

“It's a starter pack, basically, for life.”

A Conversation with Judith Obonyo, Vice President of Operations

Ann Mikia

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Judith Obonyo: My name is Judith Obonyo. I'm the Vice President of Operations here at DDD, Digital Divide Data, primarily responsible for overseeing Nairobi and the rest of Africa, where we collaborate with other partners, including those in Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, and Tanzania.

Ann Mikia: Do you also pick students from those African countries?

Judith Obonyo: No. Those countries are specifically HR partners. When we have clients who need us to do work for them in those countries, they will work with those HR partners to find suitable candidates for us who can deliver work in those specific countries.

Ann Mikia: How do you recruit your beneficiaries?

Judith Obonyo: There are different ways of recruiting the beneficiaries of the work-study program. They may have already shared with you what the work study program is, how it works.

Ann Mikia: Some of those who work here told me how the work study works, but I would like to hear how you recruit them.

Judith Obonyo: For the work study program, it's a program that allows young men and women to go to school, but at the same time be employed. They're able to benefit by having an education and also earning a decent wage to sustain their lives. This is how it works. In the work study program, we work with partners who are in different locations. Mostly, these are partners in the underserved areas, mostly in slums. These are mostly community-based organizations.

The reason why we mostly work with these organizations is that they can vouch for these individuals. In most instances, you'll find that they know them from the time they were little kids to where they are right now. They know their families. They can give us all the information that is required regarding this individual. That is one way. The types of partners that we partnered with and we've partnered with for a long time are the likes of SHOFCO [Shining Hope for Communities, a community-led, non-profit organization based in Kenya].

We've partnered with them for a very long time for Mathare and Kibera. Then also the other way is through snowballing. What that means is we have the associates who've already joined our program. They go back and inform the rest regarding the DDD program, and they're also able to apply directly to DDD. Then also there are those who just bump into us online, and then they send their direct applications. Once they send their applications, or after that initial interaction with them, either through the CBO or them sending the applications, then we invite them for an interview.

Once we invite them for an interview, one of the first things that we ascertain is the KCSE grade that they achieved. Remember, there's a minimum grade. The minimum is C minus. We are very intentional with that because if we put it too high, then we'll be cutting off a lot of them. Also, if we put it too low, then it will lose meaning. We want to be sure that we are actually working with those people who truly deserve those positions. We verify the minimum grade.

That means we have to see their certificates, just to verify that. Then, once they bring their certificates, we also verify the background information that they gave us. How do you verify this background information? We have our impact team doing the home visits, just to verify that indeed, if you said you live in Kibera, and you live with your mom, your mom is single, you have five siblings, then we want to verify that ourselves by doing the home visit.

Then we also have to verify that indeed you are deserving of that position in terms of whether you are financially incapable of taking yourself through higher education. Once we verify that, then we enroll them into the program. There's no other requirement. We don't require you to have computer skills. We don't need any of that because the intention is to remove you from a state of not knowing to a state of knowing. Once we bring them here, our very first job is to provide them with digital literacy skills. What does this mean?

We are training them on basic computer knowledge. The other thing that we also mostly focus on is helping them unlearn bad habits, for instance, unlearning that you don't have to fight about everything. The fact that most of them are coming from these backgrounds, where they already feel like they have to fight for everything. They are unlearning a certain culture, and they're learning a new culture. This new culture is a new culture of being in a professional environment. It's a culture of believing in yourself. It's a culture of having confidence that you are able to do it.

It's a culture of learning how to even present yourself, how to dress appropriately, how to communicate appropriately. It's basically a 360 sort of training that we offer them for the period that they are with us. Our focus is to equip them with business skills, just basic business skills. Equip them with employability skills. That is why I'm saying, when it comes to professionalism, how do you conduct yourself? Equip them with soft skills. How do you communicate? How do you interact with people?

Ann Mikia: How many students have benefited from this program in Kenya?

Judith Obonyo: The number changes very quickly. Since we started tracking this intentionally in 2018, we've had about 2,122 people who have gone through the best training program. That is the BEST training program [Business, Employability, Soft, and Technical skills]. Then, for the WSP program [Work Study Program], which I'll get into.

