

“No matter how fast technology develops, basic computer skills remain necessary.”

A Conversation with Thanhvar Phouthamaxang, 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?

Thanhvar Phouthamaxang: Hello, my name is Thanva Phuthavansai, but many people at DDD know me as Lu because I started using this name after leaving DDD. Originally, before joining DDD, I was from another province, Xiangkhouang. After finishing high school, like many others, I moved to Vientiane to continue my studies. Basically, I came from a rural village.

Before I knew DDD, I studied forestry and environmental subjects at Dongkhamxang. After graduating, I continued my studies at the National University of Laos (Dongdok Campus) in the English program. During that time, I had classmates who were already working at DDD. They introduced me to DDD. My friend recommended DDD to me, saying that it offered opportunities to learn and work, and if I passed the interview process, I could be selected to work with a salary. When I heard this, I was immediately interested and applied to DDD through my friend Nok in 2007. I studied there for three to six months, and I don't remember the exact details clearly because it was a long time ago.

At that time, the main training covered two areas: one was computer-related, mainly learning typing skills for letters and numbers, and the other was English language

training. After some time studying, I went through a selection process and was accepted as a volunteer. I was one of six people selected out of about 50 applicants, so you can see that those six were the ones who passed together. I don't recall exactly how many months I volunteered, but the volunteer work at that time was compensated around \$10–20 per month for basic tasks, mainly typing.

After volunteering for a while, I was promoted to a regular employee with performance-based evaluation. For example, after about three months, my salary increased based on work efficiency. At that time, I worked the morning shift from 6 a.m. to 12 p.m. Later, I became a Quality Assurance (QA) staff member, responsible for checking the quality of data entry to ensure accuracy and efficiency.

As I mentioned earlier, I studied at the National University of Laos (Dongdok Campus) while working with DDD. DDD helped cover about 70-80% of my tuition fees at Dongdok, which significantly reduced my financial burden. Besides the salary from DDD, they also helped with tuition fees. After about one year in QA, I was promoted to team leader, overseeing a team of 10-15 data entry staff. This was the last position I held at DDD.

During my time at DDD, I learned many skills. Before joining DDD, most of my work experience was related to physical labor, mainly office tasks. DDD was the first place I worked in an office setting. What I learned at DDD was very concrete, including computer skills, various technologies, and English skills. Since there were international colleagues working together, it gave me the opportunity to practice English.

I graduated from the National University of Laos in 2011. At that time, one of my dreams was to work in a challenging position because I had learned and gained experience from DDD. DDD also encouraged personal growth by supporting those ready and willing to develop themselves.

So, I left DDD in 2011 and returned to my hometown in Xiangkhouang to start my own business for about a year before moving back to Vientiane. My first job after returning was at a hotel. Later, I worked with international NGOs and continued to apply many skills I had learned at DDD in my own work, whether in computer-related tasks, English, communication, or leadership. These foundational skills from DDD were extremely important for my career.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: During your time at DDD, did you have the opportunity to participate in any training programs that you considered important, and which one did you find the most valuable?

Thanhvar Phouthamaxang: The training I participated in and found most valuable was in communication skills and leadership, conducted by trainers from Cambodia. It taught me what it takes to be a good leader and how to effectively communicate with people.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: I have heard that after you left DDD, you ran your own personal business for about a year, and then returned to work with international NGOs. Could you explain whether you applied the knowledge and skills you gained while at DDD to your later work? If so, could you describe this in more detail? Compared to people who did not have the experience of working with DDD, would you say there were any differences in your approach or performance?

Thanhvar Phouthamaxang: If I were to compare myself with friends who did not study or work with DDD, the most obvious difference I notice is my computer skills. My computer skills are stronger because I worked with DDD almost every day for about four years. Among my friends who also graduated from DDD, some may have progressed faster in their careers, while others may have progressed more slowly than me, which largely depends on each person's own effort and dedication.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Do you think the four years of experience you gained from DDD have helped you a lot?

