Business Times - October 16, 2002

NTUC Income leads initiative to offer Web services

Services like job matching and bill payment will be available By Kenneth James

MAJOR local insurance player NTUC Income has emerged as the linchpin of an ambitious effort to offer a new class of Web-based community services to businesses and consumers nationwide.

The initiative, dubbed Big Trumpet, will offer services ranging from job applications to storage of sensitive data to bill payments, all accessible from one portal, www.bigtrumpet.com.sg

Singapore is going big on Web services because of its huge growth potential. In April, the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA) and software leader Microsoft Corp launched .Net MySingapore, a collaborative effort to develop Web services based on an industry standard called XML (eXtensible Markup Language), and using Microsoft Corp's .Net technology. Government agencies and private sector partners have committed $14 million to the initiative so far.

Underlining the commitment of the key partners, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer flew in for yesterday's .Net MySingapore announcements, while Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong was guest of honour at the official launch of Big Trumpet.

At a press conference to introduce new partners, IDA chairman Lam Chuan Leong reiterated: 'We have identified Web services as one of the areas that Singapore can play a leadership role, and become an engine of growth for our software and IT services industry.

Mr Ballmer described .Net MySingapore as 'really at the forefront of anything I've seen anywhere in the world'. He lauded the collaboration between government and the private sector to develop a 'living lab' for XML Web services as 'the right vision and the right partnership'.

Mr Lam announced that the Institute of Systems Science will develop a curriculum for full-time and part-time diploma, graduate and Masters students. Other new partners introduced yesterday included National Computer Systems, which is developing the software powering much of .Net MySingapore, Hewlett-Packard Co, and Trusted Hub, a Singapore Technologies company that provides a secure electronic vault for sensitive data.

IDA and Microsoft are also jointly sponsoring a programme aimed at giving local software developers closer access to Microsoft's Redmond, Washington campus. This will help put the firms on the fast track in developing and marketing their XML software.

For sheer immediate impact, though, Big Trumpet takes centre stage. NTUC Income CEO Tan Kin Lian noted: 'Many portals can claim to offer similar services, but may not be able to match our range of services, ease of use and the intensityof their usage.

Four sets of services are ready for use. MyCareer includes job-matching services which draw on data from the Ministry of Manpower. Other services target home-related needs such as hiring contractors and locating tutors; insurance and financial planning needs; and use of a secure data vault. More services are in the pipeline.

Services are free for six to 12 months, after which 'very reasonable' fees will be charged.In order to reach people who do not have access to computers, there are plans to hire 5,000 Community Net agents who, for a fee, will perform online services for their neighbours and teach them to use the portal.

Mr Tan said he expected 100,000 users of Big Trumpet by the end of the year, with 300,000 registered by the end of 2003.

Big Trumpet had also approached 50 potential business partners and response had been 'absolutely enthusiastic', Mr Tan said.

After that, with 800 cities having populations of over half a million, the world will be Big Trumpet's market, he declared.