT universities both in public as well as in private sector answers half of the hitch, the rest of the half purely relate to the government policies, opportunities of jobs in the market, preparedness and openness of our system to the new ideas and concepts and above all the integration of our economy to that of world economies which can open both way opportunities. A software or hardware engineer would need to have a fast growing entrepreneurs in order to find not only an appropriate job but also to participate in the development process through application of new ideas and techniques. How can we use this tool of IT is the crucial question. Lets start with the economic system that is the leading

force behind today's new world order. Once we collect the correct information about our agricultural and industrial output, we can then plan realistically. For economic growth, the spread of telecommunication far and wide in the country is a prerequisite for the fast growth of IT facilities.

Which in turn can give us better skilled manpower, that can understand the up and down trends of the markets, and can manage the business of one shop as well as a large multinational agency. Allow free flow of information and refine the education system. Root out all the outdated material from the textbooks and plan the system to cope with the challenges of 21st century. Allocate more than the defence portfolio and make the job for the cream of our society. Encourage the private sector to increase its share in the developmental activities and allow them access to the required information anywhere they find inside this country.

Strictly apply the intellectual property rights. Once we started this process, it would be difficult for the rest of the departments to save their rotten systems. IT specialist can better tell you where to start in the railway, or PIA to go upward ride. Bear in mind that it is the natural outcome of introducing new tools and techniques that the unskilled or low skilled people lose their jobs and we should be prepared for this once the information technology finds its ways into the centres of our economic activities, however, the high growth can tackle this issue appropriately.

We need to move fast. The world is running ahead of us and if we calculate the distance between them and our present positions in terms of age we are almost one hundred years behind their present standing. The right use of information technology can fill this void easily, however, we need to apply the required approach and prepare ourselves to get rid of centuries old outdated governing system. Our

economy needs fresh ideas, including switching from agro-based mode of production to that of industrial base and sound planning which is not possible unless we have reliable and accurate data (information) about our present economic situation. Physically, we need a fast telecommunication system and a robust political environment.

We need to give opportunities to the middle class owned business that is in its initial stages and can afford to give a trial to the introduction of information technologies. It needs encouragement and patronisation both politically and economically. Once we start in the new direction, leaving aside every thing, we can certainly expect the 'breaking of the present stalemate. Let's give it a try. Information technology can pave the way for this once we plan and implement sincerely the new ideas, information, technology, etc, for the betterment of our people, country, and the region and not make them show pieces in our offices to impress the visitors.

E-government— need of the hour

ST. News 17-3-02

The plan will gradually transform the existing procedures and methods of working in the ministries and divisions of the government into a new framework through adoption of computerisation and other technology

By Sara Hashmi

The implementation of an elaborate plan prepared by the Information Technology Division of the Federal Ministry of Science and Technology to introduce new methodology of e-government will revolutionise the working of the government. The proposed plan will be put through in selected ministries and divisions this year. The proposed ordinance, designed to provide legal cover to the envisaged changeover to the methods of e-government, would take about four months for its finalisation.

The plan will gradually transform the existing procedures and methods of working in the ministries and divisions of the government into a new framework through adoption of computerisation and other technology. It would contribute significantly to the objective of 'good governance' at all stages of delivery of services by the government functionaries to the citizens at large.

It would add enormously to the efficiency of the government departments and achieving disposal of larger workload within a relatively short span of time.

The use of Internet has come a long way in Pakistan in a short span of time. More than 500 cities and towns now have Internet facility, which is a notable achievement. MoS&T, Ataur Rahman, a man driven to spread information technology and its application across the country, including setting up of Internet cafes in villages, is responsible for this

phenomenal increase.

The government set up an e-government task force to provide necessary input and guidelines to consultants for preparing plans and projects. Every division was requested to appoint a four-member team of resource persons familiar with working of the division. These resource officers would help in re-engineering of the present office procedures and will be responsible for change management in their respective departments. They will help in developing software applications in their actual applications.

The computerisation of the methods of working in the government departments is not the only significant element in the proposed changeover. A number of other courses are likely to revolutionise the entire framework of the age-old procedures in government departments, which are inherently slow-moving not only in decision making but also in the final implementation of the decisions, and communication of the same to the people in general and the parties concerned in particular.

Under the existing framework, the impact of the decisions on various fronts in public life, specially in the field of economic activity, is usually minimised and even lost if delays in the announcements of the decisions are deliberate on the part of the functionaries concerned.

The e-government plan is likely to help eliminate loopholes, which covertly

provide scope for corruption and bribery in the government departments directly involved in matters of public dealing. The MoS&T is also reported to have trained selected personnel in various methods of e-government, which include managing e-signatures, controlling movement of files and preservation of records, electronic facility for sending and receiving official messages etc.

The introduction of the methods of e-government with extensive use of computers at different stages of official work may immensely prove helpful to make government departments dynamic. At the same time, the efforts of the present government to eradicate corrupt practices in government departments, especially in those departments which are associated with the taxation machinery, would be made increasingly effective with the extensive adoption of computerisation and methods of e-government.

The e-government plan should, therefore, preferably be introduced in the various CBR departments on a priority basis at the major centers of tax assessment and collections where large-scale leaks and tax evasions have been causing heavy losses to the exchequer.

A successful elimination of deficiencies in these departments, such as absence of any records about the tax payers, lack of response to tax payers' letters and queries etc, through the adoption of e-government plan is likely to usher in a new chapter of fool-proof framework.