

Business of hope

A charity-funded project is training young Cambodians to capitalise on new technology, says Anthony Anderton



Photos: Anthony Anderton

Khmer Rouge victim Keo Sambath: now able to plan a future

THE over-hyped information superhighway has left most of the developing world choking on its dust. But in Phnom Penh a group of young Cambodians has managed to hitch a ride.

When Harvard decided to create a digital archive of 19th century copies of its historic newspaper, the US university outsourced the project to a specialist data

entry firm called Digital Data Divide.

Nothing remarkable about that — except that Digital Data Divide is a Cambodian company based in a modest suburban building in central Phnom Penh.

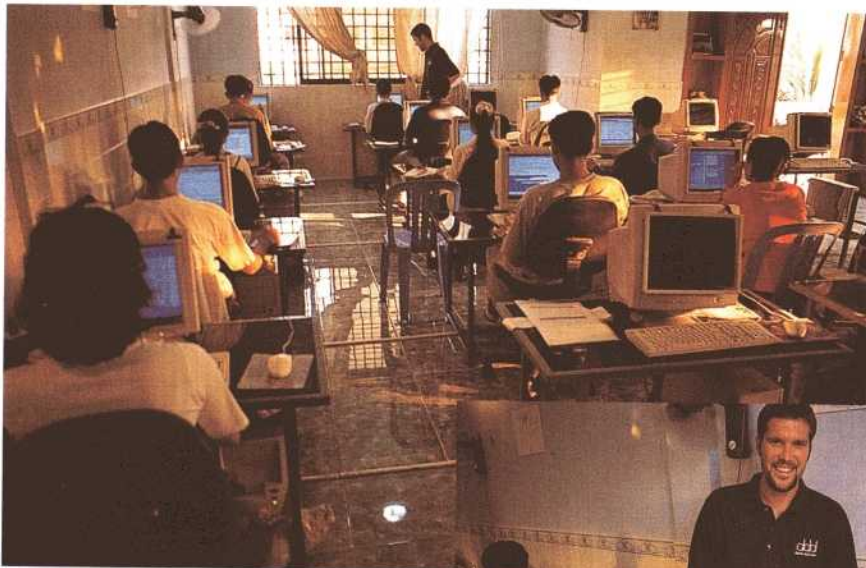
The offices on a dusty, potholed street are just around the corner from Tuol Sleng, the infamous Khmer Rouge

death camp. Here DDD's team of data operators delivers digital products to clients around the world.

The team of 65 young Cambodian staff come from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds and most joined DDD with only a rudimentary grasp of English.

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and internally displaced people," says Tim Keller, 24, the American president of DDD. "We hire direct from local computer schools. Some of these specialise in training students with disabilities."

Keller who trained as an investment banker in the US gave up his promising career to lead the project, aimed at helping young people in one of the world's least developed nations.

DDD began operations last year, using seed funding of \$50,000 from two US-based non-profit organisations, the Silicon Valley-based Global Catalyst Foundation and the Follow Your Dream Foundation.

DDD claims it can achieve 50-60 percent cost savings over US-based competitors.

"We sell where labour costs are high and produce where product costs are



Project chief Tim Keller: aiming to create a viable business

low," says Keller. "If we can approach someone in the US and offer cost savings they'll go for it," he says.

In the last 18 months DDD has won dozens of data projects. Their clients include a range of North American institutions, including Canada's National Library, three US universities (Tufts, Missouri and Utah) and Mount Holyoke, a top US women's college.

At home, the firm won a project to build the National Library of Cambodia's first digital catalogue as well as a contract with Cambodia telecoms carrier, Mobitel.

The firm has also carried out assignments for international organisations and NGOs working in Cambodia, including the World Bank, the UN and the International Labour Organisation.

The firm's staff of 65 young Cambodians earn \$65 a month, not a lot by Singapore or Hong Kong standards

but more than six times the average Cambodian wage. DDD offers training in IT and English language skills.

It also provides free health care and gives each of its data operators up to \$250 per year for their education.

One typical employee is Keo Sambath, 23, whose own life reflects the tragedy of Cambodia, still scarred by its experiences under the murderous "Killing Fields" regime of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge.

Sambath's father was killed by the Khmer Rouge. He himself contracted polio at the age of five. He did not start school until he was 15. Later, he won a place at a monastery where he was given English and computer lessons. "My future plan is to study English and Japanese fluently," says Sambath.

DDD is part of the journey, rather than a destination in itself, explains

Keller. "Our goal is to give people the skills to move on to even better jobs," he says.

Many of the firm's young operators have since graduated to new careers in banking, retail, IT, school teaching, hotel management and international business.

Over half of Cambodia's population is aged under 20. The youthful demographic base means the country is open to new ideas. "There are so many computer and English schools in Phnom Penh," says Keller. "Urban youth has put their faith in computers and English."

Keller says DDD's operating expenses are now covered by the income it generates. In the long-term, he says, the goal is to create a commercially viable business.

He adds, "I want to eliminate my own job in a year and to hand over the whole operation to local management by the end of 2003." ■