Having fun at MIMOS

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"Let's have some fun." MIMOS Bhd CEO Datuk Abdul Wahab Abdullah likes to use this phrase a lot nowadays as he motivates the organisation, the nation's premier R&D agency, to move up a few notches in hitting its targets (see *netv@lue2.0*, March 21, Issue 799). Wahab says multinational corporations use the phrase a lot when they work hard to achieve their goals.

With three years of experience under his belt and a sharper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Malaysian technology and entrepreneurial landscape, Wahab knows MIMOS has to accelerate its role as a R&D facility. In fact, he feels it even has to start facilitating market entry for entrepreneurs. However, it will do this selectively and only for entrepreneurs who have already shown the desire and ability to build their companies to a certain level. MIMOS will then throw its brainpower behind them and help the companies penetrate the global market. It has succeeded with three companies and has lined up more.

The reason for the extra hand-holding, if you may, is simple. Wahab and his team at MIMOS want to leave a legacy and they can only do this through the success of companies that ride their technology onto the global stage. But many Malaysian companies are inward-looking and most are resellers of foreign technology. Thus, MIMOS is looking for Malaysian technology recipients who are hungry to become global players and are already developing their own technology.

This hunger to think global is conspicuously missing and it frankly disappoints the dynamic MIMOS CEO.

Says one of his senior executives, "If you were to offer the kind of technologies we have here to entrepreneurs in the Silicon Valley, they would be like piranhas, snapping them up. But in Malaysia, we get our entreprenreurs even asking us if we can help develop the full product for them!"

But it gets better. Chips in Wahab, "When we ask some of them to show us their business plan, they don't even have one. Worse, they ask us to come up with a business plan for them."

Despite this, the ever-optimist Wahab is confident that Malaysia can become a nation with its own Microsoft-like tech company one day. And he intends to apply the lessons of the past three years to ensure this happens.

"The first lesson — actually, it is more of a realisation — is that Malaysia can run faster." To do this, everyone needs to be working towards a common goal and on a common platform. "At the moment, too many organisations are working in silos and as a result, not enough are looking at the full technology ecosystem and how to fill it."

So, this is what MIMOS is doing now with the platform technologies it is building, and this is the critical component, it is encouraging researchers in universities to base their technology research on its platform technologies. "At the moment, all the basic research done in universities is put into foreign platform technologies, but we are now changing this by encouraging university researchers to base their research on our platforms (for instance, semantic technology, grid computing and wireless) to ensure that they enjoy the value-add they create and that the platform they are basing their research on is Malaysian-owned." MIMOS currently has a number of centres of excellence (COEs) where it collaborates with various parties to build and enhance the technology platforms it has chosen to focus on.

The other component to this is industry. MIMOS works with industry partners to come up with products from its COEs. It has further refined the way it works with industry by coming up with the 80:20 rule last year. MIMOS contributes 20% in the form of applied research and industry or academia contributes 80%. The end-product will thus be market-ready and have a unique technology.

MIMOS is creating a full ecosystem here where industry, academia and the organisation all work on the same page, that is the various technology platforms, to come up with commercialisable products that can hopefully find a global market. Interestingly, while some universities are getting jealous of the attention MIMOS is garnering and consider it a competitor, Wahab says the uniqueness of any product that comes out of its technology platforms actually depends on the strength of the applied research from universities.

He is more than happy to share the work and strategy MIMOS has employed with the universities and would be more than happy if the universities do better. He cites the example of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, which led the way last year in number of patents applied for. MIMOS was at the top in 2008.

"It's great that UKM applied for so many patents. Hopefully, other public universities will see the importance of this too." The end result: Malaysia wins, which means we all win. This is Wahab's thinking.

To be sure, MIMOS does not cover all areas of the technology spectrum but Wahab says a small country like Malaysia has to make smart decisions in picking the areas it wants to enter. MIMOS believes its eight technology clusters are the best fit for the country.

Project Code 8

The other key lesson learnt is based on the fact that too few Malaysian technology companies are product-based. As a result, the product life-cycle skill is non-existent among our technology companies. To take a short cut on the learning curve — which can take up to 20 years to master — Wahab came up with the earlier mentioned 80:20 rule, where MIMOS insists that companies that are to receive its technologies must work with it to develop the proof-of-concept and go-to-market solutions.

"We need to remake our industry to be more product-oriented," he says. One synergistic aspect of this strategy is a project MIMOS calls Code 8, which it started six months ago. This is an initiative where it hires 70 of the best students from public universities to train

them (because they apparently do not have the right market skills) to become domain experts in the eight areas it is working on. This is an accelerated programme as the graduates focus on the proof of concepts that MIMOS is working on with industry. At the end of the year, Wahab plans to transfer 70% of these graduates to industry, which will aid the companies as they will be getting people who have already worked on their products for a year and can do further development work to enhance them. "We want to build researchers for the future," says Wahab.

The programme has caught the attention of the Ministry of Higher Education, which is now replicating it in its universities with a grant of RM1 million per university.

"We have developed our own curriculum to produce domain experts in each of the eight areas we are focused on. This is very robust exposure for the fresh graduates we bring in and best of all, it is another leg in the alignment we are creating between us, industry and academia in our focus areas," says Wahab.

MIMOS has clearly done a lot under Wahab's leadership and has even more on its plate, which the CEO plans to execute over the next three years.

Asked to reflect on his biggest satisfaction so far, Wahab pauses for the first time in the interview to think. "That we have aligned MIMOS to what it is supposed to do. We have transformed our people using our Satria 1 management and vision statement. Truly, we have gone through many changes, both from the people and technology aspect and frankly, at one time, I really wondered if we could pull it off, but we have. Today, we have the right combination of people with changed mindsets and world-class technology. I am most proud of this."

And, you can bet, he is having a lot of fun too.

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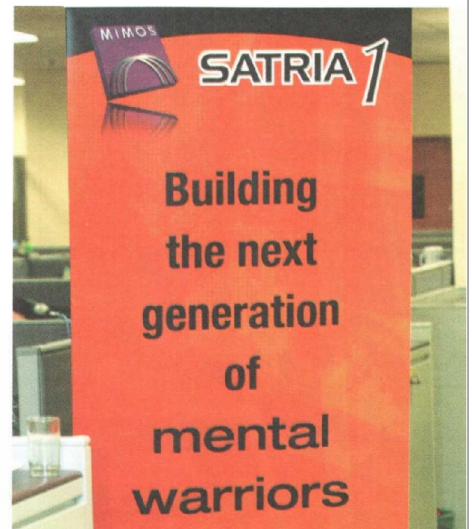
Satria 1 is the vision statement MIMOS is using to inspire and motivate its staff

SATRIA 1

Building the next generation of mental warriors