

“What I learned at DDD is that whatever task you’re assigned, do it with passion.”

A Conversation with Evance Omondi Osee, graduate of Digital Divide Data

Francis Mureithi

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Francis Mureithi: What is your name?

Evance Osee: I’m Evance Omondi Osee, also known in the corporate industry by the titles YIPP and AIK. YIPP stands for Young Insurance Professionals Program, in which I was part of the fourth cohort at the London School of Insurance. AIK stands for Associate of the Insurance Institute of Kenya. I am a certified insurance professional from the College of Insurance. Currently, I work with the National Bank of Kenya as a Business Development Manager in the Corporate Business and Corporate Insurance division.

Francis Mureithi: Where did you grow up?

Evance Osee: I come from Homa Bay County, specifically Kabondo Kasipul Constituency. I grew up in the village from the time I started school. In 2003, my father passed away.

Francis Mureithi: Sorry.

Evance Osee: Yes, he passed away. In 2002, when I was in Class Seven, I scored 300 marks. My father asked me to repeat the class so that the following year, when I joined Class Eight, I could get better marks. I repeated, but in July 2003, he passed away. I still sat for my Class Eight exams that year and scored 300 (out of 700) marks. Although I was invited to join a provincial school, I couldn’t afford it. With no one to support my preferred choice, I accepted another offer and joined Got Rateng Mixed Secondary School, a local mixed school. In 2008, during my fourth year, I scored a C+ in the KCSE (Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education). After that, I stayed in the village for about a year. There was no hope of furthering my education, even though the C+ qualified me for university, I lacked the means to proceed.

Francis Mureithi: You stayed at home the whole of 2009?

Evance Osee: Exactly, I was looking after my uncles' cattle. They were well-off, but due to personal and conflicting interests, they only focused on their own households. Eventually, I had to leave the village for Nairobi in search of any income-generating activity.

I came to Nairobi around June 2009. At first, I stayed with a cousin in Kariokor, in a *mabati* (iron-sheet) house where both the walls and roof were made of *mabati*. During that time, I got a night job with Kenya Bus Service (KBS) along Ngong Road, washing their buses. From 10:00 p.m., when they finished the day's transport, until around 5:00 or 5:30 a.m. Whether it rained or not, all the buses had to be clean by the time they resumed operations the next morning. The pay was about 350 shillings [approximately 3 USD] per night. I could wash even more than 15 buses a night with the same pay.

Francis Mureithi: How long did you do this work?

Evance Osee: I worked there for a few months. Later in 2009, I got another job with a cleaning company called Strami Limited, which was contracted by Barclays Bank of Kenya, now Absa Bank. I was stationed at the Harambee Avenue branch, Harambee Prestige, working as a cleaner. The pay was 4,000 shillings per month [approximately 30 USD].

During my stay there, I focused on my tasks and kept myself smart and clean. After finishing my cleaning duties, I would also work as a bank messenger, running errands to places like Westlands to drop off or pick up items. While on these errands, I sometimes received tips of 200 or 300 shillings, which I saved. Eventually, I enrolled for computer packages, my first course after Form Four, while continuing my cleaning job at the bank. They noticed my smartness and diligence, and one day, the bank manager called me.

Francis Mureithi: What did the bank manager want?

Evance Osee: The branch manager, Helen Njoroge, wanted to know more about me. She felt the smartly dressed person she saw wasn't someone she expected to be wearing a cleaner's dust coat doing that kind of work. I narrated my story to her. She told me, "It's very unfortunate, by now, you should be in your first or second year at university. Don't worry, we'll find something for you to do." That was around October 2009. When the bank was recruiting financial salespeople, a role meant for graduates, they decided to consider me, even though I was only a Form Four leaver with a computer packages certificate. Helen called Barclays' head office and said, "We're bringing this person, please accommodate him. Forget about the papers, forget about everything." They first conducted an interview with me, gave me guidance on what to do, and I passed. That's how I got into the bank and started the job.

Francis Mureithi: That was still 2009, or 2010?

Evance Osee: We are now in 2010. I was posted to the Butere Road Branch, next to Mater Hospital, where I worked for about nine months.

Francis Mureithi: How much were you earning at the bank?

Evance Osee: I was earning a gross salary of 10,000 shillings [approximately 78 USD] for selling loans and other bank assets. There was a target, and if I met the required threshold of clients taking loans through me, I would unlock a commission.

That same year, the bank began downsizing its operations across Africa, closing several branches. My branch was shut down, and we were moved to a branch within Nairobi's CBD. When the layoffs began in my new branch, I was among those let go. After that, I turned to *mjengo* [construction work].

Francis Mureithi: You were still staying in Nairobi?

