



KAYSONE PHOMVIHANE

A smart and competitive city begins with building the skills and confidence of its young workforce



PROJECT SNAPSHOT

PROJECT NAME	Kaysone Self-Learning App to Enhance Youth Employability
COUNTRY	Lao People's Democratic Republic
SECTOR	Education
MAIN GOVERNMENT BODY SUPPORTED	Kaysone Phomvihane City Government
SMART SOLUTION	Soft skills training mobile app with related educational content
PROJECT PERIOD	October 2020–May 2021; August 2022–July 2023
ADB PROJECT OFFICER	Khamtanh Chanthy, Lead Project Officer
MAIN PROJECT OBJECTIVE	To propose and develop smart solutions that help improve essential job skills, easing the school-to-work transition of tertiary students and enabling businesses to engage competent employees

Kaysone Phomvihane, the capital of Savannakhet Province, holds much promise for the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). Only declared a city in 2018, Kaysone (as it is commonly referred to) already had the country's first special economic zone in 2003, due to its ideal trading position for both international and local businesses.

More recently, it is reported that a national road connecting the city to the Viet Nam border is set to be rehabilitated to boost regional connectivity. This potential for growth is not dissimilar to its own youth population.

Provided with the right support and trained to match labor market needs, this hopeful generation could have the skills to boost the economy.



THE CHALLENGE

Bridging the Skills Supply-Demand Gap

The quest for high employment and thriving industries comes at a challenging juncture. Although Lao PDR's gross domestic product has rebounded after the coronavirus disease pandemic (thanks to tourism), the country is still in debt distress and bound by a weak currency. According to the [Asian Development Bank \(ADB\)](#), "*Tighter monetary and fiscal policies on account of [this] high debt service obligations resulted in trade-offs on health and education, affecting human capital and overall productivity.*"

Not to mention, education itself, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET), is not fully aligned with the skills required by the job market, leading to the lackluster employability of graduates. In particular, the soft skills of recent graduates—such as office etiquette, communication, teamwork, and time management—were found to be subpar, according to surveys with the private sector during the project design phase. These have not been sufficiently taught in schools and TVET institutions. Students, as a result, often lack confidence when applying for jobs or find themselves unsure once in the work environment. Employers likewise are unable to get the output they need from new staff and have to resort to providing additional training.

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“Instead of companies having to spend a significant amount of time to train employees on getting to know the work and to adapt, they can be well prepared before they begin working. This cuts down the process”

Phanomkone Daralasmy
then Vice-Director of
the Savan-Seno Special
Economic Zone

THE SOLUTION

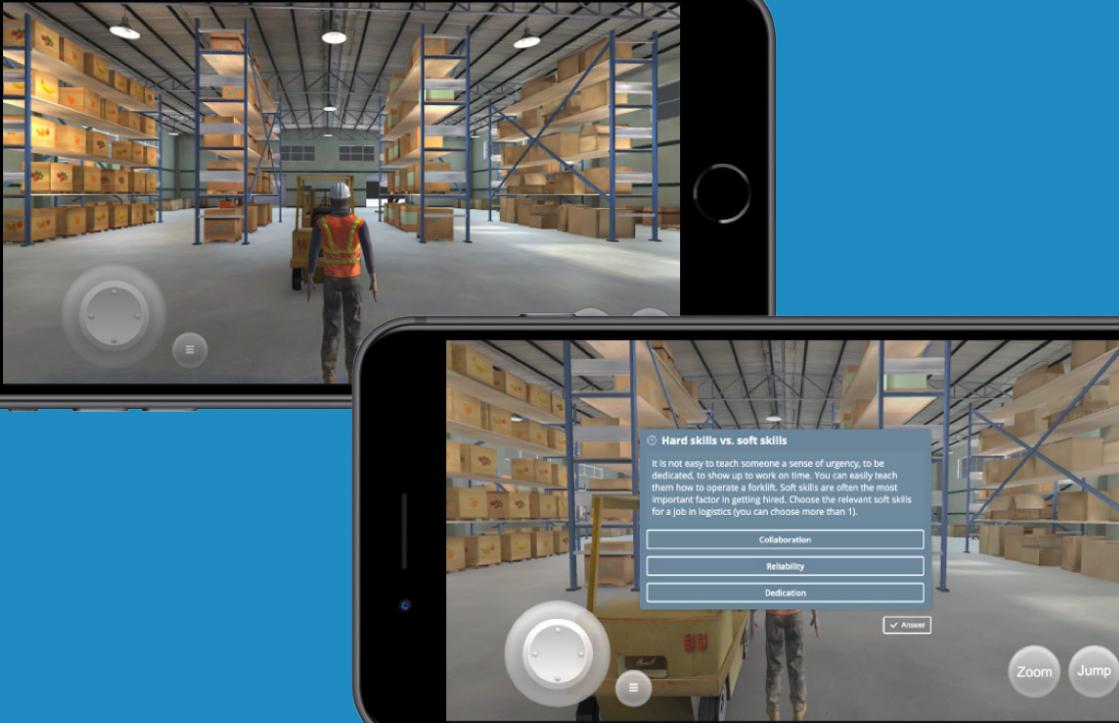
Digital Tools to Empower Employees and Employers

