Shortage of software designers hamstrings Thailand

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Pattaya — Although Thailand has made remarkable progress in host of ways a scarcity of computer software designers is a major handicap in its information technology industry, Harsh Sethi, CEO of Neon Infotech Southeast Asia Co., Ltd. said at the Intergraph conference held here recently.

While new computer engineers do join the industry every year it is also evident that most have chosen to specialize in consumption and production areas of the software technology.

"Most of our engineers are on the consumption part so that's our weakness. You can also find a lot of engineers on the production side but when it comes to the front-end, the main design part, there we need to educate our people, our engineers, that they should rise to this discipline too.

"Doing so would help build our expertise and boost our advantage while giving us a technical cost benefit over other regional countries."

"This is where we should put all efforts because right now it's focused on consumption."

Mr. Sethi added that this is one major reason his company together with Intergraph, which is a global provider of engineering and geospatial software, holds this type of conference regularly.

"We are trying to promote it and bridge the gap between academia and the industry."

Thomas Doran, Intergraph's executive vice president for Asia Pacific, said Asians are as advanced and aggressive in utilizing information technology as anywhere else in the world.

"Of course you have some countries where they are unable to be quite as forward thinking but if you look at Korea for example, it's the most efficient shipbuilder in the world."

Mr. Sethi said, "No doubt about it, they can make ships and they make lots of them and they are huge too, huge large-capacity vessels. Korean shipbuilders are among the prominent builders in the world."

Singapore too is well-respected for its skills in building oil rigs while Japan has one of the most efficient shipyards in the world although it makes smaller vessels and not the large ones that Koreans produce.

"So now they have deployed the system across the board, for example Thai Oil, the whole group is using it and 16 plants of PTT Chemical are using it," Mr. Sethi said.

However Chai Kang For, Intergraph's vice president for Asia Pacific, mentioned that plant operators are not really pushing the boundaries as far as IT control of their plants is concerned because they prefer using systems that have been tested and validated and are not keen on testing new programs in this sort of environment.

On the other hand executives of these plants are currently raising a few bars in the technical area because they now require land environment technology for their plants with this being the advantage of companies such as Intergraph.

In fact businesses and governments in more than 60 countries rely on Intergraph's industry specific software to organize vast amounts of data to make processes and infrastructure better, safer and smarter.

In Thailand PTT Maintenance and Engineering Company (PTTME), the engineering, procurement and construction services subsidiary of PTT, Chemicals Pte Ltd uses Intergraph's SmartPlant Enterprise solutions including SmartPlant 3D and SmartPlant Layout and will use the Intergraph technology as the standard platform for all PTT Chemical plants. Thai Oil Pte also uses this suite of programs.

"We started with companies like PTTME, PTT Chem and Thai Oil by offering a small help, some small solution and when they found that these solutions worked and helped their operations while also boosting efficiency we gained their trust and that trust grew."

"We have lots of business in the engineering community but we also have an equal amount of business in the owner-operator community."

Mr. Sethi mentioned that his company actually had to change its focus from green field projects to ground field ones with the latter meaning plants that are already existing which have issues related to their management of data and information.

Actually it is easier to install software in new factories than changing them in existing ones but this shift was necessary because new plants were either not being built or not completed because of the Map To Plut environment issues among other hurdles.

The software that large industries use can also help small and medium enterprises with Mr. Chai revealing that smaller engineering companies undertaking plant changes also use Intergraph software.

"There are local companies using it or they participate in larger projects."

Mr. Doran mentioned that Intergraph has another set of software which is a friendlier product for smaller, less complex projects and this was part of its acquisition of COADE Holdings Inc. in Houston, Texas, last year.

"We have the Caesar II product which everybody uses from big projects to small projects but we also have a design software package called CADWorx which is made for smaller, less complicated projects. CADWorx runs on AutoCAD and we use it as a tool for those kinds of purposes."

Despite these technological wonders one must not forget the damage to the environment when something goes wrong as happened when BPs oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico last year.

"Unfortunately technology can only do so much. You know there are human beings that run facilities and you can't escape the fact that there are problems, errors, incorrect decision - that just happens."

Although the 2008-2009 economic crash affected the whole world including the computer industry and its vital software arm, it seems Intergraph sailed through this difficult period quite smoothly with Mr. Doran revealing that this is mainly due to the company's business model.