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Survey of **Barbados**

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On Saturday morning in Bridgetown, many people are preparing for a day on the beach. One group, however, has more serious matters on its mind: how to meet a fast-growing software development company's increasing demand for computer skills.

The company is the Knowledge Development Institute, a US- Barbadian joint venture that already employs 38 programmers in Bridgetown - average age about 22 - involved in the quality control and testing of business programmes developed elsewhere. So successful has been its initial entry into this field - and the error rate so low - that there are prospects for a lot more business.

KDI, says Mr Tyrone Mowatt, the Boston-based joint head of the organisation, also needs skills in multimedia, animated video production, computer graphics and applications design. Nearly all of the people employed so far have come through an associate degree course at the local community college. The course is aimed at making sure that there are enough programmers emerging into the market in the coming years to meet the potential demand.

The Saturday meeting is chaired by Mr Phillip Goddard, a successful Barbadian businessman who is now deputy minister of the newly-named portfolio of foreign affairs, foreign trade and international business. Besides Mr Mowatt, a New Yorker of Jamaican extraction, are Mr Basil Springer, his Barbadian partner in KDI and also managing director of the Systems Caribbean consulting firm, Ms Norma Holder, principal of the **Barbados** Community College and Mr Vincent Branker, acting head of the computer studies department at the college.

For Mr Goddard, the development of computer expertise in **Barbados** will be one of the keys to the country's development over the next decade. Get this right, he says, and national income could triple to Dollars 14,000 to Dollars 16,000 a head over the next few years. Mr Owen Arthur, the prime minister, is also convinced of the importance of computer technology. As a symbol of this, he is planning to embark on a computer course being run at a local secondary school so that he can join the ranks of the computer-literate.

Barbados has the raw material provided by an education system which has not suffered the degradation of many others in the region. It has produced one of the most literate societies anywhere in the western hemisphere.

High quality communications links also support the island's ambitions, though informatics companies complain that - despite a recent reduction negotiated by the government in telephone charges - their telephone bills are several times higher than they would be in the US. They also argue that to make the leap into a major centre for software development the government needs to tighten its copyright legislation.

Nonetheless, based on his experience so far, Mr Mowatt believes that this leap towards a technologically-based

economy is a genuine possibility. Such small economies can develop rapidly provided they are open to foreign technology and foreign expertise, he says, citing Singapore as a prime example.

He says he is already confident in telling clients in the US that KDI can undertake software development projects at rates at least 25 per cent cheaper than clients can obtain elsewhere - with an accuracy second to none.

Mr Mowatt says KDI is willing to provide a pilot training programme for those graduating from the community college - whose output he prefers to that from graduates at the local campus of the University of West Indies, who he says he has to 'untrain'. In fact, KDI could mount the programme just after graduation in mid-July through the summer holidays.

However, to avoid bottlenecks because of a shortage of trained people, it has been agreed that the college needs to expand the number of people being trained and to upgrade the equipment that the students are using: its current 386 computers are not adequate to the task. At the moment, says Mr Branker, the college is accepting only 20 to 30 per cent of the qualified applicants for the two-year associate degree course, which some 65 people are currently undertaking. A further 87 are taking day or evening classes for a certificate in information technology.

It has been decided to expand the intake on the associate degree course from one to three streams from next September, and to go ahead with KDI's pilot training programme. More space needs to be found and more state-of-the-art equipment. Mr Goddard reckons the government may need to spend as much as Dollars 500m over the next five years on computer equipment for schools and elsewhere - which with current constraints on the budget will be far from easy.

Mr Branker is concerned about the logistics of expanding the classes, believing, unlike most of the others, that the 386 computers at the college could be kept. He is concerned lest his classes seem like little more than a training school for KDI. But he is told that his students will enter a free market and are free to work for whom they please.

Mr Mowatt says KDI is 'on its way to becoming the largest software company in the Caribbean'. But, more importantly than that, it is showing the way forward for **Barbados** and other developing countries to provide high quality jobs for a growing workforce.

However, KDI is not the only informatics company around. Others such as Caribbean Data Services, a sister company to American Airlines, are said to be moving to provide higher value added. Some estimates suggest only a fifth of its activity consists of just direct keyboarding of data and an increasing amount of its work - and that of other companies present on the island such as Manulife and RR Donnelley of Chicago - involves more complex work such as the processing of medical insurance claims.

Furthermore, government officials say a software development company is close to announcing its intention to establish a presence on **Barbados**, a move which would entail the entry to the island of as many as 100 foreign programmers. This would entail in the initial phase jobs for some two dozen Barbadians, although this would rise, perhaps considerably, over time.

Mr Goddard and others see little alternative but to grant work permits in order to ensure the transfer of skills and technology. The issue does not appear divisive politically. Mr David Thompson, leader of the opposition Democratic Labour Party, says that if granting work permits brings jobs to **Barbados**, he will be in favour.

'If a high quality company wants to set up here and needs 50 work permits and they are going to employ 50 Bajans, we are going to welcome them,' says Mr Lawson Nurse, chief executive officer of **Barbados** Investment and Development Corporation.

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