

“Even if I impact just one more person, and they in turn impact others, that ripple can change the world.”

A Conversation with Stephen Ndele, graduate of Digital Divide Data

Francis Mureithi
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Francis Mureithi: What’s your name and your background?

Stephen Ndele: I'm Stephen Ndele, born in a family of five, and I'm a first born. Above all, I'm born again, and I love God, and Jesus as my savior. Currently I'm a cloud engineer at Safaricom. I am from Makueni County, which is in the Eastern part of the country.

Francis Mureithi: Roughly how many kilometers is Makueni from Nairobi?

Stephen Ndele: Approximately 150 km. Not far. To and fro is around 300 kilometers.

Francis Mureithi: That's where you grew up?

Stephen Ndele: Not really. I grew up in Kitui at my mom's place. It's a long story about family issues, but I grew up in Kitui. That is where I started from Class 1 to Class 8.

Francis Mureithi: Where you grew up in Kitui, was it urban or rural?

Stephen Ndele: It was basically rural because we were staying with my grandmother. There were four of us. My mother was in Nairobi hustling.

Francis Mureithi: What happened then after finishing primary school?

I came to Nairobi. This was in 2009. I started Form 1 in a school called SSD here in Nairobi's CBD. I joined Form 1 during the second term. I was late because of school fees challenges.

Francis Mureithi: What? You missed the whole term?

Stephen Ndele: I missed the whole term because I was called to join a provincial school in my home area, but I couldn't join that term because there was no money. I ended up joining Form 1 at SSD in Nairobi. After starting my secondary school during the second term, I dropped out towards the end of Term 3. I didn't have school fees. The year that followed, after staying home for some time, I went for an interview in a different school. It was already the second term. The first school I went to, I was denied a chance due to lack of school fees. But I had a voucher of 15,000 Kenya shillings [115 USD]. The voucher was from the Sisters of Mercy, Catholic Church, in Jericho [in Nairobi]. I used to work as a casual worker for them. "You look like you are not at school," that's what they told me when giving me the voucher. Eventually I got an admission at Brain House Academy School located in Mathare North area.

Francis Mureithi: When you came to Nairobi, you started living with your mother?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, we were living in a slum called Kiambiu. But I was walking to the school which was not in Mathare

Francis Mureithi: How many kilometers roughly? Was it a short distance?

Stephen Ndele: It was not a short one. It took me more than an hour from home to school, and going back the same.

Francis Mureithi: More than an hour?

Stephen Ndele: Yes.

Francis Mureithi: When it's raining?

Stephen Ndele: You have to cope up. You have to wake up and time the clouds.

Francis Mureithi: I see you are a resilient man. After finishing Form 4, how was life then? And did you complete your Secondary School at Brain House Academy, or you changed again?

Stephen Ndele: Actually, I finished there. God was gracious.

Francis Mureithi: What followed after your secondary school?

Stephen Ndele: I passed KCSE [Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education]. That was in 2012. I received an admission letter to Kenyatta University to pursue a Bachelor of Commerce degree, but I was unable to enroll due to lack of school fees. By this time, my mother had moved from Nairobi back to the rural home. The family had by this time relocated to Makueni County [also in Eastern Kenya] from Kitui County. She relocated to Makueni in 2011 when I was in Form 3. I started living with my uncle after High School since I couldn't join university. I also started doing *mjengo* [work at construction sites]. I started this in December 2011 after finishing KCSE and all through 2012 and 2013.

Francis Mureithi: Were the construction sites in Nairobi?

Stephen Ndele: You go everywhere where there's work. You're not assured. You go today. Towards the end of 2013, I felt like this work was killing me. My body was small. I couldn't sustain that lifting. I remember one day I went to a construction site, and we were carrying cement to the second floor. It was wet and raining. I got a blister on my shoulder from the heavy load, but I didn't realize it until I got home. My shirt was stuck to my body, that's when I noticed the blister. I told my uncle. Actually, he didn't even mention it at first. He just asked me, "Aren't you going to the construction site today?" I didn't say anything, I simply showed him the blister, the wound on my shoulder. He told me, "Just relax. Take a day off."

