

“DDD wants to be part of policy discussions with the government... and improve the ecosystem in the country where we operate.”

A Conversation with Sopheap Im, Chief People Officer

Ambika Samarthya-Howard
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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your path and your relationship with DDD [Digital Divide Data]?

Sopheap Im: My name is Sopheap Im, and I'm from Cambodia. I started my career at DDD over 20 years ago, when I was in my early 20s. I found out about DDD through the training center where I went for computer training, and I applied for a job as an associate. At that time, we did not have pre-employment training. The candidate who won the job at DDD needed to learn enough computer skills and speak basic English. I got the job after the second try.

I started at DDD as an associate in 2004, and a year or two later, I got promoted to project leader to lead a small team of ten people in the afternoon shift. Two years later, I got promoted to general manager to take care of a branch office called Battambang, where I was born and grew up. That's in the west of Cambodia, about a four-and-a-half-hour drive from Phnom Penh. In mid-2011, I left DDD to continue my graduate education in the US at Portland State University in Oregon.

When I worked at DDD as a general manager, I worked full-time during the day, and I got a full scholarship to continue my education at a local university, so I studied in the evening. I finished my bachelor's degree in 2009. Now, I serve as Chief People Officer at DDD. I oversee the global function called people operation. It includes HR functions and social impact, and it does fundraising for DDD to run social impact programs. I've been fortunate to be part of DDD since the beginning.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are the biggest changes you've seen in DDD over the entire 25-year period?

Sopheap Im: We started DDD with a focus on impact; we were very young, and very purpose-driven. We learned about how to do BPO [business process outsourcing] work from a company in India, our founder, Jeremy Hockenstein, and some of the co-founders. The work itself is fairly simple. In digitization, you see what's on the screen, then you do the keystroke. Later on, technology replaced that manual work. From time to time, we'd see paperwork, but even with the local companies, it had been digitized by the evolution of technology, and we started to see less manual work. Then DDD started to progress with the market chain.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you talk about the changes you've seen since the beginning from a people and culture standpoint? Have the demographics changed? Do you see more people who are more vocal, more political, and more educated?

Sopheap Im: Yes, there is a generational change. Twenty years ago, poverty looked different in Cambodia. When we started DDD, there were only two main payrolls in the city. There wasn't a lot going on in terms of infrastructure. DDD was the only nonprofit focused on BPO technology job creation.

There were a lot of challenges to operating in Cambodia as the infrastructure was not very competitive. For instance, the internet was much more expensive and not reliable. Given that type of infrastructure, it's very challenging for people to learn a skill set and be ready for work. DDD invested in providing opportunities to high school grads who had no work experience and no skills by spending time preparing them for work.

Now, there's more access to technology, and there's more access to learning, but the gap of getting ready for a job is still there. DDD makes a huge impact just by getting people ready for the first day of work. DDD puts a lot of investment into things like job coaching, and that starts at day one, before people have become productive and efficient in their jobs. DDD's type of business is not comparable [to the usual business you find] in the countries where we operate, like Cambodia and Laos. We are unique in terms of the service and the skill set that we bring into the country.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What do you think is the hardest part about managing people? What's been the biggest challenge that you've seen as you shape the values and management across three regions—two being quite different from each other? What are you most proud of?

Sopheap Im: From a global operating model perspective, we need to set the culture properly. We are a global social enterprise. We have to be clear on who we are and what we stand for in terms of the culture, values, and desired behavior that we want our employees to embrace at DDD. We also need to make sure that we preserve the culture of individual countries, and make global operating models applicable to the local context because at the end of the day, people need to take ownership over what success looks like for the country that they operate in. We have over 1,000 employees. When you work with people at the global level, they have their own thinking, their own thought processes.

The behavior that we see represents the bottom of the iceberg, which is what people believe. Even when you have written rules, people's beliefs shape how they perform their work and how they behave at the workplace. Consistency is the key to making sure that whatever we put in place in terms of culture, procedure, and policy is there for people to reference.

The human aspect of having consistent conversations between managers and team members is a very important aspect of how people perceive their work. It's not just about roles, but also individuals, and how our managers spend time getting to know their team members and talking at a personal level so they understand each other. This is why, in our training and development model for managers, we have a structured learning program. Our managers start from the foundational level and go through the advanced level. We support them as they walk through their career journey at DDD.

There are multiple challenges. One is how to attract the right talent to DDD. The work we do is sometimes uncertain in terms of volume, how many people we need, and how many people we need to shave away. We've put a robust recruitment program in place, and we also get people ready for the work because we cannot just expect someone to walk out of school and be ready to perform at DDD. We have our own training that makes sure people are prepared.