Evance Osee: Yes, I joined the *mjengo* team in Nairobi because I knew where I had come from. Given my family background, where my two brothers could look up to me, but I had no one to look up to, I had to work extra hard and accept any opportunity that came my way.

Francis Mureithi: How did you end up at Digital Divide Data (DDD)?

Evance Osee: I had moved from Kariokor Ziواني to Kariobangi North. While walking through the slum, I learned that an organisation called Digital Divide Data was recruiting. The first qualification was being less fortunate and needy. You also had to be brought up in, or living in, one of Nairobi's slums. Living in a well-off estate was not only outside the criteria. Since my background and residence met the requirement, I went to the Chief's camp, picked up the necessary forms, filled them out, and returned them to the Chief's office.

Less than a month later, I was invited for an interview, which was held at a location opposite Afya Center. The interview was a typing test, with a minimum requirement of 25 words per minute. I managed 27 words per minute and was invited to report on 25th July 2011. I joined as a data management operator. It was known as DMO. I was part of the second intake that year, as the first group had joined in April. Upon joining, we earned 7,000 shillings (approximately 55USD). I worked in various departments within data operations, including the scanning team.

Francis Mureithi: Did DDD require any skills beyond the computer skills you already had, and did they offer you additional training?

Evance Osee: Yes My growth to where I am today is largely due to the learning experience and foundation I got from DDD. When I joined, even though I had studied computer packages, I didn't own a laptop or desktop to practice on. Reaching 27 words per minute during the typing test was actually a struggle, and an achievement I hadn't expected. At DDD, I was also exposed to new technology.

Francis Mureithi: At that time, were you solely focused on work, or had you also joined college?

Evance Osee: When I joined, there was a schooling program. In May 2013, I enrolled for a Diploma in Business Administration and Management at Intraglobal College in Nairobi CBD. We were later transferred to Nairobi Aviation College, where I studied until May 2016. I didn't disappoint my sponsor, DDD, as I earned a credit pass. I was attending evening classes.

Francis Mureithi: So DDD was sponsoring you all through?

Evance Osee: Yes, all through, because they had a partnership with HELB [Higher Education Loans Board], which managed their sponsorship funds as a grant. We would apply each term. In May 2015, I benefited from this arrangement, and the following year, 2016, I enrolled for my degree in Bachelor of Business Administration and Management at Zetech University.

Francis Mureithi: And were you still working with DDD at this time?

Evans Osee: I was still working at DDD while attending evening classes as a part-time student, from 5:30 to around 8:00 p.m. I couldn't compromise on either, so I worked quickly to finish my tasks before heading to class. Both commitments ran concurrently.

Francis Mureithi: Do you think DDD missed giving you certain skills or lessons at that time?

Evance Osee: Given where I came from, I saw whatever they offered as a privilege. Coming from a slum, earning 7,000 shillings while also studying was already significant. They even provided lunch at a subsidized cost of 20 shillings [0.15 USD], deducted from our pay. I don't think they could have done more than what they were already doing.

Francis Mureithi: When did you leave DDD?

Evance Osee: I left in April 2017. I left as a DMO Level Two. That was Data Management Operator Level Two earning 12,000 [approximately 93 USD].

Francis: What were the most important lessons you learned at DDD?

Evance Osee: The greatest lesson I learned at DDD, and one many young people fail to understand, is that you join as an individual, even if along the way you make friends. Some friends will be good influences, others bad. I saw many who joined with me fail to finish because of bad influence or poor choices. We joined as less fortunate students, but some began pretending they weren't, behaving as if they had never grown up in a slum. Ego would take over, leading them into trouble. And when disciplinary action came, it was taken individually, even if the misconduct happened in a group. What I learned at DDD is that whatever task you're assigned, do it with passion, as if it's your final stage.

Francis Mureithi: How did your time at DDD impact you and your family financially?

Evance Osee: Despite coming from a less fortunate background, I was able to use my salary and secure a loan from a Sacco that was partnering with DDD. I was able to build my first house in the village, known as a *Simba* [lion]. At the time, I was still earning 7,000 shillings per month. This was an impact that could be seen.

Francis Mureithi: When you were leaving DDD, that is in 2017, were you still a student at Zetech University?

Evance Osee: When I left DDD, and I've mentioned before how being in certain groups can affect you, it wasn't because I found a better job or greener pasture, but because the prevailing environment forced me out. I was terminated while still in my second year at Zetech University. After leaving in late April, I joined *mjengo* around Allsops at a company called Henkel, where we earned about 300 shillings [2 USD] per day. My studies had to be stopped, so I had to seek a deferment. DDD was sponsoring my studies through HELB. When I left, the source of that funds dried up.

Francis Mureithi: Did you ever go back to finish, and if yes, how did you go back?

