

“You have to adapt and grow with the technology.”

A Conversation with Jackjared Odhiambo, graduate and staff member of Digital Divide Data

Francis Mureithi
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Francis Mureithi: My name is Francis Mureithi, what about you?

Jackjared Odhiambo: My name is Jackjared Odhiambo.

Francis Mureithi: Where did you grow up?

Jackjared Odhiambo: I come from Western Kenya, Khwisero Sub-county. That's where I grew and I schooled there for primary school.

Francis Mureithi: How far is Khwisero from Nairobi?

Jackjared Odhiambo: Around 300 km [approximately 186 miles].

Francis: Quite far.

Jackjared Odhiambo: It's quite far, about an eight-hour bus ride. I attended Muhaka Primary School there. After completing primary school, I moved to Nairobi for high school. I performed very well in my final primary school examinations. However, I faced financial challenges transitioning to high school due to my difficult background. My uncle stepped in and brought me to Nairobi, where I enrolled at Langata Boys High School.

Francis Mureithi: Which year was that?

Jackjared Odhiambo: That was in 2007. I had completed primary school in 2006. After joining Langata High School, I faced challenges with school fees and was unable to complete my studies there. I transferred to Raila Educational Center in Kibera. Fortunately, due to my strong academic performance, I received a scholarship from the Chinese Embassy. With that support, I was able to complete my high school education at Raila Educational Center, once again achieving good performance.

Francis Mureithi: What happened next?

Jackjared Odhiambo: I completed my KCSE [Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education] in 2010. After high school, I began working at a local eatery.

Francis Mureithi: Did you have cooking skills or experience in hospitality?

Jackjared Odhiambo: No, I didn't have any formal skills at the time, straight out of high school, you typically don't. I was working as a front service provider when the chef noticed me and said, "Come, let me teach you some basic cooking." I transitioned immediately and began assisting the chef with meal preparation. At that time, around 2012, DDD [Digital Divide Data] was enrolling youth from disadvantaged families, particularly in Kibera and Mathare. The Deputy Principal at Raila Educational Centre recommended me to the program. DDD specifically targeted recent high school graduates who were unable to pursue college or university education due to lack of fees. I joined DDD to work, but my main goal was to continue with my education. Fortunately, DDD offered a work-study program that made this possible. Through the program, I could earn an income while pursuing my studies that were being conducted online.

Francis Mureithi: What was your job at DDD, and did you undergo some training?

Jackjared Odhiambo: When I joined DDD, I was assigned to a project and began working as a Data Management Operator, primarily handling data entry tasks. After three months, I enrolled in a university degree program.

Francis Mureithi: What type of training did you receive when you joined DDD?

Jackjared Odhiambo: I received soft skills training to prepare for the workplace and navigate professional environments. This included areas like leadership and communication. In addition, DDD provided hands-on training for upcoming projects in their pipeline, ensuring that we were ready to begin work as soon as those projects were secured.

Francis Mureithi: Did DDD provide technical skills training?

Jackjared Odhiambo: DDD provided training to ensure that everyone had at least a basic understanding of computer packages and essential information they could use. The training included tasks such as logging in and out of machines, identifying hardware components, and learning basic troubleshooting techniques.

Francis Mureithi: You mentioned that you joined university three months after starting work at DDD. How did you balance school and work?

Jackjared Odhiambo: I joined Kenyatta University in September 2012. However, I didn't enroll in the program I originally wanted. At the time, DDD only supported students pursuing degrees in Business Management, Hospitality and Tourism, or Education, through a partnership with Kenyatta University. I had hoped to study

Journalism, but I enrolled in Hospitality and Tourism instead. It was challenging to balance work and school, but the skills and coaching we received, especially on managing both commitments, were very useful in helping me maintain that balance.

Francis Mureithi: Were you paying your own fees, or how were you managing financially?

Jackjared Odhiambo: I didn't pay a single cent upfront. Initially, DDD offered grants, but they weren't enough to cover the full costs. Through strong collaboration between DDD and HELB (Higher Education Loans Board), we were able to link the program to HELB and apply for student loans. So while I didn't pay directly, I've been repaying the loan through monthly salary deductions.

Francis Mureithi: After finishing university, you continued working at DDD. Did your role change?

Jackjared Odhiambo: Oh yes, absolutely. The career journey at DDD has been very interesting. When I completed my degree, the next step from the associate level was the role of Project Coordinator. At the time, DDD promoted high-performing graduates to that position. I was fortunate to be among those selected, and that marked the beginning of my career in project management. As a Project Coordinator, I worked on various projects, each requiring different skills depending on its scope and execution. The role evolved constantly, especially with changes in technology. Around 2018, a new project came up that required expertise in sports analysis. DDD advertised an internal opening for a Team Lead. I've always seized opportunities, so I applied, went through the in-house interview process, and was selected for the role. I led the sports analysis project for about a year and a half, until it concluded in 2019. After the project ended, DDD no longer needed an additional Team Lead, as other projects already had their leads. I had to consider my next move. Around that time, a field-based project called FamilySearch was underway. I transitioned and joined the Research Department under FamilySearch.

Francis Mureithi: Today you are in the Research Department?

Jackjared Odhiambo: No. Also, research ended after the Corona pandemic. I was absorbed as a production manager, which is my current role.

Francis Mureithi: Looking back on your journey from the moment you first heard about DDD to where you are today, what would you say are the major lessons you've learned?

Jackjared Odhiambo: One of the key lessons I've learned is determination. As the saying goes, "No man is limited." When you're truly determined to succeed, you shouldn't focus only on immediate rewards, look ahead to what you can achieve in the future. Growth is a gradual process. Another important lesson is that success doesn't come on a silver platter, you have to work for it. Determination must be paired with a sharp, alert mind and a commitment to continuous learning. Especially in this sector,

where technology evolves rapidly, you might wake up one day and find everything has changed. You have to adapt and grow with the technology.

Francis Mureithi: What will you say was the turning point in your life?

Jackjared Odhiambo: The turning point came around 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many projects stalled, and operations were disrupted. Despite the challenges, I remained consistently determined to deliver quality work, even on small tasks. As projects dried up and layoffs occurred, I transitioned fully into project management. That moment marked a significant shift in my career. It's been an incredible journey of growth and learning.

Francis Mureithi: Since joining DDD, what impact has it had on you personally and on your family, including financial changes?

Jackjared Odhiambo: When I joined DDD, the salary was quite modest, around 7,400 shillings [60USD]. I had siblings to support, so I had to manage rent, transportation to work, school expenses, and other responsibilities. It was a lot to juggle. But the support I've received from DDD since then has been incredible. Honestly, my life has grown within DDD. I got married while working here, and now I'm a proud father of four.

Francis Mureithi: Congratulations.

Jackjared Odhiambo: People often say, "DDD is a stepping stone." But for me, it's more than that, it's a workplace, a foundation. I've experienced significant growth here. Over time, I've achieved a lot, and my financial situation has improved tremendously. Without the financial support I've received, many of my accomplishments wouldn't have been possible.

Francis Mureithi: What would you say is your proudest moment at DDD?

Jackjared Odhiambo: One of my proudest moments is seeing the people who report to me, whether directly or indirectly, grow into leadership roles, even outside of DDD. It may not be a large number, but the impact is real. Thanks to the coaching, leadership skills, and knowledge we've shared, many within my circle have progressed in their careers. Some are close friends, and seeing them excel through the support and guidance I've provided genuinely makes me proud.

Francis Mureithi: Are you still in touch with those you worked with at DDD, including those who have transitioned elsewhere?

Jackjared Odhiambo: When I joined DDD, I was part of a cohort, but I believe I'm now the only one from that group still working here. Honestly, I've lost touch with some of them, but with others, we've maintained a strong friendship. We stay connected and keep each other updated on our lives and careers. Many from that cohort have gone on to excel, not just at DDD, but in other fields as well.

Francis Mureithi: What role does the alumni play?

Jackjared Odhiambo: We have two WhatsApp groups for DDD alumni. One is a general alumni group that includes everyone who has been part of DDD. It's quite active, with strong participation and engagement. The second group is focused on welfare, it was created for like-minded individuals who are willing to support one another. The general alumni group has nearly 500 members, while the welfare group currently has 65 members. The welfare group was formed because we recognized that, as a community, there are times when one of us, or a family member or sibling, might face challenges. In such moments, we come together to offer support to anyone within the welfare alumni network.

Francis Mureithi: Do you have any recommendations for how DDD can improve or become even better?

Jackjared Odhiambo: DDD is moving in a strong direction, especially in how it empowers its employees. We now have learning management programs for mid-level managers, team leads, and supervisors, designed to ensure the organization is well-equipped to compete with other BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) companies. These programs focus on building essential soft and technical skills needed to navigate evolving technologies. For example, we've seen rapid shifts from machine learning to artificial intelligence, then to generative AI, and now, Agentic AI is emerging as the next frontier. To stay competitive, DDD must continue investing in employee development through coaching, learning resources, and technical training. This will help ensure we remain agile and aligned with the demands of the tech landscape.

Francis Mureithi: Is DDD currently helping enrich tech in Kenya and local communities, or is that a role it still needs to expand?

Jackjared Odhiambo: It's already happening. DDD contributed to a project called Cruise Driverless Cars, providing a strong knowledge base in machine learning and artificial intelligence. Although the project is currently on hold, the ideas and skills DDD brought to the table have been impactful.

Francis: Thank you very much, Jackjared.

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.*