

“Being at DDD helped me gain skills that put me on an equal footing with others who had a better foundation.”

A Conversation with Chansamai Phommachan, 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?

Chansamai Phommachan: My journey began at the National University of Laos (Dongdok campus) during my first year. While waiting to register for classes, I heard about computer courses at the DDD office, which was near my rented room. Coming from a different province, I had no computer skills, not even knowing how to turn one on. I applied for a three-month trainee program.

My first class was typing, taught by “Brother Nok.” We used a program to practice English typing. Classes started at 6 AM, so I had to wake up at around 5 AM. Anyone who was late was marked absent. Luckily, living nearby made it easy to be on time.

I spent six hours a day learning, and I went from a complete novice to a typing competition champion at DDD. I also learned about the internet. After passing an exam, I became an operator, which provided me with a salary and tuition assistance from DDD.

I worked as an operator for two years, then became a team leader for another two years. After a total of five years, I left DDD.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: What year did you start and what was your major?

Chansamai Phommachan: I started my studies in 2007, and towards the end of that year, I began as a Trainee at DDD. In 2008, I became an operator, and then in 2010, I was promoted to a team leader. I left DDD in 2012.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: What else did you do at DDD besides typing or learning English?

Chansamai Phommachan: I started my day at DDD, where I studied from 6 AM to 12 PM. From 1 PM to 4 PM, I went to class at the National University. Afterward, from 5 PM to 8 PM, I attended English classes. DDD helped pay for both.

Being at DDD was my first step into work that helped me gain life skills, not only in digital skills but also in other areas, such as communication and public speaking. DDD's support allowed me to study and work simultaneously, learning multiple skills at once. Some skills I didn't directly use at DDD but they helped build a foundation for the future, like writing emails in English or speaking in public.

At that time, my work at DDD was different. I handled books sent from American universities, such as Harvard or Cornell, as well as old publications from the World War era. Many of these books were old and the scans were unclear, so I had to make them clear and then check the accuracy to prepare them for online e-book systems like Kindle. This experience gave me pride in being part of the digitalization of important historical documents, allowing people to access knowledge.

However, I didn't fully understand everything back then, partly because my English skills were not yet strong.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: You mentioned that DDD provides support for tuition fees.

Chansamai Phommachan: Yes, that's right. DDD did help with tuition fees. I can't remember the exact amount, but it was probably around 70-80%. DDD had a specific budget or quota for student assistance.

My university tuition wasn't very expensive, around 1 million kip per year. Because of this, there was still some money left in DDD's assistance budget for me. This allowed them to also pay for my English language classes, which cost about 300,000 kip per month. This meant DDD paid for my tuition at both schools.

For other students at DDD who might have attended private schools with higher tuition fees, DDD may have only been able to cover around 70-80% of their costs. This is what I recall from that time, and I'm not sure if DDD's policy has changed since then.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: At that time, where were you studying English?

Chansamai Phommachan: I studied at Udorn Lek 9 School, which is now Chanthabouly High School. It was a branch campus of the main Lao-German Vocational College. At that time, I lived in Dongpaiylap village, and the DDD office was also in Dongpaiylap village, not its current location. Udorn Lek 9 School was in the same area and not far from my house; I could take the bus there. Travel back then wasn't as difficult as it is now. It was much more convenient.

The bus would pass by the DDD office. After finishing my classes at DDD, I would take the bus to my university classes at Don Dok. At 4 PM, I would catch the bus again to continue my English lessons at Udorn No. 9 School. Sometimes I'd go home first, then head to the school, and other times I'd go directly to my English class and have my dad pick me up at home after I finished at 8 PM.

Many people around me were amazed at how I did it and told me I was so dedicated. I had to study and work every day from 6 AM until 8 PM, which is when I finally got to eat and rest. I felt proud and happy that I was able to do that for about five years.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Did your five-year experience at DDD help you a lot in terms of work? How would you compare your experience at DDD with other people who didn't work there, in terms of skills or income?

Chansamai Phommachan: Every person is different and comes from a different background. For me, being at DDD helped me gain skills that put me on an equal footing with others who had a better foundation than I did, whether in English or computer skills. I came from a family where my parents couldn't provide much support for me to access knowledge. Without DDD, I wouldn't have even known how to use a computer. But once I learned these skills, I felt more knowledgeable and not at a disadvantage to anyone.

After about five years, I left DDD, which was at the same time I graduated from university. I studied environmental science because I enjoy challenges. This was one of the reasons I left DDD; working in an office on a computer wasn't for me. I prefer hands-on, adventurous work and jobs that involve working with people.

My first job after leaving DDD was as a research assistant at the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). The project I worked on was a research paper about tigers, specifically a topic about human-wildlife conflict where wild tigers were harming people's livestock, and in turn, people were killing the tigers. My team and I conducted research to help both the tigers and the local people in the Nam Et-Phou Louey National Protected Area. The position was fascinating, so I applied for the job and left DDD.

My manager at the time asked if I was sure about leaving, as the contract with WCS was only for three months, which was a very short period. But I was confident in my

abilities and believed that after the three months were up, I could definitely find another job.

