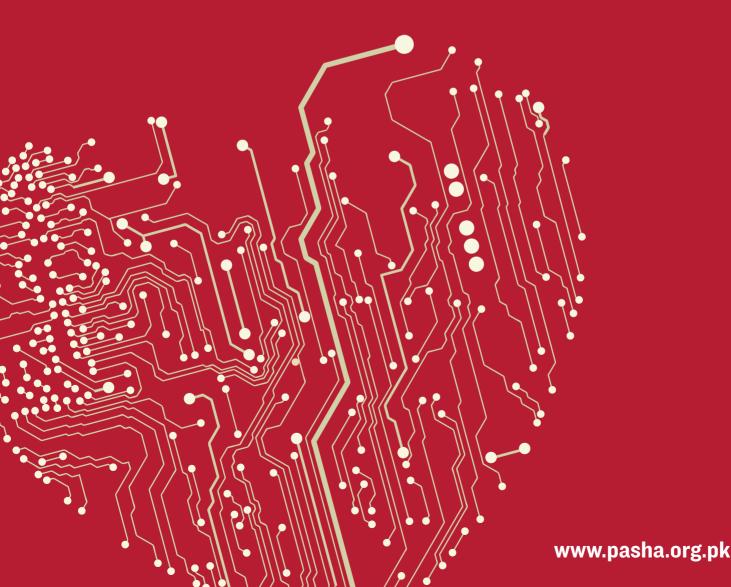# PAKISTAN SOFTWARE HOUSES ASSOCIATION FOR IT & ITES

A PASSION FOR P@SHA

A PASSION
FOR P@SHA

Jehan Ara, president of the Pakistan Software Houses Association for IT & ITES, talks about the role of P@SHA in developing the technology sector in Pakistan, and in helping to set policy standards for the country

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A discussion panel at the P@SHA Annual conference 2012 in October, Lahore, Pakistan
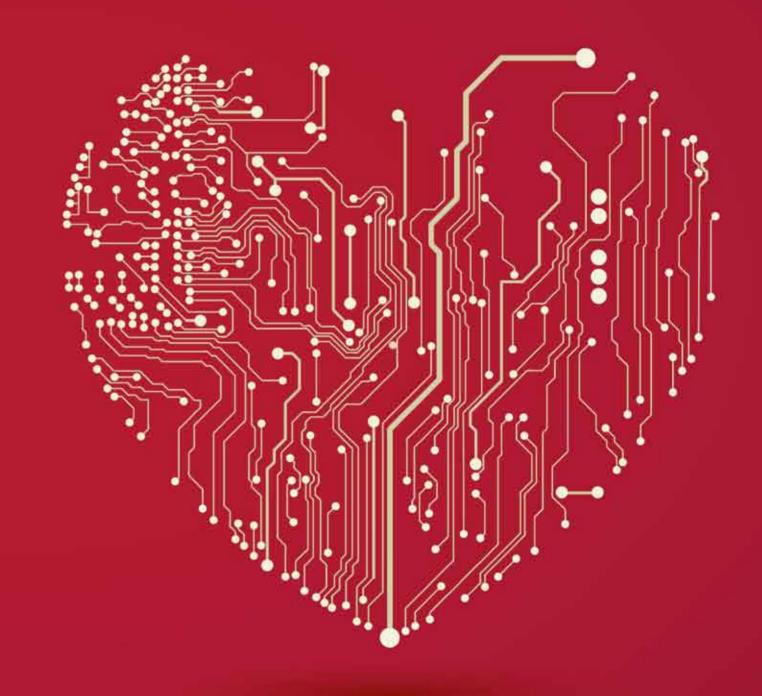
The Pakistan Software Houses Association for IT & ITES has a delightful acronym, P@SHA. Now president of the association, Jehan Ara joined about eight years ago, "so I'm not responsible for the name!" she says. P@SHA was founded in 1992 by nine technology companies, but its membership has since grown to include more than 400 of the country's largest software houses, product development centres, BPO companies, animation and new media studios and consulting and system integration companies.

As president, Ara is the equivalent of a chief executive. "I run the secretariat and work with member companies; I work on all the events, and I work with government on policy. It's what you make of it; the role is evolving all the time."

P@SHA's main objective is to promote and develop the software and services industry in Pakistan and to protect the rights of its members. One way it does this is by sponsoring annual innovation awards in the technology sector, selecting winners in 15 categories who then go on to represent Pakistan in the annual APICTA event (Asia Pacific ICT Awards).

The P@SHA ICT Awards program has been going for nine years and the 2012 event took place in Lahore in October last year. The main APICTA event was held in Brunei Darussalam in December, with Pakistani companies collecting four second place awards. "This time we didn't have too many nominations," says Ara. "We had only seven products competing but four of them got runner up awards. We normally take 15 to 20 but this year I had been ill so we did not have as many as usual." With 16 countries represented at APICTA, bringing 153 different products to the event, four out of seven is not bad at all.