At this time, I was supporting my family. Being the firstborn, with my siblings at home depending on me, I had no choice. I still had to find a way to work. I began to realize that the construction work was taking a toll on me, so I started looking for a different job. That's when I became a security guard at a construction site.

Francis Mureithi: They gave you a rungu [club]?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, they gave me a rungu. I specifically chose to work at night because I felt ashamed. The reason I was ashamed was that, on the first day I went to look for the job, they saw my academic papers, and so did my colleagues. You know how, when you're invited for a job, you show up with your documents, and people look at you like, "You're not supposed to be here."

Francis Mureithi: They thought you belonged somewhere else?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, it felt like I didn't belong. At the time I was doing construction work, I had already completed computer packages and had good exam results and university admission papers. Because of that shame, I asked them to give me the night shift. I worked night shifts from 2013 until around June or July 2014.

Francis Mureithi: After security, what did you do, and how did you end up at DDD?

Stephen Ndele: While working in security, I was very active in church. I was a dedicated church boy. One day, my supervisor approached me and said, "Steve, we want to transfer you." At the time, I was stationed at Argwings Kodhek, working at Yaya Center, in a place called Chaka. The church I attended was nearby, so on my way to work in the evening, I would stop by. I served as both a pianist and a technician, handling sound and technical work for the church. On fellowship days, Wednesdays and Fridays, I would pass by the church, complete my duties, and then head to work. I often left home by 2:00 or 3:00 PM to make it in time.

The church's location was convenient, being close to my workplace. So when the supervisor said they wanted to transfer me to Lavington, I told him, "With all due respect, if you transfer me, I won't be able to arrive on time to relieve my colleague,

because I have a church assignment." In security, it's important to report on time so the person on duty can leave.

Then he looked at me and said, "Steven, you either choose your church and God, or this job."

Oh my God, that was the easiest decision I've ever made. I chose God. I left the job immediately. I took off the uniform, shoes and everything, and went home.

Francis Mureithi: You didn't care about the salary that they were giving?

Stephen Ndele: No, I didn't. I cared about nothing. I just knew my life is God. Without God, there's nothing. Even if I'm job secured and I don't please God, it was nothing, so I left. Apparently, there was a brother I was hosting.

Francis Mureithi: Hosting?

Stephen Ndele: Yes. I was hosting a friend at the time. His in-law worked as a receptionist at DDD. The in-law was familiar with the DDD program, which supports students who didn't make it to university despite having the required grades.

One day, the in-law asked him, "The young man you live with—what does he do?" He replied, "Oh, he recently lost his job. He was working in security."

Then the in-law asked, "Does he have any computer skills? Did he score a C+ or above in KCSE?"

Even though we weren't related—I'm Kamba and they are Luhya—he answered, "Yes, he actually has more than a C+." The in-law only knew me from when I visited their home.

After that, the in-law reached out here—through Calvin and Daniel at the time—and that's how the connection was made.

I was invited for an interview. I said I had some digital skills, although they were very basic. I had only studied computer packages and had barely used a computer before. I came straight from the rural areas to Nairobi for school, and we didn't have computers back home. It was all very new to me.

But I told them, "I trust myself. I know I can do it." They gave me a chance.

That was in December 2014—when I officially joined DDD as a data entry clerk.

Francis Mureithi: Did DDD first train you, or how did you go about it?

Stephen Ndele: Yes. We were trained from the basics, including how to type, I didn't even know where the keys were. We had typing competitions, and top performers were rewarded.

Before starting client work, we went through digital literacy training and data entry simulations.

Francis Mureithi: Looking back, do you think there were things they should have taught you but didn't, any gaps in the training?

