

“Just imagine what would have happened to DDD if it hadn’t changed with the times.”

A Conversation with Akkhasone Vilivong, graduate of Digital Divide Data

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Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Could you please introduce yourself and share about your life before you knew Digital Divide Data? What were you doing before? During your time at DDD, what did you learn and what roles or responsibilities did you have? And after leaving DDD, what kind of work have you been doing, and how have you applied the knowledge and skills you gained at DDD to your new job?

Akkhasone Vilivong: Let me first introduce myself. My name is Akkhasone Vilivong. Before I joined DDD, my life felt pretty ordinary. I was a person from the capital, living right in the city center near Sihom. But I grew up in a family that was financially struggling. My father was a civil servant and my mother was a freelance launderer. Our income was so limited that I felt my parents were carrying a heavy burden, especially since they had seven children. At the time, only my two older sisters were working. My three older brothers were young and going through a challenging phase, getting involved with drugs and hanging out with the wrong crowd. All three of them dropped out of school. I saw how my parents had to support us, even though we were grown up. My dad’s government salary was barely enough to support the family.

I was in my third year of university, about to start my fourth, when a friend told me about an organization called DDD. My friend said they taught typing and English—basically, computer skills and English. They asked if I was interested and suggested I apply. My friend said I might fit the criteria since they help people from struggling families who are motivated to develop themselves and want a good career. Hearing that, I decided to apply for DDD. I felt that just studying at the university and in the library wasn’t enough. We were just learning from textbooks, which is valuable but only provides a basic

foundation. It didn't teach me the essential skills needed for a real job and earning money.

After joining DDD, I had to go through their training program, and I quickly realized I had no digital skills at all. I was practically starting from zero. I was even afraid to turn on a computer because I'd only had one semester of computer class in my first year of university, just one hour a week. It was so fast and short that I learned almost nothing. But with DDD, I had to practice. I was in the morning session and had to be there by 6:30 AM. After practicing typing, I had to study English until around 10:30 AM. Those morning sessions, which lasted for two to three months, were very stressful. Everyone had to take an exam after the training to be selected for a job at DDD.

The first step was an unpaid volunteer internship that lasted about one to two months. They would assess our development and work to see if we had the potential to continue. If not, they would identify what areas we needed to improve. After passing the exam, I was a volunteer for about two months.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: It seems so fast.

Akkhasone Vilivong: Not quickly. The fastest person took a month. I might have been a bit impatient because most of the work I was doing at the time was typing. We were working with old documents that were damaged, so we had to be careful not to cause more harm. In a way, it became a form of meditation. But I was an impatient person who focused more on quantity than quality.

Back then, I worked the evening shift and had a counselor, I can't remember her name, who guided me on what I was doing well and what I needed to improve. She told me my speed was okay, but I needed to work on my quality. About 80% of my work was typing. I also worked on an online catalog (I don't remember the exact name) for online products, which helped me learn more English. I had to identify different products and what categories they belonged to. It was a great opportunity to learn different kinds of work.

Later, I worked on uploading news stories to a website, which was great for my listening skills. I also learned how to edit videos for the website. Back then, the internet wasn't as fast as it is now, and DDD was one of the first companies to have high-speed internet because our work was online and we needed to be fast and up-to-date, especially with news. I had to work seven days a week, and on Sundays, we would take turns. I was in my early 20s at the time, and on the weekends, I wanted to go out with my friends. The management would ask us, almost force us, to come in. But looking back, I learned so much: confidence, listening, communication, and teamwork. We worked in teams of three or four, and we had to communicate about what kind of news we were working on,

what it was about, and what images to use to make the work look good. Overall, it was a great job that helped me develop myself a lot.

Later, I worked on the Reader's Digest E-magazine. Reader's Digest has many kinds of content. They sold both print magazines and, at the time, I saw that they were popular in Thailand and other countries. Since people were also starting to read e-books, I began working on web hosting for the magazine. I learned so much because I had to figure out what was a main title, a subheading, and what was the main content. I also had to determine what kind of images would match the content. This work taught me a lot and made me love reading and become more focused.