The APICTA judges look at innovation and a range of other factors, including whether the product can be scaled and sold in countries

other than the country of origin. "They look at how well the product has sold already and whether it has the potential to sell more," adds Ara. "They also look at marketing, the technology aspect, and what benefit or impact it has in its particular category. If it's a banking product, for instance, they want to know what kind of implementation there has been, and what benefit there has been to the financial sector because of the product's use in customer applications.

"One of the things we like about the awards is that sometimes our participating companies go on to work with companies from other countries," she continues. "I see that as more of a benefit than just the award itself. In Asia Pacific there's a lot of innovation and a lot of talent and the fact that we can collaborate and work together helps the whole tech sector in the region."

P@SHA also has a number of industry and social initiatives in operation. A recent one that Ara is proud of is the P@SHA Social Innovation Fund, set up with a $250,000 grant from Google. "The purpose of the fund is to give grants to young people who develop solutions to community problems using technology," she says. "We have five initiatives so far and we're going to be funding another five in the next few weeks." The fund will provide a grant and

a mentor to help recipients get their solutions off the ground, because the two major factors preventing young people from starting up initiatives for the community are usually lack of money and guidance, she explains.

Another key role for P@SHA is to engage with government in the formulation of policy. "I feel that the government in Pakistan does not understand the full potential of the technology sector in the economic

development of the country," says Ara. P@SHA worked closely with the Ministry of Information Technology last year on the development of the national ICT policy. "Most of the input for that came from P@SHA," she says. "We more or less drafted the document, but we want it to be a continuous process, not something that is written once and then implemented. The technology keeps changing so it needs to be a live document that is updated all the time."

P@SHA is now currently working with government on cybercrime legislation. "All the different parties within government need to be convinced that it's important not only for

400+

Members of
P@SHA today

the technology and business sectors but also to safeguard the interests of consumers," she explains. "We also interact with the National Standing Committee on IT, which is a parliamentary group that advises the cabinet and the national assembly on legislation, and with the Internet Providers Association and the security agencies." There is often resistance to new legislation from the security agencies, she explains, who feel that too much freedom on the internet and in the tech sector could interfere with their work. "We need them to understand that what we do is not going impinge on what they do," she affirms.

Delegates make their mark at the P@SHA ICT awards 2012

"P@SHA'S MAIN OBJECTIVE IS TO PROMOTE AND DEVELOP THE SOFTWARE AND SERVICES INDUSTRY IN PAKISTAN AND TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF ITS MEMBERS"

As a predominantly Muslim country, Pakistan can be extremely sensitive to offensive content in the media, especially on the internet. On 17 September 2012, the Government of Pakistan banned all access to YouTube in the country, after an independent film maker posted an anti-Islamic video to the site. This was the third time that the Government has restricted access to YouTube in the country, following earlier bans in 2008 and 2010.

"This is the kind of thing we get involved with because it affects our members directly and every other user in the country," says Ara. A careful approach has to be taken, however, she explains. "We prefer to engage and convince them rather than making a lot of noise," is her diplomatic explanation. "We don't want to alienate them, we want them to make changes in policy. It works better for us that way."

At the time of writing, YouTube is still blocked in Pakistan. In November 2012, P@SHA conducted a survey of its members to gauge the effect that the ban was having on their businesses, finding a significant impact on education, research, knowledge creation and overall business in the country.

"At the moment the YouTube ban is very difficult because of the religious element," explains Ara. "YouTube is used by a lot of people here, not only business people but also in education, the entertainment industry and the media. We've been trying to tell the government that it has been shooting itself in the foot. The ban is not harming YouTube. It's just harming us.

"We don't want censorship of the internet," she continues. "I personally don't think that is right. I can understand why people are offended but I don't think they are being forced to look at that content. I try to convince people of that but when religious passions are aroused people are not as reasonable as you would like them to be!"

One possible solution would be for Google to provide a local version of YouTube for Pakistan, as it does for Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries, so that specific content could be blocked without disabling everything else.

"Personally, I don't think anything should be blocked," says Ara. "It's a question of what people want to see. There is no reason any Muslim would want to see that video, so why would you want to block it? But you can't explain that to people, so the next best solution is a local version of YouTube, but you need to be very careful. Once you start blocking one thing, where do you stop?"

A picture from P@SHA ICT Awards 2012, president P@SHA extreme left & chairman P@SHA extreme right

P@SHA is discussing this issue with government, encouraging them to avoid a proliferation of unnecessary bans by the creation of a multi-stakeholder group to decide on the issues. "There should be some criteria," she concludes, "because how do you know they won't block political content that they don't like? There should be a process and there should also be a form of redress for content that is blocked that should not have been, and the whole process should be transparent."

I can see a busy year coming up for Jehan Ara and P@SHA in 2013. **B**

> ## "THE PURPOSE OF THE P@SHA SOCIAL INNOVATION FUND IS TO GIVE GRANTS TO YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DEVELOP SOLUTIONS TO COMMUNITY PROBLEMS USING TECHNOLOGY"

P@SHA Brainstorming session for the social innovation fund

For more information about P@SHA visit:
www.pasha.org.pk

P@SHA

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