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Tran Trong Minh Khoa: The Transition Process from a New Graduate Computer Engineer to an IT Professional¹

Should I accept this promotion or wait until I feel ready?

After graduation in 2001, Tran Trong Minh Khoa started his career as a software developer for FPT Software Development Company – one of the subordinate companies of FPT Corporation, the largest information communications technology (ICT) Corporation in Vietnam. He successfully transitioned from new graduate computer engineer to IT professional despite some early pitfalls. Since this milestone, Khoa's career had steadily progressed. In 2008, he was appointed a Deputy Director of Software Development Centre No.5, focusing on software applications for E-government management.

In the beginning of the year 2009, Khoa had to deal with a dilemmatic decision: keep to the same position or take a promotion to a higher position – the Director of the Software Development Centre No.3. The Centre specialised in software applications for the health and education fields. This new position, of course, would be more challenging than his current position. Centre No.3 also faced several difficult situations in terms of customer relationships and human resources issues. He weighed the pros and cons of each alternative in order to evaluate the costs and benefits of each. Apart from the advantages of accepting the proposed offer, he perceived a number of drawbacks of taking the promotion. Firstly, he thought about how to solve the centre's current issues of concern. Its products and services were regarded as low quality by its customers. The feedback from these customers was serious and had affected its reputation. Moreover, there were a number of IT professionals in this centre, but they had obvious lack of management skills leading to inefficient business performance. The second downside related to managing the centre's business performance. His expertise was not relevant to its specialty; its staff lacked management skills and its market expansion was not easy. Finally, he seriously considered the acceptance of this proposed position because of the risk of failure. He thought about his performance appraisal and how his business unit's performance would be assessed by strict policies. If he could not meet these policies, he might even have to resign or be laid off. From a cultural perspective, Khoa's deliberations were affected by three important facets of Vietnamese culture: *Confucianism*, *Saving face*, and *Collectivism*. All pros and cons considered, Khoa needed more few days to make the dilemmatic decision to accept or refuse the proposed position: Director of Software Development Centre No.3.

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The Vietnamese Culture

From a cultural perspective, there were the three key concepts and values that played a strong role in Vietnamese tradition: *Confucianism*, *Face* and *Collectivism*. These were the three pillars of Vietnamese culture.

Confucianism: Closely related to the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius, it referred to society's search for virtue. Its basic components included allegiance to family and country, reputation, love of learning, and respect for others. Confucian teachings emphasised the importance of relationships, responsibility, and obligation. This philosophy was still a vital component of Vietnamese society and was prevalent in Vietnamese business culture: conserving the harmony of the collective good. Therefore, Vietnamese decision-makers would normally consider a number of alternatives in order to achieve their personal benefits in harmony with their group.

Face: The idea of saving face was another important concept in Vietnamese society. The Vietnamese would do anything to prevent loss of face, even if it meant avoiding confrontation or telling others what they wanted to hear rather than dealing with immediate issues. Criticising someone in public and not staying true to promises were various ways that people could lose face. For Vietnamese decision makers, *saving face* was not mentioned in their considerations, however, it played an important part their decision making process. They needed to think about the risk of failure because of their reputation.

Collectivism: Vietnam was a collectivist society in which the needs of the group were often placed over those of the individual. Family and community concerns would almost always come before business or individual needs. Family, in particular, played an important role in Vietnamese society. Close ties between extended families and communities could have a major influence on individual behaviour. There were still multiple generations living under one roof. In general, Vietnamese preferred to come to a consensus for the sake of the group.

Generally speaking, China's cultural influence forms only one layer of Vietnam's cultural identity, but the most important and substantial element still rests with indigenous norms, customs, and practices, while Vietnam's cultural borrowings from Southeast Asia and the West form yet another layer.

