

**“DDD and the whole BPO concept says, I'm going to add jobs that were not in the economy before.”**

## **A Conversation with Amolo Ng'weno, Managing Director of Kenya Office**

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard**

**July 8, 2025**

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and what led you to DDD [Digital Divide Data]?**

**Amolo Ng'weno:** My name is Amolo Ng'weno, and I was the first managing director of DDD's Kenya office. Prior to that, I was working at the Gates Foundation in Seattle. This was during the financial crisis in the US, and it was a scary time. People were pessimistic. I went on a business trip to Bangalore, and when I arrived and saw this city popping and buzzing, I thought, I may be in the wrong part of the world. Michael Chertok was a colleague at the Gates Foundation, and he mentioned that he had been involved in this company called Digital Divide Data that was in the BPO [business process outsourcing] field, and that DDD had an additional social mission to support young people in their education.

He had approached me and asked if there was anyone I would recommend to set up their Kenya office. I saw this as my opportunity to leave, to contribute something positive to society, not just in terms of DDD, but in terms of the broader economy because of the employment transformation it could offer. So in 2011, I left the Gates Foundation in Seattle and moved back to Kenya, which is my home country, and joined DDD to start the Kenyan office.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What was it like bringing Kenya into a mix that already had two very different countries attached to it? Scale essentially requires being able to replicate something in different situations, so I'm wondering if you have any insights around how to replicate from one region to another region.**

**Amolo Ng'weno:** I started by spending six weeks in Laos and two weeks in Cambodia, learning how things operate. I had never run a BPO before, so I was learning, and perhaps because I hadn't been in the industry, I wasn't carrying a "this how we always did it" mentality.

I spent some time with the team, and then a little bit later, when we were setting up, they sent one of their senior managers over to Kenya to stay with us for two months to help us do the initial training of the first associates and get on our feet. It's a pretty structured industry that has a lot of standard operating procedures, and they had existing software and processes and managers, so we were able to pick that up to a substantial degree and replicate in Kenya. It's not a highly regulated industry, and it certainly wasn't at that time, so we were not constrained by having to follow certain rules in Kenya that were different from Cambodia or Laos. We could just deploy how we thought best, and we could implement the structures and the processes that came from the Asian businesses.

At the time, the government had a parastatal entity called the Kenya ICT Authority, and they gave us some shared office space and provided some connections and help for us to get registration and that kind of thing.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How would you describe that structure and process?**

**Amolo Ng'weno:** The way it was set up was, roughly, that we recruited high school graduates in Kenya who had pretty good grades. There's a government scholarship system for people who have the best grades, and then there's a group of people who have good enough grades to be admitted into the government universities, but couldn't access the scholarship fund. Things have changed a bit since, but at that time, that was the structure, and we were aiming at that group of people who didn't have access to the scholarships, as well as people from disadvantaged backgrounds, specifically from the slums of Nairobi. Later, we added on disabled communities, particularly the deaf, community.

The idea was that we would give them a basic training in typing, computer skills, and soft skills, essentially training them for the work and then hiring them. We would only recruit people when we had an additional task to do because they would become permanent employees. It wasn't project-based, so we'd have to sell work to fill up their time as we added people.

The overall concept was training people for work that we had waiting for them, and they would then stay with us as employees. After they'd been there, doing well, for six months, we would give them a scholarship to attend a local university or training college. They would attend that while continuing to work at DDD. The logic was that, after four or five years, they would graduate with both work experience and a higher education degree.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What happened after that?**

**Amolo Ng'weno:** In principle, they were also supposed to graduate from DDD and move on to other careers. I think to a great extent, even now, they tend to stay in the business. That's the business they know. We know them. There's work for them to do.

We've had some alumni events recently, and many of them have stayed in BPO or IT-related work, but people have gone on and done a variety of different things. Part of our goal was that they should be useful, productive members of the economy. I think that's been fulfilled well. The people who are attracted to DDD tend to be people who want to be in formal employment. I think we've seen less entrepreneurship after graduation than we expected, but they have done quite well in the formal sector.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Do they apply, or do they get recruited? How do you know if someone's a good fit?

**Amolo Ng'weno:** We have a combination. We recruited through NGOs that worked in low-income communities and settlements, as well as through the government, the local and the chief's offices. We did a recruitment drive, but then they had to apply. We had quite an extensive selection process, which included some aptitude tests and an interview with the candidate and their family in their home because we understood from our colleagues in Cambodia that being 18 years old, they're typically still in their family unit. Does the family agree that they should be in a program that is part work and part study, and perhaps might cut into some other, income-generating activity they're already doing? I can't remember what number we didn't accept, but we were able to be fairly selective in that we had a good number of candidates, usually considerably more than the jobs we had available.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** The family interviews are unique. Have you done any other things in Kenya that have been different from what you did in other contexts?

**Amolo Ng'weno:** We picked up family interviews from Cambodia, but I don't know if it's continuing in any of the locations. That was almost 15 years ago, so the local context may have changed. It may no longer matter so much whether the family approves or agrees.

In terms of the nature of the program, I'm not sure that there are things we did in Kenya that were very different from Cambodia and Laos. The work itself is quite structured, so we would aim to apply the same standards and methodologies across all the countries, but the Kenyan associates had a much higher standard of English than those in Cambodia and Laos. Because of that, we often did different types of work, such as work that required English comprehension, English writing, and communication with clients. That was concentrated, and I imagine it still is, in the Kenyan office because of the standard of English.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** The youth unemployment rate in many places across Africa is very challenging, and a lot of foundations have been developing employment programs and technical assistant programs like yours. What makes

**DDD different than other programs that are trying to handle this issue? Was there anything that surprised you in terms of working better than you anticipated, or perhaps not working as well anticipated?**

**Amolo Ng'weno:** I'm not sure it's unique, but one thing that DDD does is we actually give you a job. There are many training programs where you're trained in this and that, and then, as you said, the number of available jobs is low. After reasonably high standards of training, and high school and university graduation, many young people in Kenya are well prepared for the workforce. Yet it's very hard for them to find formal jobs because only 15% of employees work in the formal sector.

