

“DDD has to continually think about its relevance.”

A Conversation with Irving Levin, former Board Chair

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Could you tell me about your history with Digital Divide Data, when you got involved, and what your role was?

Irving Levin: I got involved in a very early state. My first interaction with DDD came as a result of a biking trip that my wife and I took in Vietnam, with a side trip to the temples at Siem Reap. This goes back to just after the Vietnamese had departed from Cambodia. We came back quite struck by the plight of the Cambodian people. While their country was broken, their spirit seemed not to be.

This was not long after I had sold a business, and my wife and I had started down the path of being philanthropists. In searching for something that had meaning to us and where we could help, we thought Cambodia was one place we'd seen where we might really be able to make a difference. We came back to Oregon. I was talking with a good friend of ours who was similarly inclined. She said, "Oh, Cambodia. Let me just show you something." She went to her files and pulled out a flyer that Jeremy Hockenstein had sent her. Jeremy knew her son at Harvard.

I took the initiative to call Jeremy to say I was interested and would like to know more. My wife and I were going to be in New York, so we met Jeremy and another person in Grand Central Station. We were very impressed and decided to make a small donation.

Then over time, Jeremy, who's very artful at building community and pulling people in, got me involved in marketing and awareness building and other things. Slowly, I became an advisor and then a board member, and then the chairman of the board over a span of 20 years. I just recently retired from the board.

Rollo Romig: How have DDD's programs evolved over these 25 years, and why were those decisions and changes made?

Irving Levin: When DDD went into Cambodia and then Laos, there wasn't much infrastructure. There wasn't much of anything. There was a clear and present need,

from the country standpoint, of helping people enter the digital age. At the time, we were stuck with whatever we could get for internet connectivity. There wasn't much training, so we started building our own training systems. It was very much bootstrapped.

We never had enough money. We never had enough management. The countries never were able to give us the necessary support. It was really a scramble. It went from a wonderful idea and a bunch of brave young people setting off to do the impossible, to slowly but surely building a little book of business and expanding our capabilities. This went on, on a hand-to-mouth basis, for maybe 10 years or more.

Eventually, we began to add more professional management, both at the top and in the middle. We started working with more sophisticated clients, and began to enter the competitive world we find ourselves in now. The skill building and team building evolved. It was slow. It was frustrating. In the last five years, it's been leaping ahead with much more sophistication, much better management and management systems, and becoming competitive in lots of different areas.

Rollo Romig: Why do you think it leaped ahead in the past five years? What changed?

Irving Levin: It's mostly management. DDD has always straddled the creative tension between being a business that makes money, and a service that provides a helping hand for young people who want to learn about the digital age. It's always a struggle. In the technology world, technology is basically at war with lower-end labor across the world and across all industries, so there was always this issue. We have all these people, but we could do things more efficiently if we were relying more on machines and less on people.

Also, the clients that we want to get and the margins that we want to earn come from the more sophisticated work that most of our people aren't able to do. Going to Kenya, where there's a more educated and tech-savvy population, helped bring clients we aspired to have, and dragged us forward into more sophisticated things. We had management teams pulling us to a better place. That's still the case.

It was intentional. It was a strategy, but at the same time, we're always thinking about what this means to our staff. It's a very difficult thing to operate these sorts of businesses in the places that we're in. The reason that we're in them is because it's so difficult, because purely commercial people wouldn't be there. We find it continues to be a real challenge to straddle that line.

Rollo Romig: You mentioned that sometimes there are clients who advance what you're doing. Can you give an example of that?

Irving Levin: We're doing a lot of work with crews for self-driving cars, working with a very big company, with lots of other different vendors, and we are competing with them. We had to provide the kind of quality control, auditing, and reporting that companies like that expect. It's table stakes, if you will. You have to figure out how to do that. That wasn't the first client we had that made those sorts of demands, because we worked

with Google, Microsoft, governments, and organizations like that, but it's indicative of how we had to pull ourselves up to be able to compete on even footing with other vendors.

Rollo Romig: Can you tell me how DDD selects trainees for the program? What qualities is DDD looking for, and what does DDD hope the program will do for them?

Irving Levin: At the very outset, if you went to a DDD shop, you would've seen a sea of wheelchairs, crutches, and things like that, because many people who worked for us were young people who were victims of some landmine explosion. Over time, we evolved to being a place where bright young people, maybe just out of high school, could come to work at entry-level positions in our company.

The training program was endemic, built into the work in such a way that you train part of the day, and then work part of the day. Very inefficient from a business standpoint, but probably best for them. This has evolved over time. We're now hiring more college students. From country to country, it's different too. We're in four places, so it's very different depending on the local circumstances.