If I jump to what is rewarding and what I'm proud of, it's that after 25 years in Cambodia and Laos and 15 years in Kenya, we are surviving and sustaining as a business while staying true to our social impact. The locations that we picked are not very common for BPO business. We have a dual purpose of being sustainable as a business and staying true to our core mission of transforming life in the country that we serve.

What I'm proud of is that all the people who come to DDD, regardless of background, come with the same purpose: making a difference by creating meaningful work through DDD in different functions and through their own capacity. We have up-and-down situations based on changes in the market, like COVID and changes in client strategy. What makes us stand strong is resilience. We stay afloat in whatever situation we have to face. This is what I'm proud of. We work as a team from the top down, all the way to the associates. It's what makes us DDD.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: One of the things you said earlier was that a lot of what you're doing is making sure that not only DDD, but the country as a whole, is successful. Can you talk about what it means to be successful in Cambodia, or to make a successful Cambodia?

Sopheap Im: Our end goal is to make people's lives better than they were when they started. Yes, people become self-sustaining and independent financially, but also, people grow into better versions of themselves. They are better today than yesterday, and tomorrow they will be better still. We develop a future generation of capable and professional young leaders.

What we bring to the country is not just jobs, it's not just economic development; it's a sense of responsibility, a chance for people to give back in their own capacity. What we also bring that people do not learn at school is the best practices of global enterprise, operational excellence, and ethical behavior. This is not something that people learn and enforce at school. That's something they learn at DDD.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you give an example of something that you would do over again, and maybe do differently, if you could?

Sopheap Im: How we select a person for the job. Many times, new managers focus on what is tangible. Some people might make the mistake of thinking that, just because someone is capable of typing quickly, they will be great for a job. But those tangible skills are things you can teach. If you give someone one or two weeks to learn, they can perform the work.

I've learned from experience how to look at a candidate to see if they are teachable, to see if their character will bring them success. If you can be clear on what successful attributes a candidate must have for a specific job or role, then you will make the right decisions. You will do a good job as a recruiter, and you will also give people a chance to succeed in their job because you are clear that this is something they can learn.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are the most significant attributes of somebody that you would recruit into your program?

Sopheap Im: It's different for different people. [But you can tell a lot from an interview.] For somebody who no experience at all with job interviews, especially students, you can see through interaction whether they have internal self-drive to be better, and simply lack of opportunity. If you have to spend a lot of time just to give people a clue like as to why they even came to the job interview, then it's probably not in their best interest to come. Somebody probably made them come, maybe a parent pressuring them to find a job or improve themselves.

You can assess individual commitment when you do the interview, through a simple telling about themselves, how they spend their day, what they want to do in the future. Even if they don't have a clear career goal, you will see if somebody is seeking the opportunity to be better. I don't have a clear one-size-fits-all response because each individual will share their story at a different capacity, but if you want to pick the right candidate, you need to take a cue from their words.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you have a favorite DDD success story?

Sopheap Im: There's a former DDD staff member who is disabled. He comes from a low-income family, and he started his career at DDD as an associate. He was on the same journey as everyone else, started as an associate, got a scholarship, continued to university. What stood out about him was his engagement with English.

We have an English learning program through a dedicated computer lab in Cambodia. Many students struggle with e-learning because they need somebody to be in the

classroom to teach them the English. Among all the many hundreds of learners in the English program, he spent enough time on the e-learning platform to significantly improve his English and become somebody who supported the English program. He always asked me, What more can I do? How can I help? He always found new ways to improve our program. When he left DDD, he became the director of another nonprofit. He still reaches out to me and sends updates and positive messages. He wants to give back and is always available when someone at DDD, be it me or someone else, reaches out for reference or support.

Many of our former employees speak highly of DDD, and make themselves accessible to current DDD employees for job references, speaking, coaching. I cannot give enough names. The alumni of DDD become a resource for the current employees and for the other alumni members.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What would you like to see in the next 25 years? What are some changes that DDD can work on, or what can they get better at?

Sopheap Im: We want to see DDD last forever in the countries where we operate, and also get bigger in terms of the number of jobs that we create in each country. We also want to see DDD expand to other regions. In terms of our presence in each country, we want to become the key player in the country, and not just as an enterprise and a job creator. We want to play a more prominent role in how we shape the dynamic of the space we create in each country.

How can we utilize 25 years of DDD running this mission impossible enterprise in countries like Cambodia, Laos, and Kenya? DDD can be a model for others who aspire to create a social enterprise in their country. DDD wants to be part of policy discussions with the government, to be part of the association, to improve the landscape and improve the ecosystem in the country where we operate. More than just inward-looking, we want to expand our impact outward as well.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you so much for your time and your insights.

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.*