Vietnamese ICT Human Resources and Careers

According to *Viet Nam Information and Communication Technology – White Book 2011*, since 2000, the Vietnam ICT sector had developed rapidly, playing an important role in national economy and emerging as a spearhead economic sector as well as being a critical element of infrastructure and a driving force for the socio-economic development of the country. As a consequence of this trend, the Vietnamese economy witnessed substantial development of its ICT human resources. There were major changes in the ICT training sector and labour working in this sector. Furthermore, ICT careers offered among the highest entry-level salaries in Vietnam.

ICT Human Resources

The 2011 White Book also pointed out that, by the end of 2010, Viet Nam had approximately 260,000 employees in the IT sectors, with approximately 122,000 people working directly for the software and digital content industries (see Exhibit 1). The figures showed that the number of people working in IT sectors (hardware, software, digital content) nearly doubled (from 150,000 to 260,000) in the previous 5 years (2006-2010) with an annual growth rate of 13%-18%. Universities and colleges that offered ICT courses grew from 192 in 2006 to 277 in 2010; vocational schools with ICT training increased from 0 in 2006 to 82 in 2010 (see Exhibit 2). The quota of enrolment students doubled from 30,350 in 2006 to

60,332 in 2010 (see Exhibit 3). By 2010, there were around 34,500 ICT-related graduates and about 170,000 ICT-related students (see Exhibit 4).

ICT Careers

At the time of the case, ICT remained one of the hottest subject areas in Viet Nam, according to a 2011 Vietnam ICT White Book. Furthermore, a 2012 market report from PC World Vietnam stated that the need to recruit employees in ICT-related industries was still high despite the global economic downturn. In May, one of the most in-demand careers in the market was ICT-related jobs. For instance, the Ministry of Information and Communications estimated that within five years the demand for labour would increase by more than 10% annually, and by 2015 there would be more than 400,000 people working in the IT, electronics, and telecommunications industries.

Transition from University to Career

According to the 2002 study conducted by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, the concept of transition from school to working life appeared in several international papers with slightly different definitions, but all definitions included three main themes:

- (1) Process – in the sense of the preparatory work required and period of time necessary for transition;
- (2) Transfer – moving from one educational level or life step to the next;
- (3) Change – in terms of personal as well as professional situations.

From this perspective, it can be said that changes and preparation will be a necessary part of an individual's adaption to the working environment. A key aspect of this process was the individual's employability. Employability was about developing a range of attributes and abilities, not just job-getting skills, according to a 2003 work from Harvey. Therefore, employability can be seen as an outcome of a process through which a new graduate fully engages in the workplace by learning and doing in order to become a professional.

The transition from university to employment was a challenging process, however. Communication, responsibility, and self-confidence were found to be the three main challenges faced by new graduates in transitioning from university to career, according to a 2012 study by Baytiyeh and Naja. Furthermore, new graduates also needed to acquire specific prerequisite skills and knowledge that were needed for high productivity and performance in the workplace.

Tran Trong Minh Khoa

Khoa graduated at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology in 2001, recognised as a centre of excellence among technological universities in Viet Nam. He was qualified as a computer engineer majoring in information technology. Similar to his peers, Khoa found that the knowledge that he acquired at the university could often not be applied directly in the workplace due to lack of technical skills and real-life experiences. In general, there existed a gap between knowledge provided by tertiary education and ICT-related practical skills demanded by the workplace in Vietnam, according to a 2012 market report from PC World Vietnam. He had to learn by himself in order to narrow this gap. However, he said that even though the knowledge acquired from the university could not be used straight away, it nevertheless played an important role as the foundation for acquiring the range of skills and knowledge that the workplace needed.

In the case of his transition from university to the workplace, Khoa experienced many changes as he adapted to the work environment. His acquisition of professional and interpersonal occurred relatively smoothly. He reflected that this process would not have occurred so easily if he had not viewed employability skills development as being critical to surviving in the workplace. He recognised the importance of this development process throughout his transition from student to professional. By doing so, he steadily overcame his earlier career barriers. In spite of his personal growth, he still faced several difficulties in the working environment. It seems that everyone had to deal with a challenging process that was the transition from tertiary education to employment.