Once we have completed the BEST training, which stands for Business Employability, Soft and Technical Skills, which is the initial training I mentioned, they usually have the opportunity to either secure a placement outside DDD, arranged by our impact team, or be placed within DDD. Basically, they end up doing projects within DDD. These are commercial projects. These are projects that have been outsourced to us by other clients internationally or sometimes even locally to do on their behalf.

Once our associates are assigned to these projects, over time, say around one year, we allow them to settle into the projects first. At this point, we give them medical cover. They get medical cover, and then they get a monthly salary to sustain themselves. Then, within that course of one year, we monitor their performance. Performance means how they are performing on the projects? How are they discipline-wise? How are they interacting with everyone else?

We are not just focusing on someone who can deliver their work. We want someone who, once they leave DDD, they are a holistic person and can fit into the community or any other environment. After that one year of monitoring, they get an opportunity to apply for a scholarship. When they apply for this scholarship, of course, we evaluate based on those items that I have mentioned. Then, if they meet that criteria, we help them through the application process.

We help them by first helping them identify which courses are most suitable for them. I may want to be a pilot, but my grade does not allow me to be a pilot. We help them navigate some of these things. Also, we help them navigate—you may want to become a neurosurgeon, but what are the chances of getting employed? We help them navigate some of these struggles that young people have when they're making career choices. We guide them through that, making those career choices.

Through this, we partner with different universities and colleges across Nairobi, the likes of Zetech [Zenith Technology University], Kenyatta University, Mount Kenya University, quite several universities that we partner with, just so they can understand how our program works and they can help our associates fit into their system, considering our associates are working and they're also going to school at the same time. Once they

make those career choices, we apply for them or they apply directly. Once they are selected, DDD makes the payments directly to the universities or the colleges.

Once DDD makes these payments, remember these associates are still working. A typical working day for a Kenyan by the labor law is eight hours, eight productive hours, but what we do is we have them work only seven hours so that they have that additional hour to either do assignments, revision, or just spend time on their studies. They only work seven hours for those who are in the work-study program. Then the additional hour is for them to catch up on their studies. Then we also have those who do distance learning.

Most of them are enrolled in distance learning, which means they have maybe a week every semester for them to go and do their exams. We usually plan ahead of time to make sure that during that week, they have time off and maybe even a couple of days before that week, they also have time off to do their revisions and studies before doing the exams.

Ann Mikia: Do you also support them in pursuing diploma and certificate courses?

Judith Obonyo: Yes, we do. That is why we lowered that grade, because we found out that if we put it too high, again, as I mentioned, you'd cut off a lot of people. If you put it too low, then you'll end up with a lot of people who are not deserving. C minus was to enable those who—because the way that the examination system in Kenya is set, you might be a very good student, but when you do the final exam, you end up not getting a grade that you truly deserve. With us having that cutoff of C minus, it gives an opportunity to most of them to even start from the level of a certificate and diploma.

For those who are very ambitious, over time, they save money and continue educating themselves at university. Some of them also get other scholarships elsewhere, and they're able to pursue their education even higher. For those with higher grades, of course, they get opportunities to do other things, like earn degrees. It depends on the grade they got.

Ann Mikia: Have all your beneficiaries been placed?

Judith Obonyo: Either we've placed them or they've gotten jobs on their own. Most of the time, you realize that when they go for internships, they end up getting employment. For those that we've placed, the 600 that I mentioned, those whom we placed directly, there are those who will also be employed here at DDD. In the course of their employment, they get better opportunities because they already have the work experience that they need, which is basically the core of who DDD is.

We want to allow them to get that entry-level experience, basically a stepping stone to help them get better jobs and earn higher salaries compared to what they were earning before.

Ann Mikia: How has DDD stood out in assisting them?

Judith Obonyo: There's a huge impact for sure, but the biggest one is breaking that cycle of poverty. Most of these young men and women grew up in environments where they never truly thought they would end up being anything, because they had never seen anything in their lives. DDD has given them that opportunity to realize their dreams. Even as we do our home visit, when we are initially verifying, we realize that their moms are also probably brought up in that same area.

It's a whole lineage of the same experiences. What DDD has done is break that cycle of poverty and help them realize or experience a different world from what they could have probably experienced if they had remained uneducated or unexposed to this type of environment. I think the other thing is, when you're looking at underserved communities, it's very hard to separate that also from gender exclusion. The fact that, if you are in an underserved community and you're a woman, it's more difficult for you, even compared to the men who are in that type of environment.

