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Making life easier for end users

Rais (in cap) receiving MSC status certification from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in Ipoh last month

R&D in Meru Valley

BY KARAMJIT SINGH

Last week, we highlighted the successful collaboration between BioNexus company Holista Biotech and the Indian Institute of Integrative Medicine (IIIM), which has resulted in two patents being filed for the herb Kacip Fatima. If these patents are successful, their full rights will be assigned to Holista Biotech while IIIM will get a royalty payment in the single digit, as is the norm.

The value of partnerships, especially in technology and biotech, cannot be underestimated. For a country like Malaysia, which is still in the early stages of building a culture of research in technology, it makes a lot of sense to tie up with research companies, provided our companies bring something to the table as well.

One recent example in the information and communications technology (ICT) space is The Red Snapper MSC (M) Sdn Bhd (TRS-MSC), which was awarded MSC status last month in Ipoh. TRS-MSC is a wholly owned subsidiary of The Red Snapper (M) Sdn Bhd (TRS), a provider of wireless broadband equipment and WiFi services in Malaysia, specifically to Perak and Melaka, and to India.

Its WiFi footprint in Perak is known as Wireless Perak and in Melaka, as Wireless Melaka. In partnership with YOU Telecom India, it has submitted a bid for a Wimax licence in India.

On the surface, this is just another MSC company but in actual fact, the CEO of TRS is Indian-born, US-based Braham Singh, a leading technologist in the wireless industry, who cut his teeth on building businesses for large companies in Hong Kong and the US.

Rais Hussin, the executive chairman of TRS and CEO of TRS-MSC, managed to convince Braham on the proposition of building a regional next generation wireless company

out of Malaysia. With Braham and his vast network that can be readily tapped TRS-MSC will focus on developing related intellectual property (IP) that enables handover capabilities in 802-compliant equipment as well as in cognitive radio (CR) in a second, more advanced stage of TRS-MSC's IP development effort.

"Close coordination with experts in this field in India and US is planned to ensure proper technology transfer as well as creation of appropriate channels for the export of developed IP to handset and base-station equipment manufacturers in China, Taiwan, Korea and US," says Rais.

While that sounds a bit ambitious, especially with many telecoms hardware vendors working on the same things, Rais says TRS has an outstanding core team of researchers based in Bangalore, some of whom will be moving to Meru in Perak to work jointly with Malaysian engineers to develop hardware and firmware for vertical (802-compliant systems to cellular) and horizontal (intra-802) handover.

Rais is confident the team can develop a WiFi-WiMAX compliant chip in the next 16 to 18 months. This is to be ready for when WiMAX devices and infrastructure is market ready.

"Our team in Bangalore focuses on wireless technologies and has done significant work for Nokia, Motorola and others. Using IEEE guidelines, the first focus of the team is to develop IP-enabling WiFi networks to link to a WiMAX footprint at its edges. Our MSC initiative therefore protects existing WiFi investments by making WiFi an integral part of WiMAX footprints. Similarly, TRS-MSC plans to help the WiMAX and WiFi to cellular networks in an 802-compliant manner," he explains.

"We additionally expect this cutting-edge work to seed ancillary activity and encourage foreign direct in-

vestment in Meru MSC. Some RM5.8 million has been earmarked to kick off development of handover technology as well as for work on CR."

Sometime in mid-2008, TRS-MSC intends to start work in specific areas of CR technology. CR allows users to do away with the existing system of allocating spectrum among service providers and instead allows the operator to deploy service, using equipment with radio characteristics adaptive to the real-time conditions of the environment.

Explaining the technology, Braham says: "Radios are getting smarter all the time and with CR now a looming reality, we can gradually stop treating spectrum like real estate and more like the open skies. There is no technical reason why an airplane can't fly amidst congested air traffic as long as navigational rules are followed. The same applies to radio spectrum, with CR allowing radio equipment to adhere to strict rules of non-interference by seeking out unused bands instead of adhering to any particular bandwidth."

He goes on to say that TRS-MSC's development effort would focus on specific areas of the 802.22-complaint air interface, enabling equipment to function in the white spaces in spectrum allocated for TV broadcast. Talks are underway with US partners to collaborate on this effort as well as buy back the firmware developed.

While an initial target could be the American market, the real value of this technology is in the developing world, to enable a more universal distribution of telecoms services and especially broadband over unused bands in the UHF and VHF portions of radio spectrum. It is indeed heartening to hear of a Malaysian company aiming to play in the technology space and strive to be an early proponent.

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E&Y women finalist

Noraini Soltan,
Sipro Plastic Industries



For Noraini Soltan, the CEO of Sipro Plastic Industries, this is the second time she is taking part in the award. She was nominated a finalist.

Bolstered by her win last December in the Women Category of the Enterprise 50 awards, Noraini reckoned that entering again would be a good test for her company. "My confidence level is higher today than it was then and the recognition and higher profile of the winners will help, too," she says. With revenue of RM33.5 million in 2006 and an average growth rate of 30% over 10 years, she has reason to come to the competition with more confidence.

Indeed, Noraini will need a lot of confidence in herself and her team to weather the forces of globalisation and competition. Just before this interview, she met her team to discuss a strategy to cope with the increased visibility that customers want of her costing.

"Everybody is looking to cut costs and customers now want detailed costing from us and then squeeze our margins!" That is her biggest challenge, moving forward.

"Some customers are seriously looking at reducing their suppliers in a bid to ensure their own survival. We need to be on our toes to compete better across the board."

Fortunately, the plastics industry has been open to competition in Malaysia for a long time and this has helped Noraini and her peers face up to global competition. But

that is not what she is afraid of. "I am more fearful of our customers leaving the country to set up their plants elsewhere," she says. Her two key groups of customers are from the automotive and electrical and electronics sectors.

The company has been in existence for 15 years and has grown into a medium-sized entity. Noraini now faces a new task — upgrading her long-time staff to get them to think differently to meet future challenges. "We want to get the best people but we find that our mid-size has put them off; so we are focusing on growing the capabilities of our people while bringing in new ideas and energy."

She feels that it is important for entrepreneurs to be true to themselves. They must not make too many promises, which can cost them to lose the trust of their customers and partners. "Business is so tough that once you lose trust, you have given yourself a mountain to climb to rectify the problem. Know your strengths and weaknesses and play to them," she says.

— By Karamjit Singh