

Making an industry out of the ailing public services

Sri Lanka should make an industry out of the ailing public services by firing up all its engines using ICT as the combustion fuel

by Anura K T de Silva

Significance in employing Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for Sri Lanka's economic growth has been suggested by many pundits as well as a variety of current and former politicians, although not much of a tangible affect has been seen thus far.

In the yesteryear, IT industry was viewed as a trading commodity to take advantage of tax and import duty benefits by some members of the business community, then at another period some of the university professors viewed it as purely an educational matter and eventually a host of decision makers used it to lip sync during their political campaigns.

What most agree today, although no one has yet made any tangible impact is to use ICT as a technology development sector, technology enabled service sector and as a catalyst to revive our strategic economic sectors such as agriculture, tourism, transport, education etc. A vibrant ICT industry not only can create jobs and earn foreign exchange but also benefit local companies in other sectors with the application of world-class technologies.

Stronger domestic demand

Hence, developing a stronger domestic demand base for ICT innovation is a primary key that could propel our stagnant economy as it has the ability to transform not only our own ailing public services that are in line for private execution but the ICT sector itself and many other sectors that needs to become globally competitive via a technology enabled virtual presence through the digital super highways spread across many continents.

Experiences in many other countries have proven that when demand is generated within a nation for innovative solutions, local industries respond quickly followed by a positive domino effect. Unfortunately, such phenomena has not occurred in our nation thus far mainly due to the lack of true reform targeted at enhancing pro-

ductivity in our public services that could have generated the demand for home grown innovation as against importing cheap duplications.

With the exception to a handful of businesses who could conceptualize what they actually require in terms of business technology and dare to demand a local technology partner in their migration to achieve world class performance, most businesses in the private sector take the risk averse path of choosing a legacy technology solution passed down by their foreign principals even at an immense cost to them.

Size of our population and government are significant reasons to prevent from importing large legacy or totally unfit technology solutions from donor countries or even from mega technology houses that attempt to duplicate their earnings that were once written off in their books.

Purchasing technology

The widespread strategy adopted by most leading local private companies in purchasing technology has been to delay the decision and when they did, opted for offshore space shuttle solutions to tally lug nut inventories at colossal costs combined with high priced consultants and long term contractual obligations to remit rupee earnings to sustain foreign maintenance contracts that has lead some businesses towards bankruptcy. With respect to the local public sector, purchases have usually been done for personal rewards ending up with yesterday's technology for tomorrow's needs.

Sri Lankan ICT sector has lately shown a world-class ability to innovate, design and produce when solutions were demanded from overseas. There capabilities have been demonstrated well in multimedia, web base development, inventory, financial products, and enterprise resource planning to almost every industry sector.

But the ICT sector can no longer rely totally on foreign demand due to the economic slump they themselves are facing and hence, it is opportune to find means to lift the performance of this ICT sector that could affect wonders for other local sectors by synchronizing the supply and a generated local demand for innovation.

Most capabilities within ICT can

make massive contributions to fill the gaps that exist in most of our economic sectors, if our policy makers can accept that technology holds the answer to many of the current shortcomings.

It is willingness to look within and commitment to provide a better service to the public that is needed to drive rest of the economy fuelled by ICT if the government wishes to realize the hopeful economic future than continue to beg for international aid and pour it on ducks backs. Looking at some of the larger nations such as China, USA, Australia, India etc, rekindles just how small, countries like Sri Lanka, Norway, New Zealand etc are in a global sense.

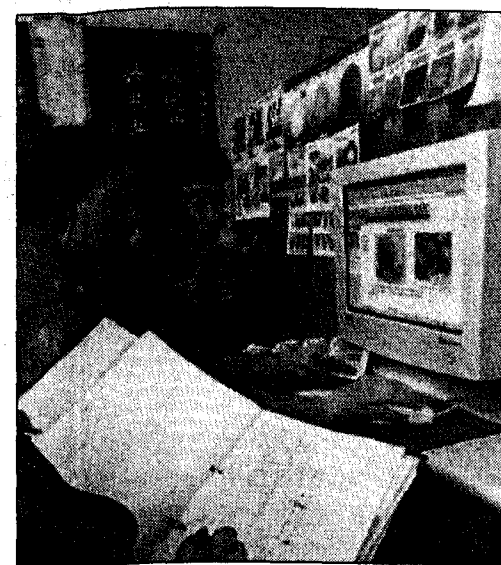
Often our population is just a small percentage of many of the cities in the countries with which we interact. Yet we need to maintain defense forces, fight terrorism, conduct foreign affairs, maintain diplomatic and trade posts overseas and many infrastructures as a nation state.

