

“Understand what the trends are. Don't be complacent, just keep learning.”

A Conversation with Dina Bitton, former Board Member

Rollo Romig
September 3, 2025

Rollo Romig: Dina, please introduce yourself and tell me about your background, and also how you got connected with Digital Data Divide.

Dina Bitton: I am a computer scientist by background. I worked in academia for a while. I was a professor at Cornell University and at the University of Illinois. Then I came for a sabbatical to California, to the Bay Area, and left academia for the industry. I co-founded a couple of startups, and then I joined a big company, SAP. Around that time I met the DDD people, Jeremy Hockenstein and Michael Chertok, and they promptly enlisted me.

I was a vice president with SAP when I first joined the DDD board around 2007. I was a board member for a couple of years, and then they asked me to chair the board, which I did for maybe a year or two. By that time, my husband had gotten very sick. I didn't want to travel anymore. I resigned from the board because I didn't have the time.

It's been a terrific experience. Jeremy and Michael, in particular, are two men who could get very high-paying jobs at many businesses, but they chose to follow their heart and do good instead. Indeed, they did a lot of good. I've been involved with a number of non-profits, and DDD is probably the one with the biggest impact.

It's been very gratifying to see how it basically started an IT sector in Cambodia. There was nothing when DDD arrived there. Jeremy had a couple of old PCs in the back of a store, trying to teach basic data entry skills to some young people. Today, I understand that DDD graduates are everywhere in the government, banking, private sector, even startups. It's been a long and very successful road.

Rollo Romig: You've been involved in a number of nonprofits. What sets DDD apart? What is it about DDD that has made it more impactful?

Dina Bitton: The model of combining training and employment has been very significant because many nonprofits focus on training and education. People who are so poor can't afford to spend years or even months being trained, so promising students a job if they successfully completed training was very significant, and often, even giving them stipends during the time of their training. Of course, the people who were involved were very talented and very dedicated. They didn't take no for an answer.

Rollo Romig: How did Jeremy and Michael pitch it to you, and what made you want to get involved?

Dina Bitton: Some of it was probably their personality and character. Just before DDD, I chaired the Board of Business Incubator for Women-led High-tech Businesses. I was open to embarking on a new nonprofit project. It's the people who convinced me with their enthusiasm and dedication.

Rollo Romig: You started around 2007. At that point, they were just in Cambodia, right? They hadn't expanded.

Dina Bitton: They were in Cambodia and Laos.

Rollo Romig: How did you see their approach evolve over time? How did things change during the time that you were involved?

Dina Bitton: They keep up with technology advancement, which is extremely important in high tech. They are very aware that they have to find business areas where people not as skilled as Silicon Valley people, for instance, can be paid a reasonable rate for those countries. There are many other jobs that you could teach people, but if you want to be able to break even or not need a lot of fundraising, you have to be able to be paid enough for jobs to support these people, which is a lot less than it takes to support people in the US, for instance, or Europe.

It's still very much a very serious consideration. The managers of DDD have been very nimble and were able to adopt fairly early technology areas where they could build a business. I just reconnected fairly recently with Michael and Jeremy, and I was very impressed that they were already developing a lot of work in the AI area, where many businesses in the US are not there yet.

Rollo Romig: What are the challenges going forward as technology keeps changing at exponential speed? Will it be tough for them to keep up, to find the right work that hits that sweet spot that clients want, but also fits the mission?

Dina Bitton: It's not easy, but in a way it's easier than it was 25 years ago. They have a track record. They have repeat customers who would buy from them because they trust the work. They have a very professional management team, which was a real challenge back then. There was a lot of enthusiasm, but not a lot of business experience.

Rollo Romig: It took time to build those systems and skills.

Dina Bitton: Many of my discussions with Jeremy, when I chaired the Board, were that he needed a better business model. Not just to contact his good friends and ask them to give him some work because he's doing good. They've accomplished a lot in that area in the last decade or so.

Rollo Romig: The mission of DDD might open the door to a conversation, but what clients want to see is someone delivering on what they need. They're not going to stick around just for the mission.

Dina Bitton: Right. And delivering it at a good price.

Rollo Romig: How did that business model change over time? It started with personal networking and picking the mission.

Dina Bitton: It matured. It became a lot more professional. Those years that I was there, from 2007 to 2010 or 2011, were really an inflection point. The organization had hired professional salespeople and developed a value proposition. They made sure that the projects would be paid their value, and that customers would be willing to pay.