To fix the mismatch, improve employability, increase business productivity, and help youth to be ready for the workplace, the ASEAN Australia Smart Cities Trust Fund (AASCTF) collaborated with the central and local governments in two phases. First, AASCTF prepared a pre-feasibility study for an enhanced employment service platform with e-learning modules. Second, AASCTF provided ADB with funding to develop the Kaysone Self-Learning mobile app, which built on the e-learning modules proposed in the first phase and came with instructional videos, supplementary materials, and training for teachers.

The first phase focused largely on a needs assessment for the employment platform and consisted of extensive consultations and data

gathering, analyzing the conditions that have led to the skills gap, as well as understanding the experiences of both employers and would-be employees. A significant factor of this study was an examination of gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI). Lao PDR, including Kaysone, has been experiencing a gender imbalance in the areas of literacy and educational attainment. Focus group discussions, held at TVET colleges and Savannakhet University, engaged 48 students (32 of whom were female) to identify barriers, needs, and opportunities, not only in terms of education and the job market, but also with regards to the digital divide, skills, and social norms.





The findings from the various dialogues informed the smart learning platform proposed in the pre-feasibility study, which could be linked to the government's Public Employment Service website. As a start, it would have six e-learning modules tailored to the local context and centered on improving students' soft skills. The idea was to use gamification, with a combination of 2D and 3D formats, to entice learning. It can also be designed for smartphone and offline use to ensure accessibility and effectiveness.

In one module developed, for example, a young jobseeker can try a virtual office onboarding, where buttons in strategic locations in the 3D environment would have questions related to office behavior. This can help instill familiarity with office settings and introduce appropriate workplace practices.

Sitha Khemmarath, Vice-President at Savannakhet University, noted the skills deficit faced by tertiary students. He said, "We know

that the students lack practical skills... This project will help develop on-boarding tools for students."

True enough, the second phase of the project brought the suggested smart platform to fruition. The Kaysone Self-Learning app, launched in July 2023, contains materials teaching four essential skills: how to prepare for job applications and interviews, negotiation skills, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving skills. All the content are available in Lao and English, with the latter encouraging international-caliber employees, potentially catering to the foreign firms in Kaysone's special economic zone.

The app was promoted on popular websites, Facebook, FM radio stations, LED advertisements, and posters around the city. While targeting Kaysone's youth, the app is open for all and can be downloaded for free (both in Google and Apple app stores) by anyone in the country.



Why it Matters

Kaysone Self-Learning App

- Supports tertiary graduates' school to in their work transition
- Highlights the importance of soft skills along with technical know-how
- Increases employability and work opportunities
- Emphasizes the value of education, especially for women and girls
- Complements a [new ADB loan](#) in Lao PDR on skills enhancement

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“During testing of the application and the launch, students mentioned that the materials and role plays are very useful, with simple instructions that are easy to follow. They can easily learn by themselves at their own time and pace.”

Khamtanh Chanthy
Lead Project Officer, ADB Lao PDR Resident Mission

Early Results and Tangible Benefits

The Kaysone Self-Learning app has given the country an incremental step toward progress. Though there are certainly persistent challenges with both enrollment and employment rates in Lao PDR, the project has shown that low-hanging fruits like a mobile app and demonstration videos can foster youth engagement and inspire a budding workforce.

