

Computerizing Ethiopia

by Daniel Yacob

Ato Daniel Admassie, partner and founder of OmniTech, was stuck with a problem. It is 1982, he is in Sweden, and his PhD advisor has asked for his assistance to write samples of Ge'ez text. Daniel doesn't like his own handwriting and he doesn't have the skill of a calligrapher and cannot pen the script in its expected elegance. The work is more than a little tedious, shouldn't these new "Personal Computers" that are all the rage be able to eliminate this kind of tedium? Daniel has another problem; it is 1982 and computers don't work with Amharic. Yet. It's not just a software limitation but also of hardware in these early days. Daniel is undeterred.

This was the problem that dragged Daniel Admassie into the field of computerization where he has been ever since. Following his trail of achievements, we find a long road of obstacles put before him that he has endeavoured to overcome. When the government invited him to follow up his early success with what was perhaps the first Amharic computer, he was presented with yet a bigger problem -the government had no computer research center. He would have to make one for the government. This research center that Daniel was put in charge of establishing and managing was the National Computer Center (now the National Computer and Information Center) where as many as 11 software products, including DOS itself were made Amharic.

When governments changed, he left the NCC to work in the commercial world with InfoTech. After a short time, the call of problem solving returned to him. He came to realize that his partners did not share the same interest in software development that Daniel did and that if he wanted to continue developing software, he would have to found yet another company to do so.

This next company would be OmniTech where he works as General Manager and Senior Systems Analyst since 1990. Since that time Daniel has been in and out of the different branches of government, the private business sector and NGOs tailor designing solutions for process of computerization. With an intimate view of the city and the nation's information and computerization problems he has been able to identify commonality in the issues faced by all and has matured some thoughts on a solution process that he shares with PC Ethiopia:

What can you tell us about the state of computing in Ethiopia at the present?

"This is not a traditional industry, it is knowledge intensive and not land or capital intensive. The development of computer technology is progressing every day and is making computers powerful, fast, and accessing all areas of society. Computerization in Ethiopia is at an early stage and I see that organizations are not given good solutions. That is a problem but not the only problem. There also needs to be a technology transfer. The potential impact of technology transfer to the private and government sectors is to huge to be dealt with by OmniTech alone.

Therefore, the government should encourage growth in this industry and apply new approaches. What I would suggest is have a rating system for software companies, computing and systems analysis standards, guidelines and tax breaks."

How do you see the future of computing and software development in Ethiopia?

“Software is a 1.3 trillion-dollar industry and continually growing. Ethiopia does not need to be software consumer only”, says Ato Daniel. “So many programs in various fields are needed every year and new application areas are also coming into existence every year.”

“Software programs designed in the developed countries are very much respected. However, there are not enough programmers in the west that can meet the growing software needs. Consequently, the price for western programmers is shooting up, so they need subcontractors. I do not mean that an Ethiopian software house will compete in the market, no it will not, but we can take subcontracts like they are doing in India and Pakistan.”

At OmniTech we have been developing Ethiopic software for some years to meet the local needs. In the course of this we are acquiring a team of software experts that are refining their working methods to reach the standard of software development so that we can be attractive for foreign markets as well.

This is a knowledge intensive industry and with educated people in Ethiopia and given the resources required after a certain period we will grow up to a level of exporting software to the developed economies.