Stephen Ndele: No, I think everything was okay at the beginning. Maybe that question would apply later, before I eventually left DDD, but during the initial phase, everything was smooth. The training was sufficient, especially for someone like me who was completely new to computers.

Francis Mureithi: After you started working, you started earning?

Stephen Ndele: Yes. I started earning. I think by then it was around 9,000 Kenya shillings [70USD].

Francis Mureithi: Your life also started changing?

Stephen Ndele: Yes. My life now started changing. I started seeing myself, "Ah, finally I'm working in an office, not in a construction site."

Francis Mureithi: Or guarding a building somewhere.

[laughter]

Stephen Ndele: Yes. I was reporting in an office somewhere every morning, not in a construction site. But still, it wasn't easy. I was staying at Racecourse, Ngong' Road.

Stephen Ndele: Transport was still a challenge. Sometimes I would wake up at 4:00 a.m. to ensure I got to DDD on time. We worked in shifts, and if I was on the morning shift and didn't have enough fare, I would walk from Ngong Road to DDD.

Still, there was hope. When we joined, some people were already in university. I had a strong desire to study too—I had the qualifications and believed I could make it. So I kept pushing. Eventually, the salary increased slightly to 16,000 Kenya Shillings [about USD 125]

Francis Mureithi: You had this big dream of going to school. Did you eventually go, and if yes, what was the role of DDD in having you go to school?

Stephen Ndele: DDD played a big role in my journey. First, they gave me the opportunity to begin, a chance to see the light and take the first step forward. I started working there in December 2014, and throughout 2015, I continued working as we prepared for the academic program.

DDD was very supportive, they helped us secure loans from HELB (Higher Education Loans Board) and also facilitated access to grants that matched our tuition fees. If I had approached HELB on my own, the process would have been much harder. But DDD made it smooth and manageable. They handled everything for us, sometimes even the allocations would be processed and we would be sent to school without having to follow up ourselves. They really made the process seamless. They even provided us with admission letters to Kenyatta University.

Initially, I had been admitted to pursue a Bachelor of Commerce, but after joining DDD and gaining exposure, my mindset changed. I realized that IT had the power to transform lives. I developed a deep interest in computers. It was my first real experience with them beyond the basic computer packages I had studied. I thought, "Wow, I want to pursue IT."

Francis Mureithi: That's 2016?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, 2016.

Francis Mureithi: You were to join Kenyatta University probably in 2013 if you went straight from secondary school. Right?

Stephen Ndele: Yes.

Francis Mureithi: There are some years that were lost before joining Kenyatta University. Did you have to make a fresh application?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, I had to make a new application. You remember when the government gives you admission, it expires after one year. After that you have to renew again. You have to reapply afresh.

Francis Mureithi: Did you continue working at DDD after joining university? Was it a work-study program?

Stephen Ndele: It was a work-study program. Kenyatta University, at least at the time, had a program called either Long Distance Learning or E-learning, where students could continue their studies without attending daily classes.

We attended classes on Saturdays and Sundays, about four times per semester. The lecturers would provide summaries and guidance, and the rest of the learning was self-directed while we continued working. So, I was studying and working at the same time, in parallel.

Francis Mureithi: What about when you finished university, were you still working at DDD at that time, or had you already left?

Stephen Ndele: No, I wasn't with DDD by the time I completed university. Toward the end, around late 2018 or early 2019, during my final semester, there were significant changes at DDD.

Actually, let me go back a bit. During my time at DDD, they introduced a cloud technology program in partnership with AWS [Amazon Web Services]. They selected a few people to join the project, and I was one of them. It was the first time we received a double salary because it was a new initiative.

We joined the cloud program in 2017 and underwent six months of intensive training in cloud computing, without doing any other work during that period.

Francis Mureithi: Were you being paid?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, we were being trained specifically on cloud technology. DDD brought in an engineer from South Africa named Billy Nelson, a man we respect deeply. He trained us in AWS cloud technology from January to July 2017.

We sat for exams in August. Initially, we were 30 trainees, but one dropped out, so 29 of us completed the program, and all of us passed.