During my time there, I felt like I was developing a lot. I started as a volunteer, then became an employee, and then a team leader, although I only had two team members. It was a morning project for Reader's Digest, so I got to teach the new volunteers on my team. After I graduated from university, DDD saw my growth and offered me new opportunities beyond being a data operator. I got to learn about management and became an Assistant Project Manager. After that, I became the Assistant Operations Manager for the morning shift, which was my last position with DDD.

In that role, I learned the difference between a bottom-up and a top-down perspective. As a regular employee working from the bottom-up, I would only think about my own perspective, how tired I was, what my responsibilities were, and whether it felt worth it. Sometimes I'd question if it was okay and if it was worth it. But when I became a team leader, I had to be in the middle. I had to look after my team members and make sure they were all working together and open to giving each other feedback so we could produce the best work possible.

I was responsible for the morning shift from 6:00 AM to 12:30 PM, which was a big responsibility. Some days I had to stay for afternoon meetings to discuss issues and find solutions with the team. These experiences taught me a lot about looking at the bigger picture. Being in the middle management role, I got a glimpse into what being a manager is like and the importance of thinking about the sustainability and progress of the organization while keeping up with technology.

When I was about to leave DDD, the typing work was phased out and replaced with new projects, like collecting football data. DDD was constantly trying new things. I have to admit I don't know what DDD does now because it has changed so much. Technology-based work is always evolving and you have to adapt. I didn't understand why they had to change so much back then, but when I worked in management, I realized what would happen if we didn't adapt. Just imagine what would have happened to DDD if it hadn't changed with the times.

Many of my coworkers at DDD were people with disabilities, especially physical disabilities. They were hired because DDD didn't discriminate and it gave them a chance to use their computer skills. Their physical disabilities didn't stop them from doing the work.

After working at DDD for about six years, I asked myself if I still wanted to work there. The answer was no because I wanted to try new things, even though I didn't know what my next job would be. A friend suggested I become an auditor. I didn't know what an auditor did, but I was a quick learner, a skill I got from DDD. I was also a good listener, which helped me figure out what I needed to improve. Another skill I was confident in was my computer literacy from DDD. I can confidently say I was better at using Microsoft Office and the internet than my peers who hadn't worked at DDD. The specific auditing skills I knew I could learn. Since there were very few people studying auditing at the time, many were starting from zero just like me, and we could all learn.

When I started working in auditing, many people were impressed with my work, my overall performance, my computer skills, and my communication. They said I had a professional way of speaking and asked where I had worked before. I told them about DDD, which they had never heard of. Being an auditor requires a high level of specialized skills, communication, negotiation with clients, and working against deadlines. Because of my experience at DDD, I already had the skills to work under pressure and handle it.

I worked as an auditor for about three to four years before I moved to a new place to work as an internal auditor. I wanted a new, more challenging experience to continue my development. After working as an internal auditor for two to three years, I left to work as an assistant to the president of a large, well-known company that I won't name. My job was to create a financial model for a hotel business. I had to analyze the feasibility of building a hotel, including the steps and the organizational structure. I was surprised that the executives had so much confidence in me to give me such a high-responsibility task. To be honest, I was very proud that they trusted me so much. After working there for a while, I learned a lot and felt that I had gained all the knowledge I could, so I left my position as an assistant to the president.

After that, I applied for a job in the field of international organizations (NGOs). I now work as a Finance Assistant for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS Laos), a non-profit organization that works in many countries around the world. Of course, conservation work is about helping preserve nature, but you have to think about it from many angles, not just wildlife or the environment. You also have to consider the community. The villagers in the area have to be aware of and take ownership of the conservation efforts. So, when you work in this field, you have to think about the wildlife, but you also have to consider the people around you. If the local community doesn't

understand and isn't cooperative, the work won't be as effective as it could be. Even though I work in finance, working for a wildlife conservation organization means I have to have a conservation mindset to do my job well and understand the overall goal.

