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Their biggest innovation is hope

Three Canadians take the digital revolution to Cambodia's streets Non-profit enterprise recruits the destitute to enter archive

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PHNOM PENH—Across the digital divide that separates computer-savvy Canadians from low-tech Cambodians, Jeremy Hockenstein is building a bridge.

From this three-floor walk-up on a Phnom Penh side street, around the corner from the former Khmer Rouge torture chambers, Hockenstein and two fellow Canadians are trying to bring a glimmer of globalization to a country still recovering from genocide.

Facing fierce competition, they have set up shop in this country of squalid poverty and dismal infrastructure. Witnessing the sight of limbless beggars on the streets of the capital when they first visited in 2000, they set out to recruit the most disadvantaged and disabled people they could find — from former prostitutes to land-mine victims.

Now, this eclectic combination of Canadians and Cambodians is wired to the world. And wondering whether they can tweak globalization to spread the riches from affluent North America to the poorest pockets of Asia.

Welcome to non-profit Digital Divide Data, where workers with minimal English skills hunch over computers typing out old hockey articles from Canadian newspapers. Or transform old Eaton's mail order catalogues into a digital archive for the National Library of Canada.

With only three fingers on each hand, Eng Naleak could easily be languishing alongside the masses of amputees who beg for money from foreign tourists. Today, trained as a speedy six-finger typist, Eng spends her days "digitizing" documents — ranging from old Stanley Cup stories to Islamic scriptures and Jewish history.

"It's a way for me to learn about the world outside Cambodia," Eng says brightly as she shows off her formidable typing skills —deploying her thumbs and forefingers with her own unique technique at 30 words per minute.

It's also a way to make money. The capital is brimming with well-meaning charities that train able-bodied people for jobs that simply don't exist in Cambodia's slumping economy.

DDD is different. Its ambition is not only to educate the most deserving people — bankrolling half their tuition costs — but to keep them busy on the job.

Hockenstein, 31, jets between Cambodia, Canada and the United States, drumming up business from old Harvard University classmates and dot-com chums to pay the bills. After 18 months in operation, the non-profit company has more than 70 employees and is running in the black — despite strong competition from similar firms in India that benefit from a well-educated, English-speaking workforce.

DDD is definitely the underdog, but it stays afloat with distinct competitive advantages: A low-wage, low-cost structure. And the irresistible appeal for clients of making a "social investment" in Cambodia's disadvantaged workforce, as Hockenstein puts it.

The starting salary may seem low by Canadian standards — \$100 a month, plus medical benefits. But it's a princely sum in a country where the per capita income is barely \$400 a year, and a typical industrial wage for a garment worker is roughly \$60 a month.

(Hockenstein, who invested his own money in the project, draws no salary. He supports himself by working as a consultant in Canada and the U.S. to non-profit companies and Jewish day schools.)

For Eng, the digital economy not only gives her personal dignity, but the chance to study for a career in accounting.

"My parents are so proud of me for doing this job," she says in between rapid-fire keystrokes. "They were surprised that I could even get this job and hang on to it."

In his own way, Hockenstein is also trying to make his mother proud. The son of a Holocaust survivor, his own Jewish roots motivated him to help Cambodians rebuild from the 1976-79 Khmer Rouge genocide that claimed an estimated 1.7 million lives.

"My mother was born in a concentration camp," Hockenstein explains. "So there was a certain resonance. ... There's definitely that connection for Jews because of the shared bond of genocide."

The DDD offices are a five-minute walk from the barbed-wire perimeter of the Tuol Sleng Prison, whose 12,500 inmates were liquidated at the infamous "killing fields." Most of DDD's employees had never heard of the Nazi Holocaust, and were astonished to learn — while typing up archival work for Jewish organizations — that similar atrocities had taken place only a few decades before.

Apart from their shared history, Hockenstein wanted to help Cambodians cope with an uncertain future. When he first came as a tourist in 2000 and realized how desperate they were for jobs, he teamed up with two Toronto friends, social worker Shawn Fremeth, 31, and information technology consultant Vernon Naidoo, 33, to brainstorm for ideas.

They were struck by the popularity of Internet cafes and English classes, but discouraged by the lack of real opportunities. With his own background as a management consultant, Hockenstein mounted a problem-solving mission.

The Canadian threesome hooked up with two American friends in Phnom Penh for a month of market research. They rented motorbikes and "knocked on doors and tried to figure out what was needed."

It wasn't encouraging.

"Everyone told us that there was no history of meeting deadlines or ensuring quality or the kind of performance needed for market realities," Hockenstein recalls.

"At the beginning, no one thought it was possible to have an entryway into the global economy."

Undeterred, they teamed up with an Indian company to get the latest software for data entry, and asked local non-governmental organizations to help with basic training. Under the current set-up, workers view a scanned image of the archival document on the top of their screen, and type in the contents below with special codings for headlines and typefaces.

Each document is typed twice, cross-checked and then spell-checked to ensure accuracy. A third person performs spot checks. The staff work six-hour shifts to free up time for outside studies, and the offices are open on the Sunday holiday to let them surf the Internet for free.

Recent clients have included the National Library of Canada, Cambodian phone companies, the United Nations, the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, and major universities.

Not bad for a non-profit.

For Soriya Nove, 22, the sound of clattering keyboards and the cool breeze from overhead ceiling fans mark a sharp contrast to her previous work environment. She was rescued from a brothel last year and is now staying at a shelter for victims of sex trafficking before starting work full-time at DDD.

Too shy to shake hands with a visiting journalist, Soriya clasps her hands together in a traditional Buddhist greeting and

beams as she looks around her future workplace. Her typing speed has doubled from 10 to 20 words per minute from daily practice.

"I've got the energy, that's why my typing speed keeps improving," says Soriya, whose teddy bear T-shirt and sunny smile belie her past ordeal.

DDD hopes to expand to 100 staff in the coming months. The rapid growth leaves general manager Nhev Sithsophary slightly overwhelmed by the pressure to perform, or run the risk of layoffs.

Nhev, who grew up in a refugee camp in the wake of Cambodia's genocide, has spent years working with NGOs that excelled at training people but never helped with hiring. He estimates that only 10 per cent of people who graduate from such training programs ever get jobs, and that less than 1,000 of Cambodia's 300,000 disabled people are employed in a country of 11 million.

"I know what it's like. I used to live in a poor family, and I know how hard it is for poor people to earn a living," Nhev explains. "There is no way for these disadvantaged people to compete. ... This is the first project to offer office jobs for low-skilled people."

Nhev is also astonished by the corporate culture that the Canadians have inculcated in their Cambodian employees. The emphasis on teamwork and informality — including shared meals — stands in sharp contrast to Cambodia's hierarchical society, which openly discriminates against the disabled.

For Hockenstein, however, the camaraderie is only part of the payback. The Canadians are gradually reducing their role in DDD's Cambodian operations to meet their goal of making it self-supporting, while they focus on North American marketing and publicity.

"We're trying to create a business model that doesn't rely on charity," Hockenstein explains.

The unanswered question is whether DDD can pioneer a model for the global economy beyond Cambodia. Hockenstein says even he isn't sure if it can be transplanted like a "magical carpet" to other settings. "We feel good that we've created 70 jobs. If that's all it is, well we've created infinite opportunities for those workers."

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