It gives these girls opportunities to—for instance, the issues that happen in such areas, such as young girls getting pregnant early and not being able to take care of these children, or just being exposed to diseases, being exposed to violence, and all that. We are basically allowing these girls to realize their dreams, and for women also to be included in that entire journey of changing the economic situation, not just of these people, but also for the country as a whole.

Ann Mikia: Is it possible to tell who has benefited more between women and men in your program?

Judith Obonyo: That will be hard to tell, but just from the perspective of someone who has been here for the last seven years, some of the things that I have seen are that I've seen the women becoming more aggressive in terms of knowing what they want and going for it because they have started seeing female role models. They have started seeing other women doing it, so it helps them digest the idea or internalize the idea that if this person can do it, so can we. Sopheap Im is our Chief People Officer. She's a woman. The Vice President of Operations in Phnom Penh is a woman.

The Vice President of operations in Laos is also a woman. In Nairobi, the head of Human Resources is a woman. They have me. I think all around, when they see all these women, it helps them see that I may not have had this growing up, but I'm seeing all these women who are doing it, so it means it can be done. I don't have the full statistics, but generally speaking, I can say that the women stick it out to the end. They always give it their best.

Ann Mikia: Before enrolling these beneficiaries, you said you would visit their homes to confirm what they have told you. Are you able to follow up after they've graduated from these programs to check the impact of your intervention on their lives?

Judith Obonyo: Yes. The impact department usually does those follow-ups. They do those follow-ups when our associates are in the program and even after they leave

DDD, just to verify the impact on their lives. You may find that at times the graduates from the program either end up leaving those communities and moving to better areas, and moving together with their families, but in some instances, you'll also find them staying there. Why? Because they also want to support the communities that are there. You'll find them staying there, starting programs there to support the young men and women.

Also, there's a huge affiliation to that community, so they feel like, instead of going and spending a lot of money out there, why not just give back to their community? Also, the fact that they have lots of people depending on them. What I've seen with most of them they end up leaving those areas. For me, that's a good thing because it typically shows the rest of them who are there that it can be done.

Ann Mikia: What do you think beneficiaries of Digital Divide Data should do to give back to DDD?

Judith Obonyo: That's a very good question, because the biggest brand ambassador for DDD can only be the beneficiaries of the program. Anything else that we say can be just said by anyone, but the person who has lived through the process and has benefited from the process is our biggest brand ambassador. They can give back by mentoring the young men and women who have just joined the program.

Also, besides mentorship, just being involved in—for instance, when we are looking for placements for the young men and women, because they have already been placed, they already have connections in whatever sectors they're working in, and they're already doing that. A lot of them are doing that. They're referring us to different employers, and they're saying, "Hey, this company's employing, or my company's employing, do you mind sending a few people to be interviewed?" Stuff like that.

Supporting us with a placement process and also just being our brand ambassadors in terms of this is what DDD does. Third, mentoring and coaching the ones who are already here so that they can finish the process, and just trust that the process will take its course if they are patient enough and if they give their best in everything.

Ann Mikia: Do you have activities where you invite successful beneficiaries to come and talk to the ones who are being trained here?

Judith Obonyo: Yes, we do. We reach out to them depending on the sector that they are working in, and also depending on their availability, and also depending on the gap that we see internally. They mostly come, talk to them about, for instance, the industries that they're working in. Sometimes they also talk to them about their own experience when they were associates, so that these guys can see, "Oh, it's not just me. They also went through it, but look at them. They have made it."

We have those sessions. We used to have them as frequently as monthly, but then it became a bit difficult for them to commit. Now we are having them at least every quarter, where we are having them come in and just speak to their associates.

Ann Mikia: Do you think DDD would seek more funding to help more needy students, since I think there are many in the country?

Judith Obonyo: Yes, indeed. We continue fundraising. We never stop. We continue fundraising because, like I said, it's a cycle and it's a stepping stone for all the young men and women. The intention and purpose are not to have them stay with us forever. The purpose is to give them that start. It's a starter pack, basically, for life. Then, once they have that starter pack, they can fly on and give an opportunity to others to also benefit from the system.

