

IT Mavericks

BY: MUHAMMAD MURAD

Foreword

While analyzing the present and future IT industry in Pakistan this article aims at utilizing the available IT resources to build a sound marketable future for our younger generation.

It involves a unique business plan where we create a nucleus of IT clusters and communities. Although one has to do some tweaking but all in all this plan can be applied to any country and any business form where people can work together in communities.

PUBLISHED: May, 2004

Channo Ki Aankh Main Aik Nasha Hai (praising the intoxicating eyes of a girl called Channo)....., Ali Zafar (a Pakistani pop singer) was pouring his heart out and I, being void of such romantic mush, started thinking of my own Channo.... Now don't take me wrong! By "Channo" I mean the business of performing arts and the euphoria it has generated in Pakistan. Large Government investment is being made to promote this field and bring about a media revolution. We realise that we lag in an area and then we try to fill the gap by bringing about a revolution within it. For a fresh graduate or even an intermediate professional, be it business or IT, it is becoming frustratingly difficult to digest the reality of being under paid and over utilized. After going through years of testing, rigorous study, hard work and putting-in countless hours one ends up falling short of his monetary requirements and recognition. Whereas, drama artists, producers, singers, fashion designers, models and cricketers are being blessed with higher income scales and recognition. This entire scenario makes it difficult to attract young brains to the fields of IT, Engineering and Technology or any other field of research. The IT hype, if there ever was one in Pakistan, is non-existent. The new wave of concentration for these young minds is media and performing arts. Every other person is entering this arena and soon this too will be flooded. In order to stop such impulsive concentrations within our industries, we need to create simultaneous waves of alluring opportunities in all fields of specialization and this feature attempts to create one for IT.

Benchmarking

We often take India as a benchmark. So for the sake of it, if we look at the IT condition in India we would become aware that the Indian position in IT is not achieved overnight. It started as a movement with all related industries chipping in to take it through. The success of a handful of software companies changed the entire setting in India, whereas educational institutes and non-resident Indians played their roles to harness such a change. Things are not the same,

when we look at Pakistan. Firstly, the foundation of IT, that is the manpower, is not quality-oriented. It will take some time to filter out all the mushroomed institutions, which, in an attempt of making easy money, have been taking advantage of young and simple IT aspirants. Filtering out IT professionals is next. All those who came along just to be a part of the money making wave have, by now, left this field in search of other lucrative arenas. All that you have left for today and for tomorrow are some genuine IT lovers. This breed of IT ingenuity is the qualified bunch that can make a difference for Pakistan.

Building an It Community

The basic concept behind this approach is quite simple but the magnitude is huge. I would love to see Pakistan prosper in all fields of life but I know for a fact that in order to achieve such ambitions one needs to have a well planned strategy, firm execution and post execution management.

What I am putting forward is the concept of building IT communities. Imagine a situation where all the power available in Pakistan's IT sector is channelized to create clusters of strong IT groups working together to achieve a bigger objective. There is widespread unemployment and the IT sector is hit the hardest. Thousands of IT graduates, some very good, are forced to look to other means of living like sales and marketing. What if we create a pool of IT graduates? A non-governmental business organization! In terms of manpower this business organization could be larger than Microsoft. Microsoft translates into Bill Gates where as, the organization I am referring to would have Bill Gates everywhere.

What we are creating here is a critical mass of IT clusters. Clusters, translated into companies. Professionals working in such companies are not employees but have complete shareholder rights in the company. Isn't it better than being jobless! Working for your own company and getting pampered by the

government to make it big for Pakistan. Yes! The government has a role to play in this mix. We'll discuss that later, for the time being focus on the concept of such a community. These IT companies or groups, working under the banner of one organization, would definitely form the biggest IT organization, at least in Pakistan. What is required is a well-conceived plan to bring together all available resources under one roof and then direct this pool of collective energies to achieve some well-targeted objectives. Who knows we might be able to create something better than Windows.

Identifying Professional Resources

Carrying out this task would require a complete workout and an in-depth assessment of available resources and their allocation. Many of our brilliant IT minds have left Pakistan. Others who are not so fortunate stay behind and hope for their luck to shine or simply quit IT altogether. We need to identify all such professionals and put them in separate clusters of excellence and interests. It would be an open offer to all those IT professionals living in and outside Pakistan to join this organization. It is an organization of independent companies built around partnerships of business and IT professionals. By taking all the brilliant minds and leaving the less intelligent ones behind would not be fair either. We need to combine the best with the good, spread the knowledge and uplift the skills throughout the organization.

These individuals may come from various regions and cities. You don't need to put them all under one roof. They can be located in clusters, in various cities joined through a virtual private network. One may also find Pakistanis living abroad who are willing to be a part of this bigger objective. Once you have organized such a pool of professionals you may start organizing separate clusters based on professional skill-sets and provide an opportunity for these individuals to interact and learn about their business partners.

Next, we need to tap into our valuable foreign resource. Some may be financially sound who can help provide funding while others may be technically experienced and can be placed in our panel of consultants.

Clusters & Critical Mass

Although I had planned to bring this at a much later stage but for all those who are unclear on many aspects of this project I thought it would be wise to bring it now before someone starts feeling itchy. Up till now, what we have gathered is, that, we intend to create Pakistan's largest software giant and for this purpose we have asked interested IT professionals to work for this organization on a percentage sharing basis because the Government does not have enough finances to put them on a payroll and we don't have such lavish resources at our disposal either. Now what! There are many aspects of this ambitious plan, which need to be addressed before even putting it for a serious consideration. What we need to do now is to direct these IT groups towards separate goals, objectives or projects all netted together to form the bigger picture. I have been using the term "companies" and "clusters" a lot, let me define a cluster. Lets say there is a large group of Java Programmers, C and Visual C programmers you can put them in a separate company or cluster, all Oracle and Database experts can be put in another, Web and Multimedia professionals in a web based cluster while Media Developers and 3D Graphic Designers in another.

There can be another mix where we can chalk out separate areas of development. For example, a game development company can have clusters of interested individuals comprising of game programmers and 3D visualizers all strategically combined for the production of gaming software. Likewise, there can be a company specializing in developing software for cellular service providers. The Opportunities are huge and we only need to concentrate on the ones which suit our vision, professional expertise and future goals. In this way, we would be creating well-planned companies with technical and business expertise

functioning independently but conjoined to their sister concerns for resource and lead sharing purposes.

Developing Project Ideas

We now have a resource of IT professionals available to work on a profit sharing basis and we know what to do with this gigantic resource. In order to achieve the second phase of our project we need to have a sound database of projects and a well researched set of concentration areas for these IT groups. Projects don't always mean a qualified monetary return. By projects I mean qualified and potential projects. Software ideas can be translated into lucrative returns. You may have a project idea and upon research you come to know that your idea is marketable and financially viable then your idea qualifies to be a project.

We need to list the potential areas of concentration and prepare a well-analyzed list of potentially lucrative projects for our clusters. These projects and areas can be developed with the help of local and foreign IT and business experts who are willing to contribute. Locals can identify projects and viable areas of concentration within Pakistan while foreign consultants can help in developing a plan for foreign markets. It is imperative that we in Pakistan should start using our own software. By implementing them in Pakistan these IT groups can learn, test and improve upon their products. They would gain in confidence, establish a brand name (at least in Pakistan) and create some qualitatively satisfying examples for prospects outside Pakistan. A continuous search in identifying the right areas and the right projects for our clusters is the key.

The Government

Remember, I have not yet defined the role of the Government and this plan does require the help of our Government or some ambitious investor who can match the ambitions of this project. The least, the better! That would be the right definition for the role of Government. Right now, Government is investing a lot of

money on projects, helping a handful of individuals to inflate their income statements. That is a sheer waste! With an IT plan of such magnitude the return is far more than what these projects would give.

The Government can play a role in :

- providing free office space in major cities
- providing discounted utilities to these budding IT companies
- providing free Internet and infrastructure for virtual private networks
- providing computers and computer books as reference
- providing initial scholarship stipends to all those IT professionals who are brilliant and needy of such support (this can also be gathered through other sources of funding)
- providing support staff
- coordinating amongst various business sections and export hubs outside Pakistan
- refraining from meddling in the affairs of these clusters and letting them run their own business
- organizing road-shows and facilitating presence in international events for marketing
- completing the initial phase of the project, for example, collecting data on all IT professionals available for the project and tapping available foreign resource that can help train, lead and provide valuable consultation

The investment being sought from the Government is far less than what it normally invests in other projects yielding a far lesser return. For a project of this magnitude, the government can help in raising funds (if not possible within its own means) through International donor agencies and overseas Pakistanis who are willing to invest in the development of IT in Pakistan.

Preparing the Stage

Now that we have gone passed our initial preparation for our company of companies we need to devise a mechanism for a smooth working of these clusters. Either we put all our IT clusters under one big roof, and that would require a space as large as Microsoft or Boeing, or we disperse them in separate buildings. Remember, these professionals are coming from all over Pakistan and even abroad. What would be the right mix for creating a cohesive working environment? If you ask me, I would suggest a mix of separate office spaces in specific cities plus a virtual private network (VPN) for all those who either cannot be accommodated or don't have the means to stay within physical reach. Companies can have their own separate portions within a building thus accommodating a lot of companies in a single building. The Virtual Network would also facilitate communication amongst all centres, provide online knowledge and resource sharing, assign and share work files and manage workflows.

Management & Leadership

Perhaps the most important part of this entire project is the leadership. It is the driving force working behind the scenes, creating solid processes of communication within the clusters and managing timely completion of projects. Every company under this scheme would have a Project Leader and a Company Head responsible for managing resources, project timelines and fostering coordination within the group and its peers. There is a sound requirement for marketing consultants who can provide domestic and foreign leads, prospective contracts and build strategies to establish a brand name, customer relations and support. For performance appraisal needs, there can be a central body of volunteers who can analyze the performance of individual companies and provide an impartial judgement. Many, local and overseas Pakistanis would be willing to volunteer their services for such a project.

The plan is quite ambitious, but not impossible. Graduates and Masters who stay jobless for long can safely invest their time and energies in building and working for a company of their own and the Government, instead of going for an investment spread can have a targeted approach. Fresh would learn from experienced and Intermediates would gain from experts. The overall impact of such sharing would result in a qualitative uplift of these IT professionals and companies. A project of this magnitude is bound to catch local and foreign investment. With competitive costing and a targeted approach we can prepare ourselves to offer value added services to lucrative markets in future.

Although, it would be ideal for the Government to take up this plan and build upon it, but it's not necessary that we always look towards the Government for support, we may start building our own IT clusters. All that is required is a little determination and collaboration. I'm sure we would find a lot of like-minded IT enthusiasts willing to join our circle. Imagine! If we can only start building these IT circles now, we'd be developing a community of IT Mavericks moulded in precarious situations to meet future challenges. This plan may require some tweaking. It is still an open debate and anyone can chip in to develop this according to his requirements.

My clusters comprise of a host of individuals joining hands as businesses and technical partners. You need to gather enough manpower to fulfil your technical and business needs. Don't worry if you don't know the guy. In theory, such a mix would breed individuals having similar behavioural patterns, making yours and your partner's life a lot easier. We need to be realistic about the current situation and make some selfless concerted efforts to win this battle. Grow with others, collectively, we win! This is the essence and it should remain intact.