

Profile



Jeremy
Hockenstein

Action:
Social Entrepreneurship

Location:
Cambodia

Initiative: Digital Divide
Data

Across the digital divide that separates computer-savvy Canadians from low-tech Cambodians, Jeremy Hockenstein is building a bridge. From his apartment 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 and train them in the skills of data entry for the global market.

Now, this eclectic combination of Canadians and Cambodians is wired to the world, 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 (DDD). Its ambition is not only to educate the most deserving people — subsidizing half their tuition costs — but also 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 successful entrepreneurs to pay the bills. The non-profit company has more than 70 employees and runs 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 appeal for clients of making a social investment in Cambodia's disadvantaged workforce.

Adapted from "Three Canadians Take the Digital Revolution to Cambodia's Streets" by Martin Regg Cohn. Toronto Star. January 26, 2003.

The starting salary may seem low by North American standards, 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.)

Hockenstein's 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."

"We're trying to create a business model that doesn't rely on charity," Hockenstein explains. "We feel good that we've created jobs. We've created infinite opportunities for these workers."