After that, we transitioned to working on actual cloud projects. This was still in 2017. Our salary, which had been 16,000, was doubled to 32,000 Kenya Shillings [about 250 USD], a 100% increase.

I still had responsibilities—my siblings were still depending on me. And as income increases, so do responsibilities.

The cloud program continued through 2017. But toward the end of 2018, around February 2019, there was an organizational restructure at DDD, and I was among those affected. I had to leave before completing my term.

Psychologically, I wasn't prepared for the sudden change. I had people relying on me, I was still in school, and now I was jobless. I had no savings, every coin I earned went toward responsibilities. Part of my salary was also being deducted to repay my HELB loan.

I was under a lot of stress and couldn't concentrate on my studies, so I decided to defer my semester. I remember going to KU to process the deferment. Just as I had completed the application, I received a call from someone I didn't know.

He said, "Are you Stephen?" I replied, "Yes." He then asked me a few questions about cloud technology and told me, "Can you come to my office in Westlands?"

I told him, "Actually, I'm still in school. I have nothing, not even a certificate." But he said, "Just come, just come."

I went, though I got lost in Westlands at first. Eventually, I found the office.

Thanks to the cloud technology skills I had gained, he showed me his server and application and asked, "Can you identify the problem with my application?"

Within a minute, I spotted the issue. He looked at me and said, "You can solve my problems."

Francis Mureithi: You got a new job, just like that?

Stephen Ndele: I got the job, just like that. But the mistake I made was not negotiating the salary. I had just come from a difficult situation, and when the opportunity came, I grabbed it without thinking twice.

Looking back, I realize that's something I wasn't prepared for when I left DDD, how to present myself, how to market my skills, and most importantly, how to negotiate. In the end, the employer paid me even less than what I was earning at DDD, but I lacked the confidence and knowledge to negotiate better.

Francis Mureithi: They had not taught you that at DDD?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, that was something I hadn't been taught. But either way, I was grateful to have something to do.

While I was still working there, the owner noticed my performance and said, "You're a very bright kid, you know a lot." Then he asked, "By the way, I've never even seen your academic papers."

I told him, "Actually, when you first called me, I was in the process of deferring my semester, I hadn't completed my degree."

He asked, "What's the issue?" I explained that I had an outstanding balance for my final semester fees.

Do you know what he told me? "Go to the school, get the invoice, and I'll write you a cheque."

He gave me a cheque for 50,000 Kenya Shillings (about 385 USD). That's how I was able to clear my fees and complete my degree, while still working there.

Francis Mureithi: Which year was that now? Was it in 2020 or thereabouts?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, you're right, that was in 2020. I eventually graduated in 2022 because I was working on my final project, and it took time to be validated and defended. It's almost like a master's thesis. Remember, we weren't doing the usual internship or attachment.

Francis Mureithi: You have talked about cloud technology. For a layman like me who's not a techie person, just briefly what is cloud technology?

Stephen Ndele: Cloud technology, in simple terms, is very different from what we were taught on campus. I often tell this to students: in university, we were mostly taught

outdated systems — the traditional model where organizations host their applications or databases on physical servers located in on-site server rooms. For example, a company like DDD might have its own server room to manage all its IT workloads. That was the model we were familiar with.

But technology has evolved. Today, most companies have moved to cloud computing. With the cloud, you can deploy your applications within minutes without investing in expensive hardware. You simply focus on your solutions and applications while running everything on remote servers, which you access over the internet. There's no need to manage physical infrastructure on-site.

Cloud computing is also financially efficient. You avoid capital expenditures because you only pay for what you use. When you're done with a task, you can switch off the server, and stop paying. That's the cloud technology we were introduced to. It was my first time learning about it, and it completely changed my perspective.

Francis Mureithi: You owe all that knowledge to DDD?

Stephen Ndele: I owe all that to DDD because I don't know whether I would've maybe known that there's such technology.