Rollo Romig: How has DDD changed the lives of people who graduated from the program? Do you have any favorite stories of the impact?

Dina Bitton: As one of the very few women executives in high tech, I always was more focused than other board members or managers on the women of DDD, both the managers and the students. It was very meaningful for them to have a woman sharing the board. It was very touching. Whenever I would show up at the DDD office, all the women would be following me around and wanting to talk to me. I helped groom a few women who became managers.

They already had one manager who was very inspiring, Mai. We called her the Santa Teresa of Laos in Cambodia. She's a wonderful person. I can give you an example of something she did. It was the right thing to do, but she came up with the idea and did it.

We had trouble recruiting people to the program from rural areas because they were so poor and they couldn't afford to come to Phnom Penh or to Vientiane. Mai said, "What's the problem? We have to house them, otherwise they won't be here." Jeremy said, "We don't have dorms. We can't afford dorms." She picked one bigger room in the office, not the kind of office DDD has now. It was an old building. She took over that room and had the students paint it. She bought mattresses and comforters, and then she said, "Hey, we have a dorm." I want to say that was in 2008.

It was so significant and had such a big impact because suddenly you could reach out to the poorest and most needy people, and bring them in. They loved being there. They were there 24/7. The students wanted to be there all the time, not just for the classes, unlike Western countries, where you have to force students to come to class. They loved being in the office. They were there on weekends and nights. They had the internet and the community. It was very special to see that enthusiasm and gratitude for what they were getting.

Especially for the women. Many of the women were handicapped and orphans. When they first were recruited by DDD, they were so hopeless. When you are handicapped in such a poor country, you just sit on a mattress all day. You don't go out, you don't do anything. Two or three years later, they were not only supporting themselves, sometimes they were supporting their entire family.

Rollo Romig: From your perspective, how has DDD done with gender equity? Do you feel like they've met the targets that they should be meeting?

Dina Bitton: They sure did. If you look at the management team, you see a number of women there. One of the board members arranged for a very young woman, I believe her name was Sopheap, to study in Oregon. She got a business degree, and then came back and was the head of HR.

Rollo Romig: Any other stories come to mind?

Dina Bitton: I was there around the time of the 10th anniversary. That was the first big event I attended with DDD. It was a beautiful, beautiful celebration. DDD back then was much smaller than it is today. Seeing all these young women show up in their beautiful attire, and so excited to be part of the celebration, it was a beautiful event. The 25th one will be bigger and better, but back then, that was a big mark.

Rollo Romig: During the years you were involved, what were some of the biggest challenges that DDD came up against? How did they address those challenges?

Dina Bitton: Harping on Jeremy to develop a viable business model was the top challenge because there was no way you could sustain that training employment hybrid model without having a well-thought-through business model. How do you sell? What do you sell? How do you determine the price for selling? How do you present a value proposition to a customer, in terms of the quality of the work, the value of the work, and the price they're paying for it? Why would they send work to Cambodia and Laos when they could have it done locally? Obviously, the price was a big, big factor, but it was not enough. You have to have more than low pricing.

Rollo Romig: What is the sales pitch that DDD offers aside from pricing? What do they offer that another outsourcing company would not necessarily have?

Dina Bitton: The quality of the work, certainly. That was not easy to achieve and sustain when your employees were not as skilled and educated as others. Management did a very good job at getting the staff very involved in that. They taught them how to look at the profitability, or potential profitability, of a project. They became very driven at achieving that goal. Taking a young person who had no technical skill, no business skill, and teaching them how to make their work profitable was not a small challenge.

Rollo Romig: What do graduates of DDD offer to employers that's different, wherever they end up? What special thing do they get from the DDD experience?

Dina Bitton: Skills, in the first place. They acquire very valuable skills, and both government and private organizations really appreciate that. There was an emphasis on business ethics. They learned to deliver value, and they knew the work was important. It's very rewarding to see how many DDD graduates are at very high levels now. A few weeks ago, I met a government delegation from Cambodia who came to Northern California. One was a DDD graduate, and the other one's wife was still at DDD.

Rollo Romig: If they asked you for advice right now about how best to move forward into another 25 years, what would you tell them? What would you suggest they should be doing that maybe they're not doing?

Dina Bitton: I am not sure I can answer that question because I have not been connected to DDD lately, except for maybe providing an introduction. Intuitively, I would say stay with the technology. Understand what the trends are. Don't be complacent, just keep learning.

Rollo Romig: Thanks so much.

Rollo Romig is the manager of Solutions Insights Lab. He is the author of I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India, which was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*