

Death by 'tectonic' fault

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Comment

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THE world is about to witness a "tectonic" shift induced by the iPad. It is expected to result in a new, qualitatively different experience compared with a conventional personal computer.

For starters, it is packed with much more sophisticated functionality for fingertip interface. It is light, easy to operate and portable. It is no more than a tablet with a relatively large screen. Some liken it to a Nokia-Kindle-Nintendo machine interconnecting seamlessly. It is a communication gadget-cum-reader-and-game device rolled into one — available simultaneously at multi-touch.

The resulting "tectonic" wave is bound to redefine the e-experience since the days of modern electronic inventions, especially when its full potential is realised over time. One reviewer suggests ordering meals in restaurants with an iPad or even reaching out to outer space where the constellations can be laid out in front of your eyes in a split second. Even churches have shown interest in its application. So it is little wonder that the technology-savvy generation in particular is rather impatient to lay its hands on the new gadget. Many are willing to camp outside stores so that they can grab one when it goes on sale; others have placed orders well in advance. Malaysians generally are still waiting for their turn, though there are those who have already purchased one overseas.

However, no matter how revolutionary the "tectonic" experience, the backroom scene at Foxconn, which produces the iPad for Apple Inc., has not changed at all. Its workplace is linked to a number of suicide cases. Foxconn, dubbed the world's largest electronic contract manufacturer, has churned out a number of electronic devices, including iPhones. It is saddled with such a problem said to be the tip of the iceberg.

So far, at least 10 workers have taken their own lives. At a recent press conference after the tragedy, the management was still in denial and at a loss for reasons for the suicides.

But not so among the workers who toiled at the assembly lines. One employee described that "life seemed meaningless" attributing it to the inhumane and tough work culture imposed on the staff to maintain high productivity. It is not surprising that last year, the company's nett income reportedly leaped to US\$2.3 billion (RM7.4 billion) — purported to be its second best on record.

The scenario is not new if we recall a similar incident in the early 1990s involving Nike, which is famed for its sweatshop factories in Asia.

This had caused a global uproar that threatened Nike's reputation as a worldwide brand which promotes the spirit of goodwill in sport. Some even boycotted the label until it changed its ways.

And the company was forced to make amends. Somehow this time around, the damage is under control since consumers are still very much dazzled by the novelty of iPad. In fact the company is quickly making compensatory moves to quell the disquiet.

But the storyline remains the same: in the pursuit of a lucrative bottomline, the human cost attached to it isn't a priority, and this is common in places where human labour is regarded as cheap, ready to be exploited.

It tends to happen in Asia and involves a low-cost manufacturing foreign concern.

Malaysia, too, has its tragic moments of Minah karan in the many assembly lines of electronics factories. The excitement for the devices is somewhat missing at the site where they are produced.

Perhaps, it is too harsh to call this phenomenon modern-day slavery, but to label it as such will not be far from the truth as the world is not exactly "flat". While we enjoy our iPad moments, it is worthwhile to examine our conscience as we step into the brave new world of technology.

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