After my three-month contract with WCS, new job opportunities came my way, especially those involving data entry, thanks to the skills I had gained at DDD. My English skills were also a significant advantage.

All of the jobs I took after leaving DDD were with foreigners, and all of my managers were foreign as well. They were impressed with my proficiency in writing emails, which set me apart from other candidates. It showed I was competent and capable of doing the work. Other skills, or soft skills like communication, could be learned on the job.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: You are currently working at the World Food Programme Laos, right? How have you applied those skills in your current job?

Chansamai Phommachan: Yes, that's right. I am currently working at the World Food Programme. Before I talk about my current job, I'd like to go back a little. After I left WCS, I went to work for Helvetas, focusing on highland rice farming. While I was there, someone noticed my email writing skills and offered me a side job to train government officials on how to write emails. Working with government officials helped me expand my network, and I ended up collaborating with them to write a project proposal for a grant from the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization). We were awarded about \$10,000 for a six-month project.

After my time with the FAO project, I worked at the Ministry of Planning and Investment [now merged with the Ministry of Finance] for about 3-4 years, mainly in state investment management. After that, I created my own short-term project called Vientiane Zero Plastic Week, which lasted about 2-3 months.

Next, I worked at the headquarters of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as an intern in Monitoring and Evaluation. I learned a great deal there. Afterward, I went to Save the Children, where I started as a Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist and Report Writing Specialist, before being promoted to Head of the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit. After a while, I realized I didn't enjoy M&E work, so I resigned and applied to the World Food Programme. I got a job as a Program Manager, and I'm currently on a permanent staff contract.

To get a permanent staff contract with the WFP or any other UN agencies, you need a wide range of skills and knowledge. Of course, my fast typing speed is a crucial skill. For example, if an exam is 20 minutes long, other people might only be able to type one and a half pages, but I can type seven. Another important skill is using the internet, which I also learned at DDD. For example, I know how to search for information on the internet efficiently and get the results I need from Google. All of these skills have really

helped me. I've applied for jobs at many different UN agencies and have been accepted at every single one.

I believe one of the main reasons is my fast typing. I can type 70-80 words per minute. Most Lao people don't type very fast, but I can type quickly in both Lao and English.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Wow! I currently work as a journalist, I still feel like I don't type very fast, but you type a lot faster!

Chansamai Phommachan: Haha, the older generations are even more skilled than I am. The reason I didn't join the World Food Programme right away is that I had to build up my experience first. They tend to hire people who are ready to start immediately, meaning they already have the necessary skills. The skills I learned from my time at DDD, combined with my previous work experience, made me qualified for this position at the World Food Programme.

My main work today is managing an \$8 million project related to agriculture and nutrition. The project aims to help pregnant women and children under two years old to prevent them from being malnourished.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: You have spoken a lot about your work from the beginning until now. I would like to ask further: How much has DDD helped improve your life, for example, did it increase your income, provide more opportunities, or help you support yourself and your family? Overall, are you satisfied?

Chansamai Phommachan: It's been over 10 years since I graduated from DDD. My current income is quite good. To put it simply, my life is so much better now than it was before. I can afford to buy whatever I want to eat and go to places I want to visit. I can use my annual leave to travel abroad with my children and family using my own money. I've been a part of many international events. I have my own car to drive, whereas before, I didn't even have a motorbike and had to get around by bicycle or bus. Everything I've mentioned is not from my parents' wealth, but something I've earned myself.

To put it briefly, with the assets I've accumulated, I could retire now at the age of 34. I'm not a person who spends extravagantly. I enjoy living a simple life and working in my garden growing vegetables.

Overall, I am very proud of myself and everything I've achieved. I used to rent a house, and now I have my own. I have my own car to drive. I have such a good income that I can afford to send my children to an international school, but I've chosen to send them to a regular private school because I want to teach them about the realities of our

society. I believe there are so many life lessons, and I want them to learn on their own. I don't want my children to have it too easy at an international school with tuition of \$5,000-\$6,000 per year. My children are very fortunate to be able to go to school now, compared to when I was young and went to a temple school.

To sum it all up, I am proud of myself for having a better life and a job that I love, which is a job that many people dream of doing.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: May I ask, are you from the capital city or did you come from another province?

Chansamai Phommachan: I come from Xiang Khuang Province. I have four siblings, so there are five of us in total. We moved to study in Vientiane. I slept together with my brothers and sisters in a small room.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Regarding meeting and interacting with friends while studying at DDD, after graduation, have you stayed in touch with them? And is there anything you would like to tell or leave as a message for DDD?

Chansamai Phommachan: I have noticed that the world is changing very fast, especially with technology, and I think people are becoming less interested in education. In our country, many students drop out of school as early as middle school. Therefore, what I'd like to tell DDD is to continue the good work they have done in the past, which is giving opportunities to people and supporting the disadvantaged. I also want to ask how DDD can help a wider circle of people. For example, how can they help those who leave school early to gain the necessary life skills? Maybe DDD could even change from being a company to an educational institution. This institution could work with other organizations beyond offering short 3-6 month courses and become a good, systematic model for the future, providing opportunities for disadvantaged people. For example, helping young people aged 15-16 who have to leave school due to a lack of money to find work in Laos or in a neighboring country like Thailand.

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.*