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A Conversation with Thongchanh Inthachak, 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?

Thongchanh Inthachak: Hello, my name is Thongchan Inthachak. I come from Luang Prabang Province in northern Laos. I am currently working at the Disability Mainstreaming Advisory Service Center (DMAS Center)

Before joining DDD, I was one of the first group of people in the initial batch. At that time, I had just graduated from a vocational school for people with disabilities and was looking for a place to practice my skills. I discovered that DDD was newly established, so I joined as a trainee, becoming one of the first seven people to enter DDD. I can say I started learning alongside the DDD system from the very beginning.

At that time, I was studying English. When I joined DDD, it was still in its old office near Dongpayap. My first training focused on learning to use computers and typing, with guidance from foreign instructors. I have always been curious and eager to learn, so I also studied IT skills on my own, which increased my knowledge and abilities. I learned typing, data entry, and later worked in IT support for DDD, applying the knowledge I had gained from both my own learning and DDD training.

After about one year, the office moved to a new location. I was given an important responsibility: installing new systems, including various network systems, especially technical aspects such as servers. I spent about 5-6 years at DDD, learning everything from basics to real-world tasks and gaining extensive experience from the opportunities DDD provided. I believe this was the right time for me to leave DDD to seek new experiences while giving others the opportunity to learn at DDD as I had.

During my time at DDD, I worked closely with two teammates. I am confident that after I left, they were fully capable of taking over my responsibilities. For people without prior experience who graduated in English, their first work at DDD was IT-related. After leaving around 2005-2006, they continued working in IT in private companies, including research work.

I can say that DDD was a turning point in my career because before that, I had only focused on English-related work such as translation. Being at DDD allowed me to learn computer skills, data handling, and IT, which enabled me to work in IT up to the present.

In addition, during my time at DDD, I learned other skills through opportunities to attend management training in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, which is knowledge I apply daily in my role as a manager at the DMAS Center. Most of the work I have done after leaving DDD has been IT-related, whether in research, banking, or project management, with IT as the main focus.

After working in various places for many years, being a person with a disability and having my own family, I felt the desire to do something for people with disabilities like myself. I had learned how to help and share opportunities while at DDD, and this experience became the foundation for establishing the DMAS Center.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Did you have any other experiences or roles while at DDD besides IT or management?

Thongchanh Inthachak: Of course. I also had a role as a trainer, as I mentioned earlier. I had two team members whom I helped train from scratch, and I also provided basic computer training to new people joining DDD to pass on the knowledge I had.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Do you think the knowledge and experience you gained from being at DDD before helped you when you worked elsewhere?

Thongchanh Inthachak: Of course, my time at DDD provided me with valuable skills, especially in typing, as well as foundational computer and IT knowledge. Another important aspect I gained while at DDD was diverse work experience in various workplaces. For example, when I went to work in a new place, I was often asked about how I adapted and about workplace culture. Because I had worked in many areas at

DDD with people from various nationalities, whether Cambodian, Myanmar, or others, it became a strong point that helped me answer these questions when I started working in a new environment.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: I would like to follow up regarding relationships among former DDD colleagues. Did you stay in contact or keep in touch?

Thongchanh Inthachak: For me, DDD was a place that gave opportunities to people from similar backgrounds to come together without distinction. Most participants came from comparable life situations, those seeking experience, those lacking work opportunities, or those looking for support.

Being together allowed everyone to understand each other well and communicate effectively, almost like a family. Working together strengthened bonds and built a strong sense of camaraderie, so even after leaving DDD, people continued to stay in touch.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Everyone who graduated from DDD seems to have a positive attitude and a strong sense of care and compassion, even though they may not be from the same cohort.

Thongchanh Inthachak: I think the reason everyone shows such care and compassion is because of DDD's organizational culture, which especially for those who joined earlier, always taught us to pass on the lessons we learned to the next generation.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Do you still meet with DDD alumni regularly?

Thongchanh Inthachak: I personally might be too busy with my own work to meet often, but there are occasional opportunities to catch up and collaborate well. DDD organizes alumni meetings regularly, but because of my own work schedule, it's not always convenient for me to attend.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: What specific contributions do you think DDD has made to Lao society?

Thongchanh Inthachak: Certainly, DDD has helped society by providing opportunities to groups of underprivileged people, who make up the majority.

However, due to DDD's budget constraints, it may not be able to offer opportunities to everyone. Therefore, it focuses on opening opportunities to those who are motivated to develop themselves and eager to improve, such as students who have finished high school and want to continue learning.

Overall, DDD's work mainly targets people living in Vientiane, and it still cannot fully cover the provinces.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: Did you also receive educational support from DDD?

Thongchanh Inthachak: I did not receive it because I did not study alongside the other peers who received it and worked with DDD. I was studying at a school for people with disabilities, and when I worked with DDD during the internship, I was about to finish my studies.

Overall, my time at DDD was mostly about learning, working, and receiving training during that period.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: I would like you to briefly summarize what you gained from DDD, what impressed you, and what you wish to convey to DDD. How do you view DDD today, given the challenges of technological changes, especially AI? Do you think DDD will still be necessary and relevant in today's evolving world?

Thongchanh Inthachak: First of all, briefly, what I received from DDD and what I think is very important are management skills and, equally importantly, IT skills that I gained from DDD. Regarding the role of DDD in the next 5–10 years, I think there will need to be adjustments because of the rise of AI. Much of what DDD does is related to typing. AI might be able to replace this work, for example, printing books used to be done by humans, but now AI might be able to read data and print it automatically. In some cases, AI could substitute for humans, and people will need to adapt.

If DDD continues to operate in this field, it may need to adapt in areas like coding or designing AI prompts to maximize efficiency, so it can remain competitive with other business units in the market. DDD is a business unit operating in the tech sector, which is changing rapidly. Therefore, DDD must adapt to continue operating.

However, one thing that is still very important and that I would like DDD to continue is its teaching of essential life skills, whether in management, teamwork, communication, or providing opportunities to underprivileged groups.

Over the past 10+ years, DDD has done this, and I hope it continues. This will ensure that technology skills go hand-in-hand with fundamental life skills because, no matter how much technology changes, humans still need to advance alongside it.

Thongsavanh Souvannasane: If you have anything additional you want to say, you can feel free to share.

Thongchanh Inthachak: One more thing I would like to add is that I learned a lot from international instructors brought in by DDD. I gained a great deal of knowledge from foreign teachers who were invited to teach us. If this approach could continue

consistently, it would be very beneficial because we would keep learning new and valuable knowledge continuously.

For example, my friends and I at DDD worked very well together, and they mentioned that they also gained knowledge from foreign experts who came to teach. However, I've heard that nowadays most of the teaching is done by the staff themselves. If experts with specialized knowledge could be brought in, it would be even better, especially in the field of AI, because I think other countries are more advanced than us in this area.

In short, it has been a very valuable experience at DDD. 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.*