

“With the salary and resources I earn, I can share ... and solve family financial problems.”

A Conversation with UI Khley, graduate of Digital Divide Data

Socheata Hean

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Socheata Hean: Please introduce yourself and your relationship with DDD.

UI Khley: I was a former staff member with Digital Divide Data (DDD) starting in 2009. That was the year I finished high school. That time I had been with another organization called CIST (The Center for Information Systems Training), a project established in Cambodia by Enfants du Mekong in Obek Ka’am, Phnom Penh. That was what brought me to get the opportunity to get training on skills called Data Operator in 2009 for six months. After training, I joined DDD and worked in the Battambang office until 2012. Then I moved from Battambang to Phnom Penh to continue working with DDD. At that time, I had to transfer my study from University of Battambang to Mekong University in Phnom Penh. In 2014, I finished my bachelor’s degree in Management. So I worked for DDD from 2009 to 2014, moving from Data Operator to Team Leader before I left. Even after leaving, I still keep strong connections as an alumni with DDD management, with staff, and I always join DDD activities when I can.

Socheata Hean: What skills and knowledge did you gain from DDD?

UI Khley: The knowledge and skills I got from DDD really gave me the opportunity to get good jobs and to work successfully. The most important skills and foundation skills were English language and computer skills. At DDD, because we worked with international clients, I improved my English. I also learned computer skills — using basic programs and administration tools that help me study better and work more effectively.

Besides that, DDD gave me soft skills like problem-solving, teamwork, and communication. These are life skills that help me as a student, as a worker, and as a human resource in society. They gave me confidence to face challenges, to solve problems, to know what direction to take, and to achieve my goals for myself and for my country.

Socheata Hean: What have you been doing after leaving DDD?

UI Khley: After I left DDD, I applied to work with Mega Asset Management (consulting real estate development company). I worked there first as an assistant to management, then later promoted to Human Resources Officer. I stayed from 2014 to 2016.

In 2016, I joined Pour un Sourire d'Enfant (PSE), an NGO. My role was an Employment Specialist to connect with students and parents. A year later, I moved to Cufa Cambodia in Phnom Penh for one year.

In September 2018, I joined Swisscontact Cambodia which is my current workplace. First I worked in Preah Vihear for about six months, then I was transferred to the Siem Reap province office. From 2019 to 2024, I was based in Siem Reap, but I also worked across provinces like Ratanakiri, Kratie, Stung Treng, Kampong Thom, Pursat, Battambang, Phnom Penh, and so on

Currently, I am Senior Regional Coordinator for Swisscontact, in charge of human resource development. Our projects focus on national level and 12 target provinces, working closely with the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Education, especially in ICT and coding projects.

Back then with the national ICT coding project, I was the one assessing eligible schools to implement the project in Battambang and Siem Reap.

Socheata Hean: Looking back, do you think what skills and knowledge you gained from DDD are relevant to your evolving career?

UI Khley: Yes, very much. 100%. Because of the English and computer skills I gained at DDD, I could work with big companies and international organizations. Also, soft skills like communication and adaptability were necessary. Without those, I could not succeed.

I also believe I am strong in management and leadership. I continued my education, completing a Master's in Development Management and now pursuing a PhD at National University of Battambang focusing on exploring the factors that drive student motivation and engagement in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

This study seeks to challenge the misperception that TVET jobs are only for the low-skilled, emphasizing instead that TVET education equips learners with specialized expertise that leads to respectable, well-paying careers.

Professions such as automotive technicians, air-conditioning specialists, electricians, draftsmen, construction workers, graphic designers, and photographers represent the backbone of a skilled workforce. As Cambodia advances toward industrialization, the demand is no longer for low-skilled labor but for technically competent and adaptable workers who can sustain competitiveness in the regional and global market.

So this study aims to provide evidence-based recommendations to government and stakeholders on how to strengthen skills training in alignment with technological and industrial needs. In this context, the Cambodian government has set a target of engaging 1.5 million Cambodians in TVET, understanding the sector's growing importance as a national development priority.

Socheata Hean: How has your skills, knowledge, and experience from DDD has shaped who you are, your family and society?

UI Khley: Talking about this, I'm very proud of what I have experienced and who I have become.

I come from a poor family in a remote area in Oddar Meanchey province. Considering the out-of-reach area I was living in, my family had very little opportunity for education. I come from a big family with 10 members. My parents are farmers. I have worked extremely hard from secondary school through my undergraduate and master's studies, and now into my PhD journey, to achieve what I have today. Since childhood, I have been determined to pursue higher education to the fullest extent possible, no matter the challenges or sacrifices.

My wife is a teacher, and she trusted me to lead and support. And she supports me to continue my education. Now I can provide for my siblings, my parents, and help my family with my income and knowledge. People look up to me as a role model for my vision and determination to reach my goal.

Socheata Hean: What is the social impact you have contributed?

UI Khley: First and foremost, I'm not a burden to society. I can support myself, my family, and my parents. With the salary and resources I earn, I can share with them and solve family financial problems.

Second, with my knowledge and skills, I can help youths — especially vulnerable youths — who have limited access to the opportunities to get opportunities, skills, and jobs through the projects I work with.

Third, by continuing my education and sharing knowledge, I inspire my friends, siblings, and relatives to study and build their own skills. Some even do better than me, and that makes me proud.

Socheata Hean: Back during your time at DDD, technology was not widely talked about. But now everyone talks about Technology, Coding, and AI. In your view, how has DDD changed the tech scene in your country?

Socheata Hean: What should DDD do to catch up with this trend?

UI Khley: I can't thank DDD enough for this. I highly appreciate what DDD has done in terms of innovation. The training and programs DDD has provided are aligned with the digital age context. For example, in my case, the work with DDD had embedded the concept of ICT in general, which is a stepping stone for capacity development. From knowing nothing about ICT, through training with DDD, they learned computers, technology, IT, and some graduates decided to study web development, networking, programming, coding, and so on. And those graduates have become a human resource in the technology ecosystem and contribute to social development. Some graduates even got jobs abroad. Therefore, DDD has truly shaped alumni and former staff and has influenced youths who have engaged with DDD's programs.

Socheata Hean: Last question, what would be three things you think DDD should improve or do differently?

UI Khley: I think DDD should incorporate career consultation for the younger generation, guiding them on how different university majors lead to specific job opportunities. It would also be helpful to identify which majors are in demand today and which will be in demand in the future. It would be great to have a handbook of job or occupation profiles and portfolios would be valuable, providing detailed information for students to explore. Additionally, they should also know what skills and knowledge they need to achieve their dream careers that would better prepare them for the future. This way, when they make decisions or begin preparing, they move closer to their goals—without wasting time or regretting their choices.

Socheata Hean: Thank you.

Socheata Hean is a Cambodian multimedia journalist dedicated to training the next generation of independent reporters through digital storytelling. Since 2013, she has built her career in journalism, producing impactful stories and advancing media innovation.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*