Evance Osee: I worked in *mjengo* for about six months while still applying for other jobs. On 30th November 2017, I was invited for an interview with Optica Limited for a data entry clerk position. After three interview stages, I was offered the job at Optica's head office on Moi Avenue. The skills I gained from DDD greatly impacted my career and well-being. At Optica, within the three-month probation period, I was promoted to other departments because the work involved extensive computer use, inputting orders, updating records in the system, web searches, and more. The foundation I had from DDD made these tasks easy for me, while others struggled.

Francis Mureithi: Did you consider going back to complete your university studies?

Evance Osee: In 2018, after my confirmation at Optica, I sought sponsorship from HELB, which I received, and then I resumed my studies. I enrolled for evening classes, from 5:30 to around 8:00 pm.

Francis Mureithi: How did you end up at the National Bank of Kenya where you work today?

Evance Osee: I worked at Optica for three years, during which I rotated through nearly all the key departments. By the time I left in February 2021, I was serving as an Import Assistant, reporting directly to the Managing Director. I oversaw imports, mainly sunglasses sourced from overseas, and managed both the online and physical main store. I graduated from Zetech University in November 2019. In February 2021, I applied for a position at Pioneer Insurance and was invited for interviews during the COVID period. After the first and second interviews, I received an offer for a permanent and pensionable role as a Business Development Executive, my first experience in the insurance sector. Despite it being new territory, I was determined to build my career in the industry and committed to staying relevant. After my confirmation at Pioneer, I enrolled in a postgraduate diploma program at the College of Insurance. Before

receiving the offer letter, I had also earned a scholarship from the London School of Insurance through Africa Reinsurance. This meant I attended two programs simultaneously: evening classes at the College of Insurance and online classes with the London School of Insurance. The London School of Insurance program lasted one and a half years, where I graduated with distinction. At the College of Insurance, I specialized in pension studies, completing the program in 2023. Still at Pioneer Insurance, I was later promoted from Business Development Executive to Company Pension Administrator, a change driven by the determination shaped by my background.

Francis Mureithi: The skills you learned about data, were they playing a big role?

Evance Osee: Yes. At Pioneer Insurance, I often used Google search skills I learned at DDD to find corporate clients. This showed my employer that I was proactive and ready to pursue business opportunities without needing to be pushed, always acting in the organization's best interest.

Francis Mureithi: How did you now transition to where you are today?

Evance Osee: During my nearly four years at Pioneer, I also helped some DDD alumni access opportunities there, which I'm proud of. In November 2024, the National Bank advertised a vacancy for an insurance sales manager in the Nairobi region. I applied, was interviewed, and was instead offered a different but more senior position, Business Development Manager for Corporate Business, in charge of the whole country. The original job I had applied for was later readvertised. I resigned from Pioneer and took up my new role.

Francis Mureithi: How do you think DDD has contributed to the tech space in Kenya and general well being of the society?

Evance Osee: DDD has impacted lives across Kenya and beyond, with alumni excelling in various fields, running orphanages, and sponsoring needy students. Coming from a less fortunate background, I was fortunate that DDD gave me a chance, and I now extend similar support to others in need, regardless of personal connection. Many other alumni are also making a significant difference. DDD has truly transformed Kenya's technological landscape.

Francis Mureithi: Any suggestions you think could improve DDD's program?

Evance Osee: Not all DDD alumni in Kenya are doing well; some are struggling. DDD could consider reabsorbing them by creating opportunities within the organization. For those in training programs who are not being paid, even a small stipend to cover expenses like transport would help, given the high cost of living in Nairobi. After six months of training, graduates should not be left to struggle outside. Even with skills, they could be absorbed into different departments. DDD should also consider expanding, as it is now in its 14th year in Kenya, having started in April 2011. Management might also reconsider alumni who left under unfavorable circumstances,

as people change. Through the alumni network, we can identify those struggling and support them before they are lost to crime or other harmful paths.

Francis Mureithi: Thank you very much, Mr. Evance.

Evance Osee: I'm extremely happy.

Francis Mureithi is the co-founder of Africa Solutions Media Hub, a nonprofit media organization advancing solutions journalism in Kenya through training, mentorship, and publishing impact-driven SoJo stories in newsrooms and communities. With over 16 years of experience in newsroom leadership and digital transformation, Francis currently serves as Digital Editor at Radio Africa Group, where he has led the shift from traditional journalism to agile, audience-focused digital content strategies. He is also a member of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network, a programme of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, which enhances global climate reporting. He holds a Master of Arts in Digital Journalism from Aga Khan University, a Master of Arts in International Conflict Management from the University of Nairobi, and a Bachelor of Arts in Communication and Media from Moi University.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*