For example, before I was at DDD, I never understood why companies had a vision and a mission. But after working in many different roles, I understand that for a business to be successful, it needs a clear vision and mission to achieve its goals.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: I heard that you had work experience around the age of 20, and compared to me at 24, it seems that you have a lot of experience and are very capable.

Akkhasone Vilivong: When I worked at DDD, many of my colleagues were older and had more life experience, so I learned a lot from them. They told me that my 20s were the best time to learn as much as possible. They said that if you don't focus on learning during that time, it will be harder to gain knowledge as you get older.

By your 30s, you won't be able to compete with people in their early 20s due to the difference in physical strength. They also said that by the age of 30-35, you need to have a stable life and a good, reliable income.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Did your experience at DDD help you a lot in terms of work? Do you think the skills you gained from DDD have been very useful in your current work? How would you compare your experience at DDD with others who have not worked at DDD in terms of working together, whether in skills or in income?

Akkhasone Vilivong: One thing I can confidently say I gained from DDD is computer skills. Another very important skill is leadership, which I developed when I was a team leader at DDD. I'm confident that I have stronger leadership skills and more self-assurance than my peers who graduated at the same time, because they didn't have the same work experience. As a team leader, I practiced many skills related to managing a team and my team members. I had to constantly communicate and coordinate with them, which taught me a lot.

This was great experience and knowledge that I still use today as a Finance Assistant, where I have to oversee my team members and help my manager with various financial tasks. Of course, my current skills are a result of working in many different places, but my time at DDD was a crucial starting point. It taught me how to prepare for problems, how to handle failure, and how to get back up quickly.

The skills I learned at DDD, like computer skills, might not seem directly related to the work I did after leaving, such as auditing and finance. But if you look closely, I used the

skills I learned at DDD in my later jobs. This includes basic computer literacy, communication, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, working under pressure, and prioritizing tasks. Before I became a team leader at DDD, the organization made sure I took many additional courses suitable for a leader.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: What you mentioned makes sense regarding the point that once you have experience, you know how to handle situations and how to deal with setbacks.

Akkhasone Vilivong: Yes, because nothing we do in life is ever perfect. There may be setbacks at times, but in the end, we still manage to take action and keep moving forward. Everything becomes a lesson.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: I'd like to ask about the communication and interaction among DDD alumni. Do you still keep in touch?

Akkhasone Vilivong: For myself, I'm currently working in the same place as someone who also worked at DDD. However, I don't keep in touch much with the newer DDD students or employees. I mostly stay in contact with the alumni from my own cohort. We have a group chat where we regularly talk about our lives and work, and we even recommend jobs to each other. For example, I'm confident in recommending jobs to people who have completed the DDD program because I know they have a lot of diverse skills and experience.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: What do you think about the current challenges DDD faces with technological changes, especially with the arrival of AI? What do you think about DDD's role in the world today? Do you think DDD will still be necessary and continue to exist in this globalized world?

Akkhasone Vilivong: If you ask me what I think DDD will look like in 10-20 years, it might sound like a long time, but it's not when you're thinking about long-term planning. For a technology-focused organization like DDD, the future is challenging due to the rise of AI. AI could reduce the need for human labor to cut costs.

Therefore, they must adjust their strategy to allow technology and people to work together. They need to keep up with technology while also creating opportunities and training for people. I'm not sure what advice I would give DDD, since I don't know what they are currently doing.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Thank you so much.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane is a journalist and writer based in Vientiane, Laos. He is an active contributor to The Laotian Times, covering topics including environmental issues, socio-economic development, and regional geopolitics, often highlighting the intersection of local developments with broader regional and global dynamics. Thongsavanh has also contributed to The ASEAN Frontier, focusing on historical and geopolitical narratives. He is a member of the Global Shaper Vientiane Hub, contributing to youth-led initiatives for positive change.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*