Population

Even if we had the most able public servants, we would yet encounter over-burdening range of constraints that would arise from trying to do so much from so little. This is greatly evident in most of the local garment factories where they spend over 10-14 hours a day 5-7 days a week on an ongoing basis to merely complete a few orders due to the absence or a weak application of appropriate technology.

The scale and the financial numbers may be bigger overseas, but the urgency and complexity of the problems are no less pressing and demanding for solutions from our local market place and more so from the government when dealing with other developed nations.

This presents us with a unique opportunity for economic growth that we should take very seriously through our own ICT resources due to its ability to generate positive multiple ripple effects. Why shouldn't our governments embrace technology applications similar to applications in bigger governments abroad but made locally at a frac-



Online Training: Workers offer advice to other workers via the web

tion of a cost? Is there not an opportunity in this electronic age to see our government processes as a source of raw material for the ICT industry to develop new intellectual property giving life to home grown international companies?

In this context, the raw materials are the problems and issues facing the government and public services, which we have in abundance. The products are technological solutions in a range of fields as law and order, education, health, transport, security (big one) and virtually all citizen delivery services.

Technology solution

Not all problems will contain a technology solution. But it is a fair bet that technology and related expertise can play a huge part in resolving a large number of burning issues that will continually face ministries, departments and service delivery agencies and more so by internet working them. Those agencies who has already embraced the need to serve its customers efficiently through manual means like the Immigration and the ETF could become pilot projects to lift them to the next plateau of client services with a single identification number and open technologies to link with other agencies.

The court system, motor traffic department, procedures in police stations that usually send the public in circles just to make a basic inquiry or obtain a transaction record could be given the ICT pill to alleviate the pain and suffering

the staff undergoes to service the public.

Essential ingredient

At a higher level, ICT can become an essential ingredient to implement power devolution that the government is wrestling with great pains to monitor regional investments at the centre without hindering the regional public services.

I once thought inland security could have become the real cause for the government to embrace ICT and offer some intelligence to the check points while I hope it will become more essential to truly realize the fruits of the peace process.

The goal for Sri Lanka could be to make our total government structure a model for the development of technology solutions that can be sold to other developing countries. In other words, turn once a lethargic government into an industry sector in its own right. The most important advantage for a small country such as ours would be the ability to provide a single prescription to cure multiple diseases as unemployment, weak public services, lower government revenue and generate further ripple effects to many other government agencies with our indigenous inventiveness in our local ICT industry.

How do we reach such a goal?

1. Believe there is a way out of waste and inefficiency, where all battle fronts within the government could be won without selling off the assets.

2. Enlighten our national leaders to seek for technology solutions to thorny problems.

3. Give them confidence to work openly with industry to find ways to mitigate risk and demand that they improve productivity quantitatively in all government agencies within a time period.

4. Invest on human resources to operate in the new environment to achieve new objectives.

5. Penalize for failing to achieve tangible productivity indicators. The above goal is worth striving for as it can be achieved and is probably the only way to develop our public services along with our almost diminishing software industry.

The software industry sector has earned a good track record confirming its ability to turn projects

or products required to meet private sector reforms into significant income earners but primarily from overseas.

We can't expect governments to keep coming up year-after-year with radical new policy changes to drive the ICT sector either. But at least for once, I believe the government will have to take this action in the name of awakening multiple areas of our economy, most importantly our rural economy.

Through this exercise, we can turn the heavy per head costs of maintaining many public services into cost benefits for all Sri Lankans, boost our own ICT industry, increase revenue for the government from the newly gained efficiency, increased volume of services and most importantly to enhance public services with convenience and affordability while preventing the need to sell our national assets which the private investor too would increase rates and eventually end up applying technology to pocket the savings from eliminated waste.

Work smarter

It's often said by many learned professionals that the only way for Sri Lanka to succeed in the new global economy is to work smarter rather than harder by turning more of our raw materials into added value products.

In this case, we have access to the raw materials in terms of know how and we have an abundance of creative talent locally to generate value products and services.

To ignore this opportunity when developing policy reports for international angels would only lead us towards irreversible decay in terms of employment, skill development, public services and in saving our own national assets.

Most uniqueness in the ICT sector is that it doesn't require the government to dole out funds other than to invest in its human resources and exercise leadership demanding for improved effectiveness in public services to enhance its earnings by providing a better service to a wider audience whilst reducing cost in contrast to selling the entire national asset.

This I believe requires much bolder courage and national coherence that would generate the will to go against international pressures, who does not hold any voting rights at any election.