# “People gain a certain level of professionalism that's extremely valuable for them as they progress in their career.”

## A Conversation with Jaeson Rosenfeld, Co-founder

**Rollo Romig**
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**Rollo Romig: Could you start off by introducing yourself, your background, and how you got connected with Digital Divide Data?**

**Jaeson Rosenfeld:** I studied math and economics at the University of Michigan. I worked for McKinsey. Jeremy Hockenstein and I were business analysts together in Cleveland starting in 1995, and we've been friends ever since, and roommates at times. After McKinsey, I went to graduate school at the Fletcher School, Tufts, and I got a couple of master's degrees at the London School of Economics. I was one of the founders of Digital Divide Data, me, Jeremy, and three others who are a little less involved now, but who were there from the start. Then I went back to McKinsey and started a couple of companies, one of which, StatDNA, is still providing jobs to DDD.

I was working and still work in soccer, professional football. I sold StatDNA to Arsenal. From 2012 to 2020, I was part of the executive team at Arsenal. From 2020 to now, I was an advisor to FIFA for the last World Cup, which I'm not supremely proud of, but the work was interesting. That was a part-time thing for me; I was trying to get together an investment group to buy a football team. We did buy one, Saint-Étienne in France, last summer. I'm actively involved in managing that investment. Then, in the other part of my time, I worked with Jeremy at the Livelihood Impact Fund. I have a group called the Urban Living Standards Initiative. We do projects mainly in Kenya to improve the living standards of urban slum dwellers by providing them with better products and services. That's my other passion.

When I finished grad school, I had a little money in my pocket from working at McKinsey. Jeremy had been to Cambodia and really liked it, and I was doing an around-the-world trip. He suggested we meet in Cambodia for a month and see if there's anything interesting we could do to help people. He was inspired when he went there. People were really scrapping, trying to learn English any way they could. Cambodia in 2001 was a lot different than it is today.

For example, all transport was either bicycle or moto, with a handful of cars on the street. After this trip, one thing led to another, and we committed to start an organization to provide people with technology jobs, a leap of faith. I've been involved with DDD mainly as a board member since then. I took a short sabbatical from McKinsey to try my hand at sales in the early days, just for a few months. I was not very good at it, but I tried. As a board member, Jeremy and I are close; I've been along the whole way.

**Rollo Romig: What convinced you this would be a good thing to gamble on?**

**Jaeson Rosenfeld:** When you're young, you're willing to try things. Maybe when you're older, you lose the bravery a little bit. Honestly, there are a lot of things that I would have been willing to try, just because you don't have the pain of experience. A lot of things don't end up working. In a way, that's good. That's why young people do stuff like this.

Basically, the confluence was, the outsourcing movement was starting then. India was coming on the map. It'd been on for a few years, but it was still a little bit nascent. We felt there's enough people there, and wages were lower. We wondered if maybe there was something we could do to get people jobs.

A lot of times, when you're an entrepreneur, a little bit of naivety about the market is a good thing, because you basically will take more chances. Once you get your toe in the water, you're more likely to keep going for a swim. We saw that people were educating themselves. There were some computers around. The wages were very low, and there was probably some set of work that didn't require English language fluency that they could do. That was our very structured business plan.

**Rollo Romig: One of the hallmarks of DDD, and probably one of the big reasons why it's worked over time, seems to be this willingness to try stuff out, even if it's not the safest experiment.**

**Jaeson Rosenfeld:** Sure. Also, even now, but a lot less, we bootstrap, if that makes sense. Sometimes we should have bootstrapped less, if I'm honest. A counterexample is Andela. They went to Africa with the idea to do low-end software development in Africa for enterprises, and took the opposite approach. They raised $100 million to do it, and it didn't actually end up working for a variety of reasons. We were the opposite.

We got our $25,000 initial grant from Michael Chertok and Koji Osawa. We continuously made it work. Jeremy's always been good at fundraising, but in the beginning, what we thought was a big check was $25,000. We hired 10 people, and we kept it small. As we grew, it was always that way.

Now, when I see the big building in Cambodia, it's different, because for seven years, we were on a dirt road in half of someone's house. It wasn't a small house, but for a while, we didn't have air conditioning because we couldn't afford it. It was hard for people to work there. There was always an incremental and bootstrap approach, but sometimes too much so. Maybe we could have made our lives a little easier by hiring ahead of things sometimes. But we always made it work.

**Rollo Romig: What's another example of something in those early years that you tried that maybe didn't work, but that you learned something from?**

**Jaeson Rosenfeld:** Many things. Basically, there's a balance between the level of a person you can take in to produce the work that you need to produce. We basically took in a class of women that had been sex-trafficked, just to see if maybe we could provide a good job for them. Ultimately, a lot of them didn't have functional literacy, so they honestly couldn't do the work. As much as we would have wanted them to do the work, it wasn't possible. We couldn't continue to do that.

Ultimately, even if you're going to do a social enterprise where basically you're trying not to make money but at least cover your costs, you're going to have to reach a certain level of productivity. You have to pay people not as much as you would like, but an amount that's fair, and allows you to deliver to the clients. We tried to stretch things a little further than we could to help people.

**Rollo Romig: DDD has always been about trying to reach the most marginalized, challenged populations, and you can't really tell what the limits are until you try.**

**Jaeson Rosenfeld:** Right. A big part of our initial experience was with disabled people, and actually, that works. We gladly hire them, and we have had some of our best employees come from disabled populations. Once you start scaling, again, you have to have the same criteria. They have to have the level of literacy and basic education to do the work. In the disabled populations, it's always been a big part of what we do. Can it be half of the workforce? That'd be tough, but we want it to be something significant.

**Rollo Romig: Tell me a bit about how DDD evolved over the years. How did the training evolve? How did your approach with clients evolve?**

**Jaeson Rosenfeld:** I'm not positive I'm the best person to answer that. What I would say is two things that have been the hardest at DDD is sales and getting clients, because there are a number of disadvantages that hamstring you when trying to sell to clients. One is just the location. Clients are concerned about sending work to Cambodia, although that's gotten better over time. Sales have always been difficult, and also getting enough middle management that, as you scale, keeps everything working well. That's a problem in general in all developing countries, but I don’t want to be pejorative.

There's a certain phase of development where the education of middle management hasn't caught up with the needs of the companies. Both of those things have always been challenging for us, and to a certain extent, they continue to be. For example, we had an office in Battambang, and it worked okay. It wasn't a catastrophe or anything like that. It just ended up being probably not significantly beneficial enough to clients and the target populations to deal with the complexity. Kenya was difficult for us.

We had a lot of ups and downs in Kenya, and for a long time, I wondered whether we should have done it. I go to Kenya all the time now, but having Asia and then Kenya so far apart, to keep that all working well, it wasn't easy, especially at the scale we were. Obviously, we weren't small, but we weren't that big. It was something that evolved over

time. Definitely the way that people have been trained has evolved over time, but I can't tell you the specifics.

Our first office, in Vientiane in Laos, was almost in a ghost town, even compared to Cambodia when we first started there. Our first office was two blocks from the river, on the second and third floor of a three-story building. Now it's obviously a lot different. The countries have evolved. Laos, not as much as Cambodia, but it's still developed a lot.

What I see mostly, especially in Cambodia, is an evolution of the types of job opportunities people can get because the economy has grown. That's a really positive factor. I hope DDD has contributed to that. We know a lot of our people have gone on to higher roles in bigger companies. When you go there, there's certainly less need for what we're doing now than there was 20 years ago. It's still needed, but the level of opportunities is better.

**Rollo Romig: You mentioned that when you started, it was difficult to sometimes sell clients on the idea of sending work to Cambodia. To what extent do you think that DDD helped change that perception by making it a place for this work?**

**Jaeson Rosenfeld:** Just little by little we should have helped because we got more and more work. We have to remember Cambodia specifically had just come out of a very rough period of its history. In 2001, if you asked people about Cambodia, they'd talk about killing fields, genocide, instability, and tanks in the streets. That's not going to be the image you want people to have when they're thinking about sending you important work. Now, that is further back in history. Probably when people hear about Cambodia now, they think it’s one of a lot of places to send work.

If you can show me you've been doing it for 20 years, why wouldn't I give you a chance? Nowadays, our facilities are nicer. I’m not concerned about showing big clients our facility and shocking them. It doesn't feel like that anymore. That's also because of the development of the economy. In 2002, we couldn’t have rented the office space we have now. I don't think it existed. In 2001, Cambodia was an NGO economy. That's what was driving all of the activity, and it's obviously not that anymore.

**Rollo Romig: How has DDD tailored its approach differently to those three different countries?**

**Jaeson Rosenfeld:** Each country is different culturally, even between Laos and Cambodia. They are quite different cultures. Again, others could describe the differences much better than me. Laos has always been behind on infrastructure. The company I started, StatDNA, is a football analytics company where people watch videos of soccer and collect data from them. That's what we did in Laos. When we first started, the biggest barrier was bandwidth in Laos specifically. Cambodia was better, but still not great. Laos has always lagged a little bit on bandwidth and its infrastructure in general.

I haven't been to Laos in a few years. The building we have in Cambodia now, I'm not sure that one exists for us in Laos. We're in more of a facility like we used to have in Cambodia. Laos is still in a really bad spot, and now the economy too, because of

inflation. Laos has always had less English-speaking people. In Cambodia, there was an almost national desire to learn English. In Laos, it was less strong. Not that it didn't exist, but there were more English-speaking people in Cambodia.

Laos is a smaller country. It's a little harder to get to, so it's been more difficult. What we've tried to do is send them projects [tailored for them]. My project was perfect for Laos, because it's video. No language skills necessary, zero. You just have to watch video and say when a guy kicks a ball, things like that. We had to be very selective about which projects we sent to Laos to make them a little bit bigger scale with less language requirements. In Cambodia, you couldn't do fluency language projects, but you could do ones where you needed basic knowledge and the ability to spot words in English. Some English, but not listening to audio and transcribing it. Cambodia has been a little bit more flexible about what we could send them. That's why they've scaled a bit more, and also for other reasons because of infrastructure.

Obviously, in Kenya, it's the English. That's a key selling point for jobs. It makes it easier for us as experts to be involved because of the language. The differences are pretty simple in a way. Even now, it's easier to get to Cambodia than it used to be, so that makes it more viable. There are direct flights from Seoul to Phnom Penh. The approaches have been very practical, more than anything else, based on the local infrastructure and human resources that are available.

**Rollo Romig: Let's talk about the graduates of the program. Is there someone for whom DDD really made an impact?**

**Jaeson Rosenfeld:** You'll get better stories from other people. The last time I went to Cambodia, two or three years ago, we had a gathering for graduates. They obviously select ones that have gone on to interesting things, and some are in real leadership positions. These were people that we saw as kids. I was a kid, too, to be honest. They were probably eight or 10 years younger than me when they started, and now they're adult professionals in leadership positions.

Our impact on the individual is the most gratifying. Also, the impact on the country as a whole by creating leaders that will grow things is quite gratifying as well. We had a person in our original group, Nalek. We were targeting disabled people, and she was born with some deformations in her hands. Our jobs were typing at that point. Not the easiest job to do with deformation in your hands, but she was our fastest. She had a good spirit, a very warm person. She went on to learn English, and eventually moved to the US, in Massachusetts. I believe Jeremy set it up.  In Buddhism, with the principle of karma, it's pretty tough for people who are handicapped because they believe they did something in a past life to deserve it. It's important to help people overcome that.

**Rollo Romig: The ultimate goal for graduates is to leave DDD and get jobs in the wider world. What special qualities do DDD graduates bring to whatever they do?**

**Jaeson Rosenfeld:** DDD program is a mix of real job experience and education. We've often debated, what is it that makes them better off? Education? Job experience? Both?

If I had to put money on it, I'd say it was the job experience. Because we never really completely understood the quality of the education that's constrained by what's locally delivered, we know what we're delivering in the workplace.

When you come to DDD, especially in the beginning, what we're doing is delivering for demanding international clients. In many countries, that demand is not there. I'm not picking on Kenya, Laos, Cambodia, because I've lived in a lot of countries. If it happens, it happens. If it doesn't, it doesn't. You don't have that high level of demand.

People gain a certain level of professionalism that's extremely valuable for them as they progress in their career. English is also a huge benefit for them. From our own internal surveying and research, we know that the ones that learn English really well go on to more. Just being in a company that's running with international standards is the key thing that helps them. We also obviously hope to have a good nurturing work environment where people feel they are cared about and are here to grow.

Then hopefully they take that to wherever they go next. For me, it's really about the expectations in a company that delivers to international clients. I have my team at LIF, Livelihood Impact Fund. I have projects on the ground, and I have four people executing my projects. They're all DDD graduates, and honestly, they're amazing. It's incredible what they're doing. That's a really good touch point for me with the impact of DDD.

**Rollo Romig: As DDD continues past 25 years, what is something that it should be doing that maybe it's not doing yet, in order to sustain the program?**

**Jaeson Rosenfeld:** That's a tough one. In DDD's history, we always had people who wanted to do DDD in another country. We did it ourselves, and honestly, there must've been 50 to 100 times that different people from different countries wanted to do DDD.

The problem has always been what the work is going to be. The solution that can work is if you can get local clients. If everyone can get local clients, then you're not all competing for the same international pool of business. We never cracked that sufficiently. I don't know if it's crackable. If it is, then you can have a lot more people getting these types of jobs.

That's where I don't know, because, honestly, we've been at it for 25 years, and it's not through lack of effort. When you're actually delivering to the local ecosystem at international standards, you're creating jobs, and you're providing a service to the economy that's distinctive and beneficial. That would be my dream. I don't know if it's possible, but that's the one thing that would allow things to progress further.

*Rollo Romig is the manager of Solutions Insights Lab. He is the author of I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India, which was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.*

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*