

“When people have low technological skills, it will impact our country's development.”

A Conversation with Phabphada Dokbouathong, Laos VP Operations

Ambika Samarthya-Howard
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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Please introduce yourself and tell me how you got involved with Digital Divide Data (DDD).

Phabphada Dokbouathong: My short name is Phab. I started working with Digital Divide Data (DDD) Laos in 2004 at the associate level. At that time, it was quite small, from 5 AM to 5 PM. I had the afternoon shift, led by Mai Siriphongphanh, the co-founder of DDD Laos. She was quite strict in recruiting people for her programs.

People needed to pass a strict test or exam, with typing, computer, and English skills, and face-to-face interviews. For typing, 30 words per minute was needed. I tested with just eight words per minute and did not pass. I waited for her to call me, but she put me on a backup list.

I know DDD because I studied in the evening class and I worked as a seller in gas stations. One day, when I collected money from a customer, I saw in a newspaper that DDD was looking for data entry associates, and I applied.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did they still recruit you after failing the typing test?

Phabphada Dokbouathong: Three months after that test and interview day, she called me to ask if I was still available. I came, but she did not give me the contract yet; she just gave me one month of typing practice. And in January 2004, she accepted me.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are you from Vientiane?

Phabphada Dokbouathong: My parents are from the south of Laos, but I was born in Vientiane. My hometown is next to the airport. I have two siblings, my younger sisters. After I joined DDD, I was an associate for almost six months. It was difficult for DDD to find people who knew how to use a computer at that time.

That's why the lady established an internal training program and recruited more people to study data entry training. My friends and I volunteered to work part-time for training programs to train the associates.

I volunteered to teach English. I grew with DDD from being a supervisor, to a project coordinator, and a project manager. In 2017, I got promoted to VP Operations to oversee day-to-day operations in Laos.

We don't have other experts in Laos; in Cambodia, they have the foreign staff. I'm the only representative for Laos, the VP Operations, together with the head of the office, and a representative for legal documents. I'm involved in approvals and joint meetings with the government.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What have been the biggest changes in Laos in the last 20 years?

Phabphada Dokbouathong: Our country has changed a lot. We are still a developing country, especially regarding the infrastructure and health. Our economic growth is good, with a lot of development. If you come this year, you might see an environment that you won't see next year because of the development.

Sustainability of development is more important for our country. The reason we locate our office here is that we are near the University of Laos, bank institutions, and other schools or colleges. Right now, people drop out of their education, and it's hard for us to look for opportunities and candidates from the schools. Because young people want to go straight to the workforce.

I don't know about the mindset for our young people. They don't worry about the education at all. They want to look for a job without having any experience. When they graduate from high school, they're supposed to continue their study at a higher level, but they changed their mind and perspective about this. They're looking for a job to earn money, to make their life easier than studying. They don't think studying will get them a good job in the future.

This change is not good for DDD at all because we are looking for people who have just graduated from high school and want to continue studying. We try to find out how we can balance our program with the current situation. Maybe we need to think differently and not focus on their current education, but let them focus on real work and how to earn money.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's so crazy. I would never have guessed that.

Phabphada Dokbouathong: It's not easy, but we still find a way. We find partnerships, we work with the high schools, because when they graduate, we want to know their plan. If they want to study, they can do it together with DDD because we're helping young people get skills. They can earn money while they are student. That is our concept, and we have partnerships with several NGOs or schools to get more candidates.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: If you think of DDD and the most successful people you know who have graduated from this program, who comes to mind?

Phabphada Dokbouathong: I have several of my close friends in the first group; I'm the only one still working with DDD. All of them graduated and work at a high level in other countries. Some of them are senior ministers or heads of some offices.

I have observed that they are very committed. For example, we have two shifts, morning and afternoon. In the morning, they need to arrive at the office at six o'clock. You need to work together with your school, but at the same time, you are also a volunteer to support the training program in DDD. It means you need to work an extra hour to help other people in the company. That's the kind of behavior we have been trained to establish DDD Laos. I don't know if we call that culture. It might be like helping each other, teamwork, because of the belief that whenever we learn together, we will grow together. You can't grow alone.