We're not hiring older people, such as college students or even college graduates, who think of the job as a stepping stone. The industries have evolved so much, especially in Cambodia, where the needs are very different for a person who is hired at DDD. We were the only game in town for a long time. We're not now. You can, as a young person, go to lots of other places and get the kind of training that we would offer.

You might have to go to two places, one to get a job and one to get trained, whereas we offer it under one roof. It's very different. As you look for higher-skilled people, you tend to hire people, not because they're desirous to get trained, but because you need those people to get a job, and to get the job done.

Rollo Romig: How does the approach differ from country to country? How have you had to tailor your approach to these different locations?

Irving Levin: The cultures are very different. Cambodia, for instance, has a much more vibrant workforce and job market than Laos does, and Kenya, which is even more so than Cambodia. There are big language issues because this kind of work is typically done in English. Kenyans speak English very well. Cambodians speak English, not very well, but there's enough of them who are better, but Laos less so.

For instance, with our work called data tagging, somebody might be looking at a soccer game or something like that, and pulling data off of it, and there's no requirement for English. In other places where there is an English requirement, the most sophisticated work may go to Kenya.

Rollo Romig: DDD is a daring experiment that's managed to work for 25 years. What is something that DDD tried that didn't really work, but maybe you learned from it, in one of these locations?

Irving Levin: Oh, there's a million of them. Liberty Source is a great example. Jeremy never saw an idea he didn't want to consider. Sometimes that didn't work very well, such as Liberty Source. Liberty Source was brought to us by someone with a real passion to help military spouses in the US. They had many ideas about whom to work with in the US, so off we went with 100 or so employees. It was just very difficult. For a lot of reasons, it didn't work very well. Finally, we sold the company to one of our clients. They didn't make it work very well, and ironically, they returned it to us, so we have it again.

We operated in two places in Cambodia. One was Phnom Penh, and the other was Battambang. Battambang was always the little brother, much smaller, almost a provincial town. At some point, we just couldn't support that. In any organization, if you're being honest with yourself, you see all sorts of ways in which things didn't happen the way expected, or turned out really bad. There are many jobs we bid on and won, but we couldn't perform properly for whatever reason. It was a heartbreak, but it was also financially bad. We had many examples of this, because DDD takes so many chances and gets into so many different areas over time. The old joke is that when you're trying to find your footing in a market, you lob an artillery shell at a wall, then you run out and paint a bullseye around wherever the hell it landed. We were doing that for years and years. Still some of that now, but a lot less.

Rollo Romig: Why didn't some jobs work as you hoped?

Irving Levin: It ranges from, we didn't have the systems, we didn't have the quality control, we didn't have the management, we didn't have the training. Our operators couldn't do the work at the quality and rate that was necessary. We didn't even have good reporting systems. Any combination of any of those might tell the tale. We were a very young, raw, undermanaged operation.

It's quite remarkable that here we are, and that's not true anymore. We still have a long way to go, but it's a much different thing. The fact that the market put up with us, and we could still find things to do to feed the company is really a testament to the people who are dragging us into the 21st century.

Rollo Romig: What was the challenge with Liberty Source in particular?

Irving Levin: We thought it was a very compelling argument to help military spouses who are underemployed and certainly underappreciated. At the end of the day, when you're looking at clients who are being fought over by companies all over the world, that story will get you in the door to the client, but it won't necessarily be the determining factor. They want to know that you can do the work, that you're the cheapest and best vendor. We didn't have the marketing network or the awareness to do a proper job of telling the world about us, nor necessarily even performing the work. We'd get difficult clients and work that nobody else wanted. It takes a while to get yourself to a place where you can survive and thrive. We never got there [with Liberty Source].

Rollo Romig: What is your favorite success story with DDD?

Irving Levin: My favorite success stories are the people who started in training, slogging away at a computer terminal entering data, who then became a first-level manager. One person who started this way is now a senior leader in the company. In fact, she was running the Battambang office, and moved to Phnom Penh to do that. She's a shining example of what's possible. We have many other alums who have left and are now doing very impressive things.

Rollo Romig: Can you give me an example of someone's evolution?

Irving Levin: There are a number of people I met as operators and then as young managers who now have significant jobs, such as a guy named Rady. People who built their career closer to the ground. My wife wasn't actively involved in DDD, but she came with me to visit all the offices and was very supportive. DDD used to take visiting board members to the slums to visit the homes of some of our employees and trainees. It was an eye-opening experience to see the way people lived. It added emphasis on why the work was important.

Rollo Romig: It's not just affecting the graduates, but also their whole families, I'm sure.

