

BOTS

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The silver lining

The pandemic may have disrupted lives and businesses but it has also been a boon to some technologies, writes **Izwan Ismail**

YOU would have foreseen the global disruption brought on the Covid-19 virus over the past year, which has forced countries to close their borders and halt their economies.

The new normal, as it is now known, includes a halt to face-to-

face events and physical conferences. Even schools have had to close.

Despite the troubles brought on by the pandemic, a number of technologies and companies have benefited from the disruption. Here are some of the businesses and technological innovations that have flourished throughout this pandemic year.



The use of online meeting platforms has been prevalent since the onset of the Movement Control Order in March.

ONLINE CONFERENCE PLATFORMS

Prior to the pandemic, online communications platforms like Zoom, Cisco Webex and Microsoft Team, to name a few, were "alien" to most of us.

Only those who have been working remotely and have had to collaborate with their teams from different locales were familiar with these online platforms.

With the onset of Covid-19 and the subsequent disruptions to businesses, these platforms have become household technology almost overnight.

Thanks to the availability of fast broadband, the adoption of these online communication platforms has been generally smooth even though issues like invasion of privacy surfaced at the initial stage.

With the increased use of online meeting platforms, invitations to virtual meetings and events have become the order of the day as more and more employees work from home.

Audio and visual online technologies not only mean that there is now no necessity for employees to travel to and from office, but they also get to save a lot on daily expenditure.

For companies that provide these online communications platforms, the business outlook has become rosy. Unified communications is now the new catchphrase.

According to the International Data Corporation (IDC) Worldwide Quarterly Unified Communications and Collaboration QView report, worldwide unified communications and collaboration revenue grew 25.1 per cent year over year. In the second quarter of 2020, the figure was 12.4 per cent or US\$11.5 billion.

With most country borders still not open yet and events still done online, it looks like online communications platforms will continue to flourish in the near future.



Cloud computing has seen a big jump in adoption rate this year.

CLOUD COMPUTING

Cloud computing has seen a big jump in its adoption this year, thanks to the pandemic, which resulted in companies providing related applications and security as employees work from home.

According to market research company Gartner, the worldwide end-user spending on public cloud services is forecast to grow 18.4 per cent next year to US\$304.9 billion, up from US\$257.5 billion this year.

The pandemic validated cloud's value proposition, said Gartner's research vice president, Sid Nag.

"The ability to use on-demand, scalable cloud models to achieve cost efficiency and business continuity is providing the impetus for organisations to rapidly accelerate their digital business transformation plans.

"The increased use of public cloud services has reinforced cloud adoption to be the "new normal," now more than ever.

"The pandemic forced organisations to quickly focus on three priorities: preserve cash and optimise IT costs, support and secure a remote workforce, and ensure resiliency," said Nag.

QR CODE

Although it was invented nearly two decades ago, QR Code had never been an important piece of technology to most of us before the pandemic.

Its use has always been limited to niche places like museums and restaurants where people scan the code to get more information on what's being displayed or served.

With the spread of Covid-19, this "almost forgotten" innovation has become one of the most-used technologies by people worldwide this year.

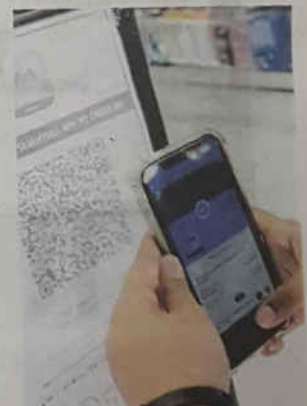
With people not wanting to touch almost anything and the need to "check in" when entering any premises, the QR Code has become the preferred solution.

The high smartphone penetration rate and availability of related QR Code apps have made it more relevant to us all.

Besides being a "registration" mechanism before entering any premises, QR Code is also popular in contactless delivery, contactless pickup and, most importantly, contactless payments.

For Malaysians, scanning the MySejahtera QR code is now commonplace, almost a habit, albeit it being legally compulsory. In fact, we sometimes even scan a few other codes generated by shops before we are allowed in.

QR Code technology has also helped the government gather data and do contact



The QR code technology has helped the government gather data and carry out contact tracing for Covid-19.

tracing for Covid-19.

The MySejahtera app, for instance, has to date recorded 1.7 billion cumulative check-ins to registered premises using the QR Code scan with an average of 15 million check-ins daily.

This is one technology that is definitely going to stay with us for some time.