We share the knowledge, that is the mindset. When you go to another company, you still carry that behavior. Other companies also praise us, saying that whoever comes from the DDD company will be accepted. At the time of graduation, it's easy for them to get a job based on the work culture that they received from DDD.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is that why you stayed so long?

Phabphada Dokbouathong: Yes. When I saw my friend leave DDD, I felt sad. Sometimes I train people as a team member, and when they're good, they leave. That doesn't feel good at all. But I feel proud when I see them outside. When I walk out and we see each other, then they praise the DDD culture.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What about you? Why did you stay?

Phabphada Dokbouathong: I think there are several things why I'm still here. First of all, after the core group resigned, one of my leadership models also resigned. Several new people came from other countries, who were difficult to work with.

Especially people from America or other countries who did not know Asian culture at all. But that challenge was my opportunity, and I learned from them. I know what they want, and they understand how the Laotian people are. I'm still here as a middle person to connect my local people. One thing I'm really proud of is that for DDD Laos, 98% of local people manage the office. We have only two foreigners right now. One of them has his wife here; he's Dutch. We hired him because we had a special project that required Dutch language skills.

The second guy just moved from the Phnom Penh office in Cambodia to Laos because several people from my project management side could not be replaced, and we transitioned him here. The rest are local people. It was my dream for the last 15 years in DDD to grow new, younger local leaders.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you do that when there is this new trend of nobody going to university anymore?

Phabphada Dokbouathong: That is a different thing that happened after the COVID-19 era. It wasn't like this before. It may be time for DDD to change to fit the current situation. Maybe people want to work remotely instead of at the office, and we could outsource a new project with high technical skills to our alumni team?

We could set up one alumni team that works part-time, but doesn't come to the office. It's for the future because right now, based on our platform, we still need people to come to the office.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you think about people who didn't succeed, people for whom it was not a good fit. What type of people do you feel DDD hasn't reached?

Phabphada Dokbouathong: I saw some key observations about those who did not succeed when coming to DDD. First of all, the goal they expected was different. Some of them join us for three years, and then find out it's not the right place for them. Others think they don't need these kinds of skills to be a good employee. They just want to open their shop, which is different from what DDD trains them.

The second thing is technology. We think it's good to train people in technology, but they may not need it to have a good life in the future.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Talking about this point of technology, when you think about the impact of DDD on Laos and about technology in Laos, do you feel like it has impacted the country?

Phabphada Dokbouathong: Yes, it has impacted our country as well, not just individuals. Right now, Laos is trying to digitalize all of the platforms, for example, the digital government.

When we have a good policy in our country, but people don't know how to use it or they don't have the technological skill, they cannot understand what the government or our country is trying to change. Whenever people in our country have low technological skills, it will impact our country's development as well.

You may think that this is a good thing, but people don't even know what you are trying to do or how they can adapt to change. It's impactful if the people don't have the mindset and the skills yet.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: If you could ask for something DDD to stop doing or to do more of in the next 2, 5, or 25 years, what would it be? Is there anything you want to see differently?

Phabphada Dokbouathong: There are a few things to consider. The first thing is regarding the environment of our work. How can we lead our work to the people who do not come to our programs?

The second thing is that in other DDD offices, they have three shifts: morning, afternoon, and evening. Evening is not like our evening; it's like a night shift.

The night shift is still new for our people; they don't want to do it, because they think it's not a really good time for work. Maybe because they did not open their mind, people sleep late. I want to know what they are doing in the evening and if they can change from playing and watching on their phones to doing work instead, and if that will be good for them.

The last thing is that we try to bring the other programs to DDD Laos, the Career Connect programs. We want to establish that program in Laos and network with the employer. Before, when people graduated, they were looking for a job by themselves. The Career Connect program will bring the model from Phnom Penh, and it helps people choose and find an employer they're willing to work for. It helps them to prepare themselves with the skills they need to work for a financial office or company, for example.

Once we have the program, we can help our people to explore opportunities in the future.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's great. Thank you, operations people are the busiest people, so I appreciate that you took the time.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*