Transition into the Workplace

Khoa was employed by FPT Software Development Company right after he graduated. To survive in the tough working environment, he had to improve in many ways, both in terms of technical skills and soft skills. Firstly, he had to learn new programming languages, as the programming languages that he had studied at the university were not used at his workplace. He quickly overcame his first career barrier by undertaking training courses offered by FPT and through his own self-study. He believed his skills and abilities continuously developed through his experiences, helping him to adapt to the working environment. However, he found out that technical skills were not the most important aspect of the workplace.

For Khoa, communicating with companies' clients often proved to be the greatest challenge. At that time, the company required its employees to work in a variety of tasks such as software development, software consulting, and software implementation. His communication skills needed further development and were also affected by his lack of confidence. This resulted in workplace performance that did not live up to his potential. This was the second thing that he had to learn in order to improve his working skills. He acquired these skills from observing other individuals in the working environment, including his peers, bosses, and even his company's clients.

FPT's business culture was to encourage and facilitate all staff members to maximise their ability and long-term dedication to the company. FPT offered a number of training courses for its employees. By attending these courses, Khoa enhanced his abilities to work in ICT industries such as the development of international standard and industry-in-depth software skills, team-work skills, and critical thinking skills. He gained some professional world-leading IT vendor certificates from Microsoft and Oracle.

In order to perform well in organisations in ICT industries, he strongly believed that communication skills, team-work skills, critical thinking skills, and professional expertise need to be continuously developed as a life-long learning process.

Interpersonal Skills Developing Process

In general, people with strong interpersonal skills were usually more successful in both their professional and personal lives. Particularly, in the business domain, the term generally referred to an employee's ability to get along with others while getting the job done. Khoa recognised these skills played an important role in his career progress. Besides the communication skills mentioned earlier, he also pointed out other skills, such as problem solving, decision making, and stress management, that were also essential for anybody, especially someone who had an ambition of becoming the leader of a team or a business unit.

There were many ways to develop specific interpersonal skills such as learning from the workplace or professional courses. In addition, he found books to be an important learning resource. "My favourite books are those that help me to improve my personal skills and management skills in the workplace," Khoa said. Some his favourite books were "How to Win Friends and Influence People", "Getting Past NO" and management books from western countries, as well as Chinese ones. He felt that these books

had been valuable resources for enhancing his interpersonal skills. He used to be the person whose communication skills were weak. Now, with more than 10 working years, he had completely transformed himself. He now believed that we can discuss and negotiate in order to improve every issue in our lives.

The Transition of Khoa's Career

As a consequence of his professional and interpersonal skills development, Khoa had been steadily promoted in the workplace. In 2003, he was appointed as a Project Manager after working for two years at FPT. From 2006 to 2007, he held a Deputy Manager position, then a Manager of one business unit in this company respectively. He was promoted to Deputy Director of a Software Development Centre of FPT in 2008 with approximately 50 staff. He had particularly extensive experience in development and implementation of software application projects, focusing on enterprise operations and E-government management.

To Become an IT Professional

Khoa seriously considered capabilities that an IT professional should possess to overcome career barriers for IT professions. Being an IT professional was not just learning IT knowledge and skills and getting an IT job, this also required having capabilities as an IT professional. From a personal perspective, Khoa felt that there were four capabilities that would help in becoming an IT professional:

- First of all, by learning how to enhance professional expertise in IT fields, Khoa found that IT jobs demanded continuous learning and strengthening of his skills. Therefore, he tried to keep up with new information in relating to technology and development trends. To keep a life-long learning process to become a recognised expert in their professional field, IT professionals could continue their education or self-study by learning from up-to-date technical books and attending technical workshops.
- Secondly, he recognised the next essential trait was interpersonal skills such as communication skills, problem solving skills, and decision making skills. It seems that possessing strong interpersonal skills was a strong predictor for career success. Khoa wondered that how these skills could be trained in effective ways to facilitate the transition from university to employment. In addition, he thought about how such skills, such as decision making, could be maintained and improved through the course of a career.
- Thirdly, considering the vital role that time management played in work performance, Khoa found that it was necessary to avoid falling behind with his workflow. To meet all deadlines for any task, he tried to organise his tasks efficiently.
- Finally, Khoa was married with two children so it was important to balance the amount of time spent on working and personal life. He pointed out that without a balanced life, one could not perform well in the workplace. Therefore, he considered how to divide his time between career and family commitments. Furthermore, setting aside time for relaxation was also critical to achieving a balanced life.

The successful transition from university to employment had been an essential part in Khoa's career. To become a successful IT professional, Khoa had carefully considered the traits needed to advance and sustain his IT career. He recognised, however, that there were a number of ways to achieve IT success. Thus, he believed that everyone had the capacity to find an appropriate path to enhancing their career. However, the most important thing in choosing any approach was that the path chosen one should also be seriously considered as a moral matter, Khoa said.

Dealing with a Dilemma

The Situation

According to a 2010 report from *PC World Vietnam*, in 2002 Viet Nam implemented the National Programme on IT applications in state agencies to facilitate government operations. This programme created a potential opportunity for ICT companies providing E-government solutions applications. FPT Information System Company provided its software applications to a number of Vietnamese government agencies. As a Deputy Director of Software Development Centre No.5, specialising in E-government applications, Khoa could take this opportunity to lead his team to exploit this mature market.

On the other hand, Software Development Centre No.3 focused on software applications for the health and education fields including general hospital management and school management software. At the time of the case, this Centre No.3 was faced with several difficult situations in terms involving customer relationships and human resources issues. At the beginning of 2009, he received an offer to become the director of that centre. Khoa had to consider this offer carefully because he was already aware of these difficulties. On the other hand, this was also an opportunity that included significant promotion.

Pros and Cons of Each Alternative

Before making his decision, Khoa weighed up the pros and cons of each alternative. From a personal perspective, this represented an opportunity to apply critical thinking skills that he had developed over the course of his career.

To reject the offer

There were a number of potential advantages to rejecting the promotion offer. At that instant, there were a number of great opportunities at Software Development Centre No.5. As a Deputy Director of this centre, Khoa would lead his team to exploit the mature software market for government agencies. FPT dominated this market, providing its software applications to numerous Vietnamese government agencies. Moreover, the Government implemented the National Programme on IT applications so the demand of E-government products would increase steadily. Hence, he would be to achieve his sales target thereby complying with FPT's business plans.

On the other hand, in rejecting the promotion offer, he would also entail many costs that he needed to bear in mind. Promotion to a Director position of any Software Development Centre was difficult to achieve. This position was considered desirable and included a number of incentives in terms of salary, bonus, and training courses. Many of FPT's employees competed with each other when there was an opening. Additionally, the general hospital management software and school management software were his new areas of interest. He would have regretted losing this chance to acquire experience in these areas. For him, learning about new areas in IT was a critical element of his professional plan for building his career. Last but not least, he could be assessed as an inefficient manager by his bosses if he could not present acceptable reasons for refusing the proposed position. He could not, of course, use the difficulties at Centre No.3 to explain the rejection to his bosses.

To accept the offer

Khoa also considered the pros and cons of accepting the promotion. In terms of its advantages, the promotion would represent a significant step in his career. There was also a substantial pay increase associated with moving from Deputy Director to Director, according to FPT's payroll system. As a Director of Software Development Centre, he would have opportunities to attend managerial training courses for the senior management level that were offered by FPT. In addition, accepting the promotion would be viewed

as a significant promotion by his peers at work. Many of FPT's employees were ambitious, competing energetically for promotion prospects through enhancing their working environment and skills. In general, there were many potential internal and external candidates for a management position. Khoa was pleased to be singled out for his expertise and personality.

In regard to market opportunity, at that time, the general hospital management software and school management software were still an unexploited market, where he could develop this market in terms of sales revenue and market size. Khoa believed that government spending on health care and education would be increased in the next coming years. In addition, the private sectors invested in these fields as well. More importantly, there was upward trend of applying software applications to virtually all management areas. Therefore, there would be an almost unlimited market for the applications of the centre.

On the other hand, the perceived drawbacks of taking the promotion to the director of the Centre No.3 needed to be weighed seriously. He thought about how to solve the centre's current issues in terms of customer relationships and human resources. Its products and services were regarded as low quality by its customers. These customers complained about its products because the software applications did not meet their requirements. The feedback from these customers was negative and had affected the centre's reputation. In fact, there were several projects that were not finalised due to the volume of complaints from its customers. Therefore, relations between this centre and its customers had become so strained that some customers were going to sue the centre for damages. Furthermore, human resources issues also affected the centre's business performance. There were a number of IT professionals in this centre, but they obviously lacked the necessary management skills that would allow them to deal with customer relationship management, project management, and administrative and financial issues. Khoa suspected that many of these problems resulted from a lack of empowerment in management. Another personnel issue was its employee turnover significantly higher than that of other centres.

Khoa's concern was how he could improve the centre's business performance. He felt that there were three aspects to this issue. Firstly, he did have relevant experience in software applications for the health and education fields because he had previously specialised in E-government applications. He worried that his existing expertise could not be applied directly in this centre. He also wondered how he could address the lack of management skills that had led to the weakness in the centre's business performance and efficiency. Finally, at the present time the general hospital management and school management software markets were not well developed, meaning that they were very small. It would not be easy to expand these markets since the software for these markets had just been introduced by the centre and the demand of these products was not established a foothold. If these markets could not be expanded, the centre's business performance would not improve.

The greatest drawbacks of accepting the position was the accompanying risk of failure. Despite the advantages, this would be an extremely challenging position. As Director of Software Development Centre No.3, his performance appraisal would be based on his ability to meet sales revenue targets and to enhance the centre's business performance measured in terms of its profits and other financial and human resource ratios. He had to comply with the annual business plans to remain in this position. If he could not achieve these targets, he would be forced to resign the position; alternatively he would be laid off. In fact, the previous Director of this centre was demoted due to its unsatisfactory business performance and sales revenue falling below targets in 2008. How to improve the centre's growth rate and achieve its targets had become the question that the Director of this centre had to address. Therefore, Khoa wondered what specific solutions he could devise in order to avoid the risk of failure.

Khoa's deliberations were influenced by Vietnamese culture. With respect to *Confucianism*, maintaining the harmony of the collective good meant that Khoa needed to consider how to manage the centre in a

way that not only met his performance goals, but also provided a good working environment for its personnel and provided them with opportunities for increasing their incomes. With respect to *face*, he worried about the consequences that failure might have on his reputation. Finally, in regard to *collectivism*, Khoa also felt the need to place his family's needs over his own. The offer represented a very important turning point in life. He was married with two children and he was the sole breadwinner. He needed a job to stabilise his life and career. In making the decision, he recognised that his family was the centre of his life. Although not directly involved in his making process, their needs profoundly affected his thought processes.

After evaluating the pros and cons of each course of action, Khoa felt that he needed a few more days to make the decision to accept or refuse the Director of Software Development Centre No.3 position. "I should also talk about the dilemma with my wife, because I need her advice on this decision and her support whatever happens," Khoa thought to himself.

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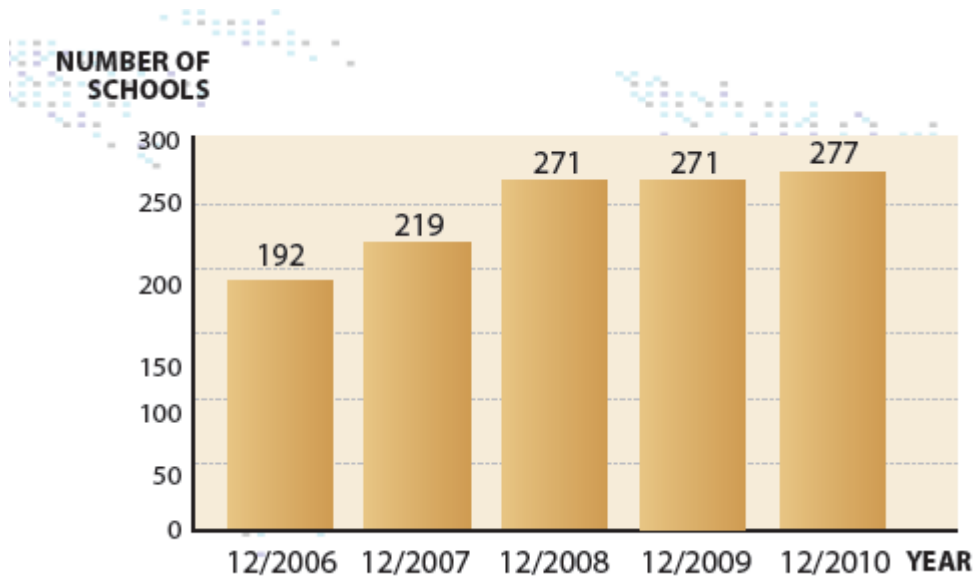
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Exhibit 1: Total number of employees in IT sectors

	12/2008	12/2009	12/2010
1.2.1 Hardware industry	110,000	121,300	127,548
1.2.2 Software industry	57,000	64,000	71,814
1.2.3 Digital content industry	33,000	41,000	50,928

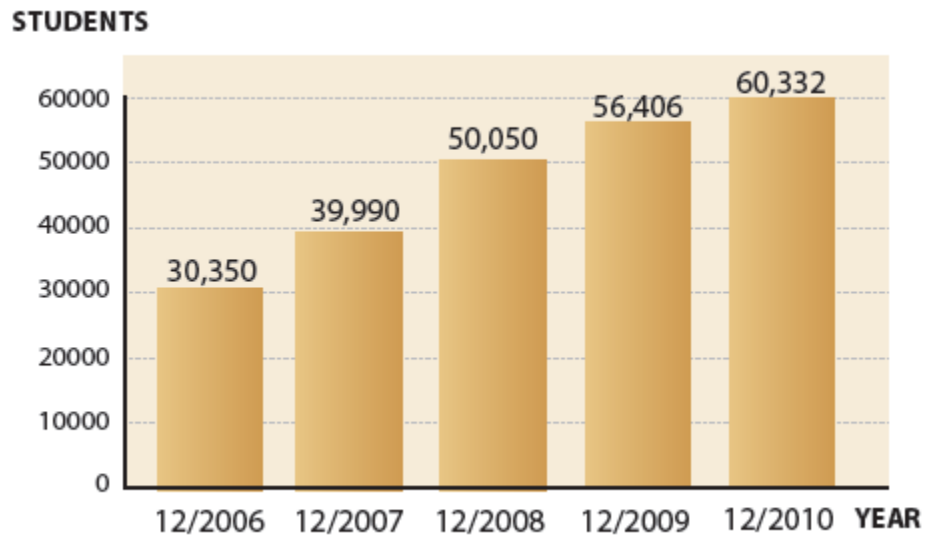
Source: NSCICT & MIC (2011)

Exhibit 2: Number of Universities and Colleges Offering ICT Training



Source: NSCICT & MIC (2011)

Exhibit 3: Quota of ICT-Related Students Enrolment



Source: NSCICT & MIC (2011)

Exhibit 4: Number of ICT-Related Students

	Year 2010
1 Actual number of ICT- related students enrolled	56,338
2 Number of ICT- related students studying until 31/12/2010	169,156
3 Number of ICT- related graduates	34,498

Source: NSCICT & MIC (2011)