Notable benefits and results include:

- **Soft skills strengthened.** Graduates and young jobseekers can avail two sets of 4 e-learning modules (one in Lao and another in English) and 59 YouTube videos, which include interview scenarios for different job positions.
- **Teachers trained.** Aside from learners, training of the trainers was equally important. By the end of the project, 299 teaching staff were trained to facilitate skills development from two universities and six TVET colleges, such as the three main partner institutions: Savannakhet University, Savannakhet Technical and Vocational College, and Xaysombath Technology College. Of the 299 instructors, 130 were women.
- **Community supported.** The launch of the app convened more than 100 participants from the private sector and various schools, as well as representatives from local government, ADB, and the Australian Embassy for the Lao PDR—all were anticipating this new method of learning that can likewise benefit the city's economy in the long term.
- **Mindsets shifted, digital tools adopted.** The project demonstrated both the smart approach and the smart solution as a way forward in a rapidly changing world. It signaled the need to adapt to the times and how an app could be a new way of learning.



At the launch, Kaysone Phomvihane City Mayor Prasongsin Chaleunsouk acknowledged AASCTF's support in developing the app. He explained that this was a continuation of the first phase and its purpose of promoting youth employment, supporting companies, and stimulating job creation in Savannakhet Province.

Deputy Governor of Savannakhet Province Lingthong Sengtavan, on the other hand, noted in her remarks that the app was a new learning tool for the province and possibly, the country. She added that it was the evolution of the learning-teaching model in the digital age.

Lessons and Pivots

Sophisticated technologies, however, or the typical notions of a smart city, are not quite on the horizon for Kaysone just yet. Though it aspires to become a smart city, Kaysone has separate hurdles to overcome on the information and communication technology (ICT) front.

As such, based on one of the takeaways from the pre-feasibility study, gamification and plans for simulation as part of the smart platform were deemed too advanced at the time. Local capacity would not

be able to teach using these methods, nor would the limited ICT infrastructure and internet in the city be able to handle these. The project had to pivot and opt for the appropriate format and technology to facilitate knowledge transfer. Hence, Phase 2 delivered a mobile app with simple presentations, videos, documents, and templates. Innovative features were set aside for the more important informative solutions—resources that are user- and gadget-friendly, for increased uptake and upskilling.

Sustaining the Gains and Ripple Effect



The project may have ended, but the app and its educational materials live on. The goal of the project to improve necessary work skills and empower the young to start their professional careers is hopefully carried on and passed forward as they rise through the ranks. Similarly, this is why providing training to teachers was also vital for the project. Apart from the initial students during project implementation, the teachers can continue to increase and multiply the number of students learning about teamwork, problem-solving, and the like. The modules were also added to the curriculum of the institutions' communication subject to mainstream this knowledge.

Furthermore, the three partner institutions have posted the models and videos on their respective websites. The project also assisted Savannakhet University with developing a new professional website with enhanced functions and menus. About nine IT teachers were also trained on maintaining the websites and social media platforms.

According to Chanthy, the project can be expanded to develop more master trainers in tertiary schools in the northern and southern provinces of Lao PDR, and if there is funding available, include other soft skills such as active listening, public speaking, team building, and goal-setting

At the time of the pre-feasibility study, Pheutsaphar, a student at Savannakhet University, was already looking forward to the project. He said, *"The project will help us get prepared for employment, to know and understand what the job requirements are."*

Palita, a fellow student, agreed: *"I think this project will make looking for a job easier, helping us become more prepared and more confident in ourselves."*

LEARN MORE



For more information on this project, check the Kaysone Phomvihane resources in the AASCTF Data Room



ABOUT THE ASEAN AUSTRALIA SMART CITIES TRUST FUND

The ASEAN Australia Smart Cities Trust Fund (AASCTF) assists ASEAN cities in enhancing their planning systems, service delivery, and financial management by developing and testing appropriate digital urban solutions and systems. By working with cities, AASCTF facilitates their transformation to become more livable, resilient, and inclusive, while in the process identifying scalable best and next practices to be replicated across cities in Asia and the Pacific. AASCTF is supported by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, managed by the Asian Development Bank, and implemented by Ramboll.



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