

Podcast Name: *ACM ByteCast*

Episode: Yaw Anokwa - Episode 31

Welcome to the *ACM ByteCast* podcast, a series from the Association for Computing Machinery! The podcast features conversations with researchers, practitioners, and innovators at the intersection of computing research and practice about their experiences, lessons learned, and visions for the future of computing. In this episode, host Scott Hanselman is back for another episode of *Hanselminutes*, in association with *ACM ByteCast*! He is joined by Yaw Anokwa, Founder and CEO of ODK.

“Powerful offline forms” is ODK’s tagline. At its primary differentiator, the company’s value is the fact that their forms themselves work entirely offline. These powerful forms have the ability to collect text, numbers, pictures, GPS coordinates, and more. Each ODK user has their own accounts and machines which collect the data personalized to them. It is a “power to the people, for the people” model targeted exclusively towards social impact organizations who can use the data for making critical decisions.

As a graduate student at the University of Washington designing NFC hardware for Intel, Yaw had the urge to pivot his career into a new direction of positive social impact. During a six-month volunteer position with Partners for Health, he was able to see firsthand the potential for technology to change lives. As a computer scientist, he began to think about ways to make data more abstract and usable for everyone. It was the simple idea of taking a paper form, digitizing it, then returning it back to the people who are collecting the data which sent him on the path he is on today. When Yaw was first asked to be part of the new ODK data collection program at Google, he was not immediately interested. The idea of giving smartphones to rural farmers in Uganda, he reveals, didn’t sound like the best idea. However, he was amazed at how positively people took to it once the first versions of the software were deployed about 15 years ago. What was once only a vague idea he didn’t see plausible has become Yaw’s life work and biggest passion.

ODK offers many user interface affordances (UIA) to accommodate their users. For example, their touch screen buttons are larger than usual for the farmers who work with their hands. Additionally, they recently introduced a Cloud-based option for users who may not want to run their own servers. This has also afforded them a predictable revenue which they can use to hire people and thoughtfully evolve the software. Next, Yaw speaks to the virtue of consistently showing up and trying to get better every