Meteoric rise in e-commerce

TEMPERATURE SENSORS

Besides QR codes, we have also seen an increase in the use of high-tech temperature sensors at all premises.

It has become a norm and a legal necessity that our body temperature be checked first before we are allowed to enter.

From just the use of a simple digital thermometer at the beginning of the pandemic, temperature sensors have advanced to those which can scan and determine individual body temperature with just a walk-by the scanner's perimeter or a glance at a screen. These can be found at private hospitals and even some malls and offices.

According to business-to-business research company MarketsandMarkets, the global temperature sensor market is projected to grow from US\$6.3 billion in 2020 to US\$8.8 billion by 2027, recording a compound annual growth rate of 4.8 per cent.

The temperature sensor industry growth is driven mainly by increased use of these sensors in advanced and portable healthcare equipment. There is also a growing demand for temperature sensors in the automotive sector. Rising adoption of home and building automation systems is also a factor.



There is an increase in usage of high-tech temperature sensors at malls.



Online learning and teaching is now an integral part of education.

ONLINE LEARNING

For the first time ever, students, teachers and lecturers have had to quickly adopt online learning and teaching as schools and universities shuttered because of the pandemic.

Despite the many challenges, the teaching and learning process continued with the help of technologies, such as Google Classroom, Zoom and WhatsApp. Many teachers even went the extra mile by creating YouTube channels to impart knowledge not just to their own students but to everyone who desired to learn.

Local telecommunication companies Celcom, Digi, Maxis, UMobile and Telekom Malaysia are also doing their part by offering attractive Internet packages to B40 households and examination candidates.

According to a Bernama report, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission said the initiative in the first quarter of next year involves special data packages for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) candidates until the examinations end in April.

Prepaid data passes at RM20 for 15GB for 30-day periods will be available from Jan 6.

As for the Learning From Home (LFH) facility provided by YTL, MCMC said it has been extended until the two examinations are over. Students from B40 families will be provided with a free SIM card with 40GB data, content as well as a free telephone.

Celcom, Digi, Maxis, TM and YTL will also continue their free online classes, according to the report.



This year has seen a high demand for food delivery services.

FOOD DELIVERY SERVICES

With regulations on movement restrictions and social distancing, food delivery services such as Grab Food, Foodpanda, Honestbee and Dahmakan have seen a rise in demand for their services.

According to Acumen Research and Consulting, the Malaysia online food delivery market is expected to reach over US\$319.1 million by 2026.

Besides the pandemic factor, changing lifestyles and the appeal of online food ordering are also said to be the factors that drive the food delivery services.

Grab Malaysia managing director Sean Goh said that Malaysia has gone through

"a challenging patch filled with uncertainty this year".

However, he added that local businesses have undeniably also benefited from the shift online.

"There are countless stories of traditional businesses reaping the benefits of digital transformation. Our aim is to ensure that as a platform, we provide businesses with an additional avenue to generate sales.

"All in the ecosystem — merchants-partners, delivery riders and customers — have benefited and we will continue to come up with solutions and innovations that benefit everyone," he added.

ONLINE SHOPPING

With malls and shops closed or partially open from the onset of the Movement Control Order (MCO) period, online shopping has become one of the favourite pastimes of Malaysians.

According to GlobalData's E-Commerce Analytics, Malaysia's e-commerce market is estimated to register 24.7 per cent growth this year.

This is expected to reach RM51.6 billion by 2024, increasing at a compound annual growth rate of 14.3 per cent between 2020 and 2024.

"Malaysia is among the fastest-growing e-commerce markets in Southeast Asia, driven by rising Internet and smartphone penetration, growing middle class population and tech-savvy millennials," said Nikhil Reddy, an analyst with GlobalData.

"The fear of the virus spreading through cash handling and physical stores has further accelerated this growth."

Besides that, initiatives by the government via the National Economic Recovery Plan (Penjana) — in particular, the Penjana micro and SME e-commerce campaign — have also boosted the e-commerce market and helped small businesses.



Online shopping has become a favourite pastime of Malaysians.

To date, the campaign has onboarded more than 30,000 new micro SMEs onto the e-commerce bandwagon.

Through Penjana Shop Malaysia Online, more than RM400 million in sales have been generated by local retailers and traders via various e-commerce platforms.

For platforms like Shopee and Lazada, 2020 is definitely one of the best years in e-commerce.

The success of shopping campaigns such as 7.7, 9.9, 11.11 and the recent 12.12 shows that online shopping has become a preferred way of buying things among Malaysians.