For that, we need continuous fundraising, which continues to happen, but most importantly, because we are also training our associates to work in a professional environment, we also need commercial projects, because we sustain our business through those commercial projects. We invoice clients, they pay us, and that is how we can pay salaries. That is how we can pay for their medical, that's how we can pay for their meals and all that stuff. The fundraising mostly supports the scholarship, but the day-to-day running is from our commercial projects.

Ann Mikia: DDD is celebrating 25 years since it was started in Cambodia, and later in Laos and Kenya. Tell us about the success to celebrate in Kenya?

Judith Obonyo: The biggest success for Kenya would be and still is the work-study model, because without an education, it's very hard to have doors opened. It's okay to give someone employment because it means they can pay their daily bills, but how do you equip them for the future? We can only equip them for the future if they have a certain skill, if they have knowledge, if they have papers that they can present that can help them move to the next level. From my perspective, that's the biggest impact that DDD has had in Kenya.

If you educate a community, you are eradicating so many things. You're eradicating cycles of poverty, you're eradicating diseases, you're eradicating traditional nuances, traditional cultures that are mostly retrogressive, cultures that are demeaning to women. You are empowering a whole community when you provide education. I think that is the biggest thing that I feel that DDD has done and is impactful, not just to the individual, but to the entire community.

Ann Mikia: What have been your most significant challenges in the program?

Judith Obonyo: The biggest challenge in the program has been the fact that when these young men and women come from these communities, there is already an affiliation with these communities. These communities work is that people are used to a given culture where you report to work in the morning, in the evening, you have your 200 bob in your pocket. You're able to buy sugar, milk, whatever, and you eat for the day, you go to bed, and people are done. Then tomorrow you start afresh. When these young men and women are coming from such communities, and now you have to train them to be patient to wait until the end of the month to earn a salary, but remember, back at home, people still have to eat.

People still have to pay rent. People still have to take care of all those bills, and because the parents still have a lot of control over these young men and women, they find it hard because they expect every single person in that household to leave in the morning and come home in the evening with money so that they can pay their bills. We typically find a lot of them struggling with that, because their parents want them to be able to provide something every day.

We experience some absenteeism. You ask them, "Where are you?" They say, "Oh, I was called for this job, mjengo [construction job], and I had to make some 500 shillings." All these things could happen. This mostly happens with the very new cohorts, the ones who are still acclimatizing to that culture shift, but over time, as we continue mentoring them, as they start seeing a consistent salary, as we keep having these financial literacy programs just to train them on how to manage their finances, then we start seeing lots of changes there.

Just that whole culture mind shift of being very aggressive, or just coming to the office like it's nothing, that also just certainly communicates that there's an environment that this person is coming from that you have to take care of before even their mindset changes, before they settle into this new environment that you want them to be. That, for me, has been the biggest challenge. Just having that mind shift from, I'm expected to provide every day, or I need to argue about everything, or I need to fight for everything.

Life is easy. Just take it slowly. Just be calm. Having that total mindset shift has been the biggest challenge, but it has also been one of the most interesting things to watch, having to see most of them coming in as not even knowing anything. A week after they are paid, they are coming to ask for money and stuff like that, now seeing them actually even paying school fees for their siblings. Seeing that complete shift is a very interesting journey to be a part of.

Ann Mikia: How about asking for a salary advance?

Judith Obonyo: [laughter] Yes, they do. They do, and that is why we have those financial literacy sessions. Well, of course, we would love it if they were able to save, but it's mostly to help them manage what they are earning right now. Then it also helps them in the future, once they graduate and they move on to their careers, then it helps them learn to manage even larger finances compared to what they are earning right now.

Ann Mikia: Have you had a challenge with some of the beneficiaries falling out of the program?

Judith Obonyo: Yes, and mostly it's because of that reason, the expectation that we should provide some money every day, and also the peer pressure because of the areas that they are coming from. Initially, we used to have those quite a lot, but nowadays, especially with the type of work that we are exposing them to, artificial intelligence, machine learning, it's very interesting for them, and the attrition rates are

super, super low. Mostly, they will attrit because they've gotten a better job, which for us is a plus.

We are happy when that happens, but they will not attrit because they're staying at home drinking alcohol or doing drugs or anything. No. Very rarely does that happen. Yes, it still does, but not at a high magnitude.