Irving Levin: That's true.

Rollo Romig: When DDD trainees finish the program, what do they offer to tech companies that graduates of other trainings don't have?

Irving Levin: They probably have had more hands-on work. Typically, they've been doing some of the work. Most people who cycle through have been with us for two or three years, some less, some more. They've had work experience. They've been in an operation. The way that DDD has traditionally measured its value was to look at the delta between what the earnings were for our entry-level people versus what they were five years later. You could see a very economic derivation.

There's another component to this. Merely by working in a more sophisticated professional environment with all the expectations and values that infers is hugely important to people in this society in a way you can't measure. In Cambodia, for example, the culture is male-dominated, you don't ask questions, and you do what you're told.

We come in and tell them that approach is all wrong for what we're doing. Instead, we want you to express your opinion. We want you to tell us if we're doing something wrong. We want you to work in teams. We want you to respect women in the workplace as much as men. All of those ideas. You'll never be able to scientifically measure the value of that, but I think it's a very big deal.

Rollo Romig: Do you sense that DDD has changed the tech employment scenes in these countries, even beyond the specific employment that DDD offers to the trainees? Has DDD'S presence or approach uplifted the sector?

Irving Levin: Not in Kenya, because there already was a sector there of some sort, and we're just part of a number of companies there using that approach. Any such systemic changes have been very modest there, if at all. In Laos, definitely. Laos is such a miniature economy, and still so backward in many ways. Our employment in Laos is a few hundred people, so it's hard to say we've changed the world there. Probably the biggest impact, because we were there so early, is in Cambodia, where our roots are deep and the need was so great.

Rollo Romig: In what ways have you seen that change?

Irving Levin: Again, it would be silly to say we're the only ones doing it, but we were among the only outsourced data companies in Cambodia for a long time, probably the only one. Now, there are a few others. Certainly, the way we train people means they get gobbled up by other industries. We have had some effect. These are difficult things to measure, but it's obvious that if we weren't there, an awful lot of people, and probably the whole system, would have just evolved more slowly.

Rollo Romig: DDD seems like an organization that's always willing to evolve and actually needs to evolve to keep going. What's something you wish you could add to DDD'S approach or program that it's not already doing or hasn't already done?

Irving Levin: DDD has to continually think about its relevance, as I told Jeremy recently. When he went to Cambodia 26 years ago, saw what he saw, and said he'd like to try to do something there, certain circumstances led to that. The need was absolutely great, but the need in Cambodia is not at all the same now as it was then.

How does DDD maintain its relevance and its value to the society in a world where, without DDD, their young people could still get trained now in many different ways and get a job? What do we do? I'd like to know that there's some highly relevant thing we could do that would give us the reason to press on for the next 25 years there. If we had a training program that was different and better, we might import it to many new places. We have to think about unscrewing the training from the employment side as well. It's very difficult to run this organization. For instance, if your workforce is working on a project for 25 or 30 hours a week, that's less than 40 hours a week. If they're coming and going because of the training program, it's crippling.

We're all about training the most people, and giving people the most chance, but the world of technology and efficiency that goes along with it is just the opposite. How do we do things with no people, or a few people, or less people? It was a latent question for a long time, but now it's more to the front. How do we serve both masters? How do we build a successful, stable business in an industry that requires a lot of technology and sophistication? What does that mean for where we operate? We're not going to get there with the language issues, the technological issues, and the managerial scarcity that you find in Cambodia, for example, or Laos.

You can find it in India big time, but we're not in India. Should we be in India to operate? What does that mean for the countries we started in? What, if anything, can we do to help them continue to advance? These are not existential questions, but they're the highly strategic ones that the board needs to be thinking about.

Rollo Romig: Was there anything you'd like to add?

Irvin Levin: When you have a foundation, you get a lot of incoming [requests], if you will, from people eager to share in your bounty. What separates those things, for me anyway, is that first of all, you have to believe in the mission, and then you have to believe in the management. Then, if you're involved as I was, you have to believe that you can make a difference in that organization, or they will at least listen to you, and you appreciate the people who are rowing in the same direction in the organization. If you don't have all of those factors, you might write a check, but you probably won't get as deeply involved.

For me, DDD hit all those things. It was highly relevant. The people were wonderful. They believed, and they were eager to listen. Jeremy's wonderful about that. The people on the board and the management have been just terrific. It's been a great ride for me. That's why, even though I'm not on the board anymore, I still like helping and occasionally showing up at meetings and things like that because it's very meaningful. They've done it in a wildly unusual way. They've done it the right way.

Rollo Romig: That's a great note to end on. Thanks so much for taking the time today.

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.*