

“Working at DDD gave me continuous learning and growth opportunities.”

A Conversation with Metta Thippavong, 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?

Metta Thippavong: Hello, my name is Metta Thippavong. I am now working as a Project Manager at COPE. Before that, I worked with DDD until I left in 2011.

I am originally from Huaphan Province and graduated from the Sikeut School for People with Disabilities. While I was studying and about to graduate in 2003, I heard from friends who joined DDD that the organization had a program to support graduates. As I am a person with a disability, and DDD was supporting people with disabilities and also providing scholarships, I became very interested.

At that time, DDD announced that participants could work six hours and then use the rest of the time to study. When I went to DDD, I met Mai Siriphongphan, one of the founders, and asked for a chance to join. But Mai said the slots were already full, five people for the morning shift and five for the evening shift. I was sad that I could not join. Since one of my friends worked in the evening shift, I went with him to volunteer every day. DDD noticed me, but after some months I was still not accepted.

The training focused on typing, and everyone had to type fast. Since I practiced typing with my friend, I asked to take the test. We used the Marvis program, which trains typing

with ten fingers without looking at the keyboard. At that time, I did not understand why it was important, and I did not see the overall work of DDD.

After about two months, one person resigned, and I was given the chance to join. I was among the first 10 members of DDD. The work was data entry, changing hard copies into soft copies. Most of the work was digitizing old books and newspapers, including archives from Harvard University. At that time, I had never even heard of Harvard.

Typing was monitored by software to check speed and accuracy, and the work was also evaluated. To move up to Quality Assessment (QA), we had to train more. When the staff increased from 10 to 20 people, DDD moved to a bigger office, which was close to my home and convenient for me as a person with a disability.

At DDD, I kept trying to learn more. I still remember what Sister Mai taught me: “Always practice and train yourself to build knowledge and capacity. When you have skills, you can work anywhere. Knowledge stays with you forever.” She said the first job is very important because it gives you the most experience.

That is why I wanted to learn as much as possible, not only digital skills but also life skills. Sister Mai gave me motivation, and I can say that my positive mindset today is from her.

As a person with a disability, sometimes I felt discouraged, but Sister Mai reminded me not to let negative thoughts bring me down. That created a good culture at DDD, where everyone had goals and motivation to develop. The team grew from 10 people to more than 100 staff.

I worked in different roles: Operator, Data Entry, Cashier, Finance, and later moved to Human Resources. Sister Mai taught me HR skills because DDD was growing and needed better systems. I also joined many trainings, which gave me more experience.

I enjoy working in Human Resources because I like working with people. At DDD, every time we hired new staff, we introduced them to the organization’s culture and goals and guided them in their development, including my own. Working at DDD gave me continuous learning and growth opportunities, which I could also share with others.

Later, I worked in Finance, which was different but important. It helped me see another side of business, like managing finances to ensure the organization’s progress. Since DDD is a Social Enterprise, managing finances well allows profits to support disadvantaged people.

Through my years at DDD, I gained knowledge and skills from many opportunities, especially thanks to Mr. Jeremy [Hockenstein]. This prepared me to grow further and

pass on opportunities to others, so new staff and disadvantaged people can benefit as I did.

In 2011 (the speaker mistakenly said 2021), after leaving DDD, where I had worked since 2003, I applied for a new position in finance with a relief project under an NGO. Since I am a person with disabilities, I thought the organization would consider me because they provide opportunities for people in need. At that time, I was worried whether I would be accepted, but someone who knew I had left DDD recommended me for the position, so I decided to join, which was in the private sector.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: After leaving DDD to work at a new place, did what you learned while at DDD help?

Metta Thippavong: The most noticeable benefit was that I could work faster than others because I had a stronger foundation in computers and typing from many years at DDD. Another key point in work is interacting with people, which is crucial. In a new environment, adapting and connecting with others is essential for work to run smoothly. This shows the value I learned at DDD, especially in human resources management.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Has your DDD experience helped you in your work compared to others who didn't come from DDD? How much has it improved your life, whether in terms of satisfaction or income?

Metta Thippavong: Yes, I think it was very useful because I gained a lot of experience in many areas while at DDD, as I mentioned before. Doing real work helped me think critically, learn, and improve myself while handling pressure and high responsibility. This made me more resilient compared to others who may not have had similar experience. Not only for myself, but also former DDD colleagues often said the same, as in the eight years I worked there, I saw many people graduate or leave, and they agreed that the experience at DDD helped them a lot in their new jobs. Of course, I feel the same way.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: I've asked many questions about your work skills and knowledge, and also about other people who were at DDD. Another point I'm curious about is that I've noticed from former DDD colleagues that they seem to have good teamwork, care for others, and strong dedication, even if not everyone is the same. Also, everyone who graduated from DDD seemed to want to give opportunities to others, including you. I would like to know: what do you think is the most important thing, or what did DDD teach you that helped you develop such teamwork, care, and dedication?