Thanhvar Phouthamaxang: If I compare myself with others currently in the same position, I still believe that my computer skills are stronger and more experienced. In addition, this also includes leadership and management skills that I had already gained before joining DDD.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Do you think you gained a lot of knowledge and experience while you were at DDD? If so, do you think it has been very useful for your work compared to others who are doing the same job but didn't come from DDD? How has it helped improve your life, whether in terms of personal satisfaction or your income?

Thanhvar Phouthamaxang: As for myself, I am satisfied with my current situation. I would say that I am a lucky person and persistent, not easily giving up against circumstances, because I come from a family that was not complete and did not have a strong financial background. By "lucky," I mean that I have two sources of income. Besides working in the office at WCS (Wildlife Conservation Society), I also run my own business.

For my work at WCS, I applied the knowledge and skills I learned from DDD as a solid foundation for my current tasks, whether it is computer skills, English language skills, teamwork, working under pressure, or self-directed learning. My second type of "luck"

comes from the foundation I had built prior to joining DDD. I had already worked in construction-related work, which I was able to expand on, and I started my own business in construction, similar to a contracting company.

Of course, I was able to apply the knowledge gained from DDD directly to running my own business because managing people, planning work schedules, and handling finances properly were all required skills I had learned.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: What do you think DDD has contributed to Lao society?

Thanhvar Phouthamaxang: If Laos had 18 DDD offices or branches in all 18 provinces, I think it could raise the level of knowledge across Lao society significantly. However, it ultimately depends on the individuals involved, because DDD alone cannot change someone's life, each person must take responsibility for their own life.

For myself, I think DDD is an excellent place because it gives people who have limited opportunities access to education, especially in computer skills. Studying on their own would be expensive, and scholarships might not provide the same practical experience as DDD. At DDD, people not only learn but also actively practice, which gives them more knowledge than conventional schools that mostly focus on theory.

I believe that anyone who attends DDD will gain solid knowledge and can achieve results after graduating, as long as they are willing to work hard and practice. DDD's role is to teach and provide knowledge, but ultimately it depends on the individual to take that knowledge and continue developing it in the future.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: What is your perspective on DDD in the present context, given the challenges brought by technological changes, especially with the arrival of AI? How do you see DDD's role and relevance in today's rapidly changing world? Do you think DDD will continue to be necessary and remain active in the modern world?

Thanhvar Phouthamaxang: I think the vision of DDD is already good and should be maintained. Speaking from my experience as a former participant, I believe DDD serves as a strong model by providing opportunities for those with fewer chances, helping them gain knowledge and skills before they move on to work in other places with readiness.

If asked what I would like DDD to improve or develop further, I would say I want it to grow bigger than before so it can provide even more opportunities for people. For example, if DDD had 18 offices or branches across the 18 provinces of Laos, it would be very beneficial. I would like to see its branches expanded beyond just the capital, Vientiane, to other provinces, following the example of Cambodia, which already has

multiple branches. I'm not sure if DDD currently has any branches in Cambodia, but I believe there are still many people in Laos with potential and knowledge who lack opportunities to access personal development. If DDD could provide more opportunities, it would be very positive.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: What do you think about DDD in the current era of technological change, especially with the rise of AI? How do you see the role of DDD in today's world? Since DDD is a social enterprise and needs to generate revenue as well, do you think it will still be necessary and continue to exist in this rapidly changing world?

Thanhvar Phouthamaxang: I think that although AI may eventually replace humans in certain tasks, such as typing, for example, AI can directly convert spoken words into text without the need for a person to type, I believe that basic computer skills, especially typing, are still necessary in the present world, particularly for young Lao people. Everyone needs to learn the foundational skills first, because nowadays using a computer for work, regardless of location, is almost an essential part of life.

Therefore, no matter how fast technology develops, basic computer skills remain necessary, and DDD still plays an important role in passing on this knowledge to others.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Do you still stay in touch with other alumni on a regular basis?

Thanhvar Phouthamaxang: As for me, I haven't been able to join any gatherings because of a busy schedule and inconvenience, since most of my work takes me to different provinces or even abroad, so I have had to decline participating. The last time I joined in person was about 2-3 years ago. However, nowadays we stay in touch daily through WhatsApp.

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.*