DDD and the whole BPO concept says, I'm going to add jobs that were not in the economy before. After my experience in Bangalore, my goal, our goal, was to have a much bigger business, not just for DDD, but to see the whole sector to grow much more than it has. It has been growing, but much more slowly than expected.

That's why we haven't been able to build up as a sector. We haven't been able to build up enough market demand, which has to come from Western markets. There are well-established competitor destinations in India and the Philippines, but breaking into that has been much slower and more difficult than I had imagined when we started. The one thing that would allow DDD, its competitors, and the whole sector, to grow is demand in Western markets.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you're talking about sectors, are you talking about the computing outsourcing sector?**

**Amolo Ng'weno:** Yes, I'm referring to BPO and IT-enabled services, like call centers, where we're providing a service in Kenya to a customer who's abroad. Those are generating new jobs in the economy that wouldn't otherwise exist, but selling into that market has been slower than I would have hoped or imagined.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you think AI is going to change that?**

**Amolo Ng'weno:** AI will certainly change things. Some of those jobs are going to be replaced, and all of those jobs are going to change, but this has been the case since we began. When DDD started, they were keying in the text of the newspapers. The digitization programs consisted of typing in the text that you see. By the time I got there, ten years later, we had optical character reading technology that just absorbed the text, and we had to format it. There's been a constant progression of automation in the sector, and that is only going to speed up now, but I'm not anticipating that it will put the sector out of business. We just have to be on point with all the things that are changing.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you think about a success story from DDD, what comes to mind, or who comes to mind?**

**Amolo Ng'weno:** Evance Osee. After graduating, he got into the insurance business. He's been very successful as a business person, but what I really like, and this is a

principle held by many DDD graduates, is his spirit of, I was helped so I should give back.

His method of giving back is to seek out DDD graduates and place them in the companies where he works. Other people are involved in education programs, sports programs, women's programs, programs in their home communities. Evance is a great example of someone who learned while at DDD, parlayed that into a job opportunity, and then has been helping others.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: On the flip side, what type of person does this approach not work for?**

**Amolo Ng'weno:** The people it doesn't work for are people who don't like 9:00 to 5:00, people who don't like sitting in an office, doing repetitive, detailed, focused work all day. Those people usually decide very early, This is not for me. And it's not for everyone. It is repetitive, detail-oriented, and it requires paying careful attention. If you're good at that, then you can do well. Otherwise, it generally doesn't take long for someone to figure out that this doesn't work for them.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What happens over the next 25 years? What are your hopes and dreams? What are you seeing from your vantage point of doing this work in Kenya? What are you going to implement next? Is it about just making sure that you're sustaining what's already there, which is a very hard task?**

**Amolo Ng'weno:** DDD is at this juncture where we've been substantially doing one thing, digitization, for a long time. We've been building up some other capabilities. We have AI coming in and shaking everybody up, and we're seeing that as an opportunity, so I think we have to deepen the technical complexity of the work that we do, both in terms of something that we can sell more of, but also in terms of increasing our own efficiency.

We've been really good at building operational efficiency in the past few years, but we have to apply technology to make it more efficient, because the nature of the work is changing with the advent of AI, with competition, and with renewed interest in Africa as a destination. We have to offer to the world something that's worldwide competitive.

DDD is standing at the brink of a very great opportunity and a lot of internal change in terms of taking on new technology and a mindset of providing solutions rather than just responding to customers' defined needs. We're hoping for a fairly rapid expansion and internal transformation, but of course, it's uncertain times, and those things are not necessarily easy to achieve, so it will be a challenge.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: One thing that I saw when I was in Nairobi was people coming through the program who were starting unique businesses, often that didn't have to do with computers, and then, they were using that success to give back to the communities they were from. It was remarkable. Is that just how Kenyans are, is it embedded in the culture, or is it embedded the values of the organization?**

**Amolo Ng'weno:** I think that going through DDD contributes to their continuing feeling of investing back in the community, or participating in the community.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Why doesn't it translate to, DDD gave to me, I should just go and try to get a better job in London?

**Amolo Ng'weno:** I am not sure why that is exactly. It might go back to the fact that we often found them through community-based organizations, so they were possibly already involved in their communities. That's how they got the job with us. Maybe they came in with several people at the same time, whom they already knew and were in a relationship with.

We didn't have particular programs that said, You should do this or that. But one thing that does contribute to people feeling they should give back is that they see themselves as fortunate, with improved life circumstances. They're living better than the people they grew up with. But yes, I agree, I've also noticed that they tend to have a high degree of engagement in their home communities.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** When you left the US for Kenya, you also left the philanthropy sector to go into programmatic work at a social enterprise. Can you talk a bit about that decision?

**Amolo Ng'weno:** For my whole career, I've been in and out of the private, philanthropic, and public sectors. I started my career at the World Bank, then I moved back to Kenya and started the first internet service provider, Africa Online, then I moved back to the Gates Foundation, and then I came back to Kenya.

There's been a thread of technology through all of my work, and I think it has made me a very strong technology optimist. Various events of recent years may have knocked me down a little bit, but I still believe that technology offers the opportunity to do things differently, and therefore, do them better. Through all the different things I've done, that's the thread that has guided me— not whether it's private sector philanthropy or the World Bank.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Thank you so much for your time and your insights.

*Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has*

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*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*