Francis Mureithi: Let's talk about your income. It started at 9,000 Kenya shillings, then increased to 16,000, and at one point reached 32,000 before dropping slightly. How was this impacting you personally and your family, especially considering that you were now earning something and supporting your siblings?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, it impacted them significantly. I was now able to cover my own bills and pay school fees for my siblings who were in high school. They were the direct beneficiaries, because they were able to stay in school. Whenever there was no food at home, I supported them with whatever I could. They directly benefited from my participation in this program, the role I took on, and the income I earned. To this day, they still rely on me. I've become the father figure in the family, since we don't have one. On a personal level, my life also changed, I got married last year.

Francis Mureithi: Congratulations.

Stephen Ndele: It's just about my anniversary.

Francis Mureithi: Wow. Where is the party?

Stephen Ndele: Saturday, we got a newborn baby boy.

Francis Mureithi: Congratulations.

Stephen Ndele: Yes, I thank God. My family is benefitting directly.

Francis Mureithi: This gentleman who picked you and also paid school fees, did you continue working for him, or you joined another company?

Stephen Ndele: I worked with him up to 2021.

Francis Mureithi: 2021, after your graduation

Stephen Ndele: Yes, it was after I graduated. When we left DDD as a team, we stayed connected and continued communicating. One of my former colleagues was working at a FinTech company called Cellulant. We kept in touch, and I had told him, “If you ever come across any job referrals or opportunities, please let me know.” In January 2022, he reached out and said, “By the way, there’s an opening at our company, can you apply?” I applied around February and got the job in April at Cellulant. I left my previous company and joined Cellulant as a Support Engineer. I worked there and, at the time, I can say the salary was good.

Francis Mureithi: Something better.

Stephen Ndele: Things were getting better. I joined Cellulant as a Support Engineer, and my life transitioned well. I remember that around the time I was leaving my previous company, I bought two cows and a donkey. I felt it was time to start investing—like a real man. I thought, “Let me buy some livestock I can maintain.” So, I bought the cows and donkey before joining Cellulant.

Francis Mureithi: This was 2022, April.

Stephen Ndele: I started working at Cellulant around April 2022. However, due to instability within the company, they eventually began restructuring. I wasn’t directly affected because I had already resigned in 2024. I was still seeking better opportunities, as I hadn’t yet found full satisfaction. I often say that as long as I don’t own shares, I’m still young and exploring. That’s when I applied to Safaricom. I got the job and officially joined Safaricom on May 4th 2024.

Francis Mureithi: Congratulations.

Stephen Ndele: Thank you.

Francis Mureithi: Largest company in East and Central Africa, if not Africa.

Stephen Ndele: I joined Safaricom as a cloud engineer. Remember, where did that journey begin?

Francis Mureithi: DDD.

Stephen Ndele: Exactly.

Francis Mureithi: You initially wanted to pursue commerce, but DDD changed that path. Beyond shaping your career and your mindset around technology, would you say DDD has also had an impact on Kenya as a society and on communities?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, absolutely. I'm not the only one who's been fortunate enough to benefit from this program. I still have colleagues at Cellulant who are doing very well financially. If we look at the broader economy, they're contributing positively. I also have a colleague at Safaricom, Maureen Chebet, who's also a cloud engineer. We were in the same cohort at DDD.

Francis Mureithi: Oh, you were here together?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, we went through the program together.

Francis Mureithi: The DDD family powering Safaricom!

Stephen Ndele: Exactly! Even before us, there was another DDD alumnus, Steven Oduor, who also worked at Safaricom. He started here, then went to Cellulant, and eventually moved on to a company in South Africa.

It's not just me. I know Isaac Mwana, who is now working for AWS in South Africa. We were in the same program. Paul Mulonzya is also in South Africa, working with AWS, also from DDD. So, this program hasn't just impacted me, it's transformed entire communities.

There are people behind us who have also benefited—our families, friends, and others we support. The ripple effect is real.