Ann Mikia: Does DDD support the alumni program for the beneficiaries in any way?

Judith Obonyo: Supporting financially? No, because the focus is on supporting the young men and women who've not benefited from the program, but support in terms of collaboration? Yes, we have a very active alumni program. Like I said, they are the ones who come to do those talks with the associates. We've had alumni who've gotten scholarships even to go abroad and continue their studies abroad, still through the help of DDD, and mostly those are people who are very outstanding.

There are a couple who went to either Sweden or Norway. We've had alumni, too, who are currently working with AWS in Cape Town. We have a couple who are at Safaricom. Yes, so there's still a lot of collaboration between DDD and the alumni, not from a financial perspective, but more to help continue this journey together and continue supporting the other youth who are yet to benefit from the program.

Ann Mikia: What would you say is the impact of DDD in the tech space in Kenya?

Judith Obonyo: I think DDD has been very innovative in the way we blend our associates with the business. Most organizations would hire people who are already experienced, people who already have the skills. They would not typically invest as heavily in training the way we invest in training. For us, our program ensures that the workforce is developed and customized for the specific needs of our customers, and that is what most customers want. They want you to provide solutions that are working for them.

They do not want you to provide copy/paste solutions that worked for someone else. That is why our program ensures that how we train our associates encompasses not only the DDD culture but also the customer expectations. In this tech space, you need someone who is very agile. The reason you need to be agile is that all customers are asking for customized solutions. If you already just have people who are "plug and play," then it means chances are these are people who are very rigid in their thinking, but when you're working with the associates, it's more like a sponge that is typically just soaking in all the learnings and soaking in everything that you are training them on.

That enables them to adapt to the customer's expectations. Then also, when you are looking at higher value work, higher value work needs people who can think outside the box, and that is what we at DDD focus on. We focus on training people, not just to do the expected or the day-to-day, but also to think out of the box, beyond the regular day-to-day, and think ahead of time.

At DDD we quickly look into what is going to happen in the next five years or next four years and how do we start preparing our people now so that our clients are coming and just telling us, "Hey, I need this done," and then we are offering them a solution that works for them, because we already have a workforce that is prepared for that future.

Ann Mikia: Does work experience favour the employability of your graduates?

Judith Obonyo: Exactly. Most of our graduates, either from the WSP program or the best training program, get jobs very quickly. Not only because of the skills, but also because of how we have cultured them to think. For them, it's not money first, for them it's mostly what I am learning from this whole experience for now, and after I learn what I've learnt now, how is it going to benefit me or quickly build my career in the next 5 or 10 years, yes.

Ann Mikia: Are there courses that you feel you should have included in the DDD program?

Judith Obonyo: Yes, the program keeps evolving. I think when we first started, there was a lot of focus on IT and hospitality. Over time, we've seen a lot of them moving to other business-related courses. A lot of educators have graduated from the system, people who have done a Bachelor's of Education. We are also seeing a lot of interest now in the data science space, mostly because of what they've been exposed to and the current state of the world, which is moving very rapidly to AI and machine learning. I think it keeps evolving because it's also dependent on the available courses, and also dependent on their grades. Yes.

Ann Mikia: What would be your word to DDD as you celebrate 25 years?

Judith Obonyo: A lot. My word to DDD mostly would be, even as we continue to provide or create better futures for our youth and giving them dignified work, access to education as well and the stepping stone to have those initial skills that are required in a professional environment, my word to DDD would be let's stay true to our mission. We'll never give up. The impact is bigger than the effort. The effort may seem immense, but at the end of the day, we are saving a whole community, we are saving a whole country.

It may seem as though we are just touching one or two people, but that one life that has been saved, chances are, we've saved an entire lineage. That is one thing that, as DDD, we should be super proud of.

Ann Mikia: Thank you.

Ann Mikia brings over 25 years of expertise in health reporting, production, training, and mentoring in journalism. She is an accredited solutions journalism trainer with Solutions Journalism Network. She served as a judge at the Annual Journalism Excellence Awards (AJEA) by the Media Council of Kenya. She has published stories on platforms such as Science Africa, Daily Nation, and Mail & Guardian. She holds an MA in

Communication Studies and a BA in Communication and Sociology from the University of Nairobi.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*