Metta Thippavong: I mentioned earlier that I was among the first cohort to study and work with DDD. Therefore, everything I learned from DDD, I have passed on to the next

cohort. One reason I think is important for DDD students is that, although each person may have their own ideas, they all share the values set by the organization.

When the organization gives the same guidance to everyone, each person receives the same lessons. There may be minor differences, but overall, the outcomes are consistently good. Even after leaving DDD, we never forget where we came from and continue to pass on opportunities to others who have fewer opportunities, so that they can receive the same valuable chances we once had.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Currently, do you and other alumni who graduated from DDD still keep in touch? Has DDD facilitated any opportunities for you to meet or coordinate with each other?

Metta Thippavong: Yes, we keep in touch regularly. If we are free, we often meet up, especially at DDD, though sometimes we cannot meet because everyone has their own responsibilities. However, when we do meet, we exchange ideas and perspectives, especially with the younger alumni. We make sure to share with them the value of the opportunities and experiences we received.

Nowadays, technology makes it much easier to connect compared to around 20 years ago, when I worried that younger alumni might not fully understand the value of what DDD offered because they could access information more easily on their own. One thing I want to emphasize to the younger alumni is that DDD provides unique life skills—not just computer skills—that are truly valuable.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Do you think DDD will continue to exist in the future? If so, will it remain the same or evolve? Has DDD contributed meaningfully to society, for example, by producing skilled professionals who go on to make a positive impact, like yourself?

Metta Thippavong: My generation that studied and worked with DDD also gained a strong foundation in computer and printing skills, which are valuable experiences and skills that can be applied to future work. These skills open doors to opportunities, allowing students to succeed without needing to rely heavily on repeated practice.

Overall, DDD has contributed to society by empowering graduates, including myself, with the knowledge that every individual from DDD has strong abilities. For example, I supervised work and collaborated with peers who held leadership positions, and we shared knowledge and supported each other. Graduates from DDD have collectively contributed to society, whether directly or indirectly, by applying their skills in their careers.

For me and others with physical disabilities, we may have more challenges than others, so we need to practice and develop our knowledge and abilities even more intensively to reach our full potential.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: How do you think DDD will evolve or change, especially in today's era dominated by AI? Will it remain the same as before, or are there aspects that should be adjusted or improved?

Metta Thippavong: I believe that DDD will continue to exist and should persist because it operates as a social enterprise, with its mission centered on benefiting society. While AI may excel in certain aspects of life and could potentially take over some tasks, it cannot replace the human-centered values that DDD embodies.

AI cannot fully understand or replicate the emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and soft skills that are fundamental to DDD's work. The tasks carried out within DDD, such as team collaboration, coordination, communication, and community engagement, require human judgment, empathy, and experience. I believe these are core elements that DDD must preserve to continue making a meaningful impact.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Do you have any additional messages or advice you would like to leave for DDD? If you want to suggest any changes, how would you like to see DDD evolve or improve?

Metta Thippavong: I think DDD has done well so far, but over time, things may need to evolve. I hope that DDD will continue providing opportunities to those with fewer chances, teaching skills and good attitudes to help them step confidently into society, just as it has in the past. I hope DDD will keep guiding younger generations to think critically and remain open to learning, so that when they step out into the world, they will be ready to face new challenges and meet people with greater skills.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: I wasn't surprised to hear that you initially wanted to be a teacher, and later you worked with DDD, as both roles involve guiding and teaching others, consistently passing on good values.

Metta Thippavong: Yes, no matter how much knowledge we have or how much we've learned, whenever we enter a new environment or community, we always need to keep learning even more.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Should you have anything additional you'd like to add beyond what has already been said, you can share that as well.

Metta Thippavong: Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the founders and co-founders of DDD, especially Jeremy, who recognized the importance of young people and created opportunities for first job experiences, particularly in the digital field.

I also want to thank all the donors who have supported us over the years, regardless of which generation we belong to.

Most importantly, I want to thank Mai Siriphongphan, one of the DDD founders in Laos, for bringing this project to the country, as well as the entire founding team in Laos. I feel truly happy and proud to see DDD continue to grow and expand, even though I may not have participated frequently.

I still think of DDD constantly and cherish the eight years I spent collaborating with them, as every opportunity I received helped shape who I am today. Thank you.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Thank you.

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.*