Personally, because of the help and generosity I received through DDD, I felt compelled to give back. In 2024, I joined Rotary International, you may have heard of it. It's a global organization focused on community service. That generosity I experienced sparked something in me.

Francis Mureithi: Oh, you're a Rotarian?

Stephen Ndele: Yes. We give back. I've been privileged to serve as a Project Director. I'm now in my second term. One project I led was setting up a computer lab at Embakasi Primary School. The students there were learning about computers by looking at diagrams on a blackboard—being taught what a mouse or CPU is through drawings.

This is in Nairobi, in this digital age! It broke my heart because I saw how far technology had taken me, and here were students who hadn't even touched a real computer. So, I led the project to build a proper computer lab and install the full ICD (Integrated Computer Devices) package so the kids could learn hands-on. That project is why Rotary appointed me as a project director.

Francis Mureithi: That's powerful. Now they can learn practically.

Stephen Ndele: Exactly. They can interact with the machines, touch the mouse, the keyboard. DDD completely changed my perspective. It's not just about me anymore. It's not "me, myself, and I." I want to carry that same spirit forward. Even if I impact just one more person, and they in turn impact others, that ripple can change the world. We can't keep complaining. We must ask: What small thing are you doing to make a difference? That's my personal motto.

Francis Mureithi: What would you say has been your proudest moment since joining DDD, up to now, sitting at your big desk at Safaricom?

Stephen Ndele: One thing that stands out for me, when I joined Cellulant, they asked for a personal tagline. I wrote, "The sky is no longer the limit." That's what DDD did for me. It opened my eyes to the opportunities out there and removed my mental limitations. I learned that if you're given a chance, just do your best, God will take care of the rest.

Francis Mureithi: Very inspiring. You mentioned several former colleagues doing well. Do you still keep in touch as alumni? What do you think is the role of alumni today?

Stephen Ndele: Yes, we absolutely stay connected. In fact, just a month ago, we had a DDD alumni cocktail event. The CEO even attended. Maintaining those connections matters a lot. For example, I wouldn't have gotten the job at Cellulant if a former colleague hadn't reached out. And from Cellulant, I found my way to Safaricom.

These networks help us support each other—sharing job opportunities, offering encouragement, and guiding those who haven't yet secured work. I remember a lady who left DDD without a job. Later, I had friends looking for an accountant. I referred her, and she got the position. That's what these alumni connections are about: helping each other grow.

Francis Mureithi: Fantastic. Now for my final question. If you could suggest just three improvements for DDD today, based on your experience from day one until now, what would they be?

Stephen Ndele: First, I'd recommend providing psychological support during times of transition or organizational changes. When my contract ended, I had to defer school. I honestly think I fell into a mild depression. It felt abrupt, one day, I was fully immersed here, and the next day, it was just over. No one clearly said, "This chapter is closed, and it's okay."

It was tough. Some people, like me, recovered. Others never did. One of my friends never found a good job afterward. He lost hope and fell into bad habits. I wasn't a drinker, so I didn't go down that road, but I can see how he got there. A little guidance

during those moments could help young people, especially those still trying to find their footing, handle change better.

Second, I'd suggest training on job transition, especially in salary negotiation and personal branding. These may seem like small issues, but they are very important. Helping people land on their feet positively after DDD would make a big difference.

Francis Mureithi: Final thoughts?

Stephen Ndele: To the DDD team: keep doing the good work—even if people don't always come back to say thank you. You never know how many lives you're transforming. Even Jesus healed 10 lepers, but only one came back to say thank you. So keep going. And know that many of us still feel connected. I regularly drop by, say hi, and stay in touch, especially with Daniel, the social coordinator.

If the opportunity ever comes, I'd be happy to come back and contribute. We're not enemies, we're family. DDD molded us. Expand the programme and give more people a chance.

Francis Mureithi: I'm truly amazed by your story. Thank you. Clearly, God is working!

Stephen Ndele: I'm humbled.

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.*