Thailand needs to quickly pass the Data Privacy Act if it is to avoid being left out of the world's IT and business process outsourcing (BPO) boom, according to Natasak Rodjanapiches, managing director of Oracle ASEAN.

Other requirements include a need for strong security standards, interoperability standards as well as the legal and privacy frameworks that are needed for a knowledge-based industry to flourish.

"Nobody will feel secure outsourcing to Thailand if the legal and privacy framework is still so uncertain. The interim government has an opportunity to do something good for the industry now by passing this law quickly," he said.

Natasak was still working with Bell Canada in 1987, but recalls how the early 80s witnessed the rise of a client-server architecture, and with it the rise of a small database start-up called Oracle that would one day take-on and win the business market away from mainframes and minicomputers.

Natasak joined Oracle in Thailand in 1997 and, despite the financial crisis, still remembers the atmosphere of the dot-com era. "I felt a buzz, a realisation that the Internet was going to change things, both for companies and for individuals," he said.

Oracle Thailand focussed on setting up incubators during the dot-com boom in an attempt to help grow the Thai software market. This involved support for the establishment of Software Park Thailand and thaiincubator.com.

It was also during the dot-com era that Oracle set up a portal, thailandmarketplace.com, in order to act as an exchange for service providers, venture capital funds and users of IT services to meet.

Looking back, Natasak regrets Thailandmarketplace.com not taking off as it had all the right parties and the right ideas in trying to take on various market verticals. The project was a joint project by Oracle, Pricewaterhouse consulting and others, but unfortunately the venture capital they had lined up decided otherwise and abandoned the project.

Natasak remembers landing two large accounts for IT outsourcing in Thailand. These were for Thai companies that were Oracle's partners. Oracle Thailand had fought hard to convince them to bring their IT systems to Thailand. One was GE aircraft engines and the other was Motorola's PCS division.

"GE was looking to roll out systems in Asia, and this was the time of a lot of tension between India and Pakistan over their nuclear tests. They wanted to diversify, so I convinced them to come and visit Oracle Thailand and see what we had to offer," he said.

Natasak regards the Oracle Academic Initiative Programme and Think.com education project as major milestones in Oracle's presence in Thailand.

Today, as the boss of Oracle in Asean, Natasak is in a unique position to reflect on what Thailand has done right relative to our neighbours. Interestingly enough, he said that we were all similar and all struggling with politicians and bureaucrats who do not truly understand the concept of ICT.
The exception is Singapore, which Natasak feels is the only country to have a clear mandate and policy and, most importantly, a clear policy for public-private partnerships (PPP) - a clear distinction that many other countries still lack.

However, he questioned what we were referring to when we talk about the ICT industry. Was it an industry of technology companies? Or a socio-political driver to bridge the digital divide and move society forward?

"Because the expectations of industry and government are so different, participation by both stakeholders is necessary. If you cannot understand the private sector, you can't write a master plan that works," he said.

He cited Singapore Management University as an example, which recently launched an enterprise grid architecture course. The academics have little knowledge about bleeding-edge grid computing and rely on the private sector and Oracle. However, neither could have done it alone, but together they have made a new, cutting-edge curriculum for their students which has the backing of a university rather than just a manufacturer-branded course.

Natasak said that the world is today on the cusp of what he terms the participative age, exemplified in YouTube and IP telephony. "Our children will have to be well versed in multiple languages, in technology, and in finding our niche in the global economy," he said.