Michael: Welcome to another MIT Sloan podcast. I’m Michael Perrone, and I’m here with Jeremy Bratt and Lia Cavalcante. Welcome.

Jeremy & Lia: Thanks a lot. Thank you.

Michael: I understand that you recently participated in a G-Lab in Thailand. Why don’t we start with one of you telling me a little about the organization you worked with and what the project was?

Lia: Sure so we worked for Nam Mee Books, they are a children’s book publisher based in Bangkok but actually serving the entire country. They are one of the leading publishers for children in Thailand. They do educational comics but they also published Harry Potter in Thailand. And they were looking at how to incorporate the adult market so they have books for adults but they haven’t been as successful there as they are in the children’s segment. So they wanted us to help them make that transition on being a family book publisher, rather than just a children’s book publisher.

Michael: Did you or anybody on your team have any sort of publishing background?

Jeremy: So we all, I mean we all traced some experiences that were loosely related to various aspects of the company and the project. So I actually worked in the publishing industry, but in software, in educational software. So I had some loose experience and I think some of the other folks did as well.

Michael: Did you work with anything as global as this?

Lia: Well I’m originally from Brazil. So that’s where my previous work was and I also did some work in other Latin American countries but I hadn’t been to Asia before so it was a fairly new experience for me.

Michael: What sort of preparation did you do beforehand?

Jeremy: So as part of the G-Lab class there’s different milestones and deliverables. And I think the kind of the culmination of that is, they call it the Interim research report. So what goes into that we did some research on the publishing industry, specifically in Thailand, and tried to benchmark it against other, perhaps related industries: Japan, Malaysia, Korea. We also did some research specific to various kind of functions that we thought were directions the project could go. So branding, marketing, we reached out to resources here at MIT and outside the MIT community and did...
several surveys with MIT students and we also conducted, we also submitted surveys for Nam Mee Books’ customers during the fall. We then used that data to inform our recommendations.

Lia: Yeah, in addition to that we had some data from the company. And that was actually helpful to know what we could get or what we would need to get when we got there. Because they tried to give us a lot of things but being in another country has some limits on that. So that was interesting how that theoretical, when the data, the practical data we had, kind of went together but we knew that we needed more so.

Michael: Now a lot of G-Lab teams report that they sometimes find unexpected factors when they’re finally on the ground, when they’re face to face with the company. Was everything exactly what you expected when you got there? Was there anything you didn’t expect?

Jeremy: So I guess I’ll throw this one out there. I think something that surprised me, they had been telling us that this project was to be centered around finding ways to expand their presence in the adult market. And I think I was surprised to find what I perceived to be that they had done very little to advance that thus far. So we come there and we start visiting their bookstores and they look like kids’ bookstores. It doesn’t look like a store that’s going to be able to sell books to adults. So there were kind of things that seemed very obvious to me as an outsider. So I was surprised to find that, I mean, and I think were able to recommend, to make recommendations along those lines. But things that they hadn’t done because they hadn’t thought of it, or because inertia it’s hard to get things moving and hopefully we were able to kind of get them moving along in those directions.

Michael: How was the company overall to work with?

Lia: Oh that’s something I would add. We were quite surprised with how open they were. I mean, we expected them to be open but not that open so it was really nice to have their support and everything we needed in terms of interviews and structure, and the actual data, things that they had only raw data about, and we actually had access to pretty much everything. So in top of being very open they also very friendly so they were always kind of helping us, and trying to make the experience more than only a professional experience, but a learning experience it was pretty good.

Jeremy: Yeah they were great to work with and I would add just another surprise along that lines, I think you alluded to it Lia but I was surprised as to how welcoming they were to our ideas and how they really wanted our input and it seemed like they needed our input. They kind of said, the managing director said to us on the first day, I don’t know what to do, tell me what to do. So I mean, there was pressure that goes along with that but it was a good feeling, it was certainly not something, I didn’t expect that kind of responsibility on day one.

Lia: Yeah but that was really rewarding that they really wanted to know what we the
thought and that we, well we left there and having the, being almost sure that they will do some of the things that we suggested and that’s really cool.

**Michael:** Did you notice any differences in the way business is done there?

**Lia:** Well I think something that we sort of expected, but was different in seeing practices, it’s a very family and acquaintances connections are very important or stronger than they seem to be in the United States. Also we found some details like how people organize books and the shelves, which it’s completely different from what they do in Latin America. So we couldn’t find the books on the shelves because they were all over. It was oh the newest comes here and everything else goes somewhere. And that’s detail, but it’s interesting because it actually affects the business, so it was some interesting things to look at.

**Michael:** Do you think they’ll succeed in this venture?

**Jeremy:** Oh I think we hope so we all kind of developed relationships and a vested interest and we, you know, hopefully gave them some recommendations that will move them toward where they say they want to be. You know I have confidence that they will be able to do it if they want to. I think there’s definitely challenges, and I’d say core to those challenges is that children’s books are their main business. And it’s what they’re good at, it’s what they know how to do, it’s kind of the easy money for them it’s the low hanging fruit. So to get away from that and to move into the more challenging new territory is going to be difficult, but I think they’ve got a shot if they make some of these changes.