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'The Smart Island' is in the making

Martin Debattista

"There is no such thing as too ambitious. Not working as hard as our competitors and letting them over-take us is a real possibility however."

This is the warning made by the Minister for Investments, Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) Austin Gatt in an interview with i-Tech on the recently launched draft National ICT Strategy for Malta 2008-2010.

As reported last week, the draft strategy is setting the ambitious objective that by 2010, Malta will become one of the top 10 information societies in the world. The application of information and communication technologies will be ubiquitous, the internet will be a social equaliser and the ICT industry will be an economic pillar.

"Targets are not set with political safety in mind," insisted the minister. "They are admittedly ambitious but they are set out in the knowledge that we are not alone in the world and if we are to compete we have to make an effort to be ahead of others in some aspects of the information society and economy."

Some observers had already labelled the targets set in the previous ICT strategy as too ambitious. However, Dr Gatt insisted he is especially satisfied with how government managed to boost the country's capacity to train new ICT human resources, with the educational incentives created, the EU-leading e-government deployed, the improved national infrastructure everyone enjoys today, the multiple vertical strategic alliances signed, the terrific take-up of ICT by households and with the ICT investment government managed to attract.

"Areas which I think still need more effort are those of affordability and take-up of e-commerce. Otherwise most of the other target areas have been satisfactorily achieved," he said.

The new draft strategy provides another list of objectives and lists that have to be attained by 2010 and, once again, the issue of ambition crops up.

For example i-Tech asked the minister how can an operational Malta eMall with 500 online merchants be successfully launched when surveys show there is still some lack of confidence in local e-commerce, or how can 200 new ICT companies be set up in Malta when local companies are already facing expansion problems because of lack of human resources as reported by this newspaper recently.

Citing e-banking as an example, Dr Gatt insisted Maltese consumers have a "striking confidence" in e-commerce and they use it.

"What should concern the local business community is that consumers buy on line from overseas retailers. Most local firms are too small and too ill equipped to offer added value on line. We feel we have to intervene by supporting the set up of an eMall infrastructure to break this disheartening mould."

As for adequate human resources to support the new ICT companies, the minister remarked that "it should be remembered that last year alone 36 per cent of all the investment we attracted from outside the country was in ICT companies. True, human resources are an issue but, we have made huge strides in meeting that problem and there is no reason to believe we will not keep up our momentum. This scholastic year, over 2,260 students are studying ICT at Mcast and the University, a good number more than the 700 taking the same programmes in 2002. We can do more and we will".

Nevertheless, importing foreign workers is still an option, but Minister Gatt gives a very important reassurance.

"Let me make one thing clear at the outset: Maltese ICT experts will always have the first preference in our operations. This was also reflected in the SmartCity agreement, wherein we entrenched a clear principle to this effect. Obviously this has to be done with the context of us being in the EU.

"Having said that, our draft strategy is clear - we aim at consistently operating at full employment of local talent and complementing that with the brightest minds from anywhere in the world - we want these specialists to think of Malta in their short list of favourite places they would like to train and work in.

"Today I am proud to note that the problem we have is one of full employment in the ICT field! That shows how strong our



IT Minister Austin Gatt wants Malta as a country to be recognised as The Smart Island and not just the host of SmartCity.

success in promoting this market has been."

Such a strategy was expected to have direct references to SmartCity Malta. Indeed the term "smart" is mentioned around 50 times in the document, with no fewer than 21 references to SmartCity alone.

"For us SmartCity is a cornerstone of our strategy. In fact it is clearly defined as being a landscape determinant of the entire strategy. "Having said that, we're already looking beyond SmartCity even now. The strategy wants to target the American and Indian markets for companies offering ICT services in business process outsourcing, shared services, software support, training, sales and logistics. We are looking at grouping ICT clusters in the maritime, financial services, e-government, digital media and hospitality segments. We are seeking to cultivate ICT start-ups and help established Maltese companies to grow.

"Clearly what we are looking at is taking all the benefits as a nation from being the hosts of SmartCity. But what we are also looking for is making our entire country recognised and known as 'The Smart Island'."

The consultation process on the draft National ICT Strategy for Malta 2008-2010 will last through to the end of the year. A revised version will then be submitted to Cabinet and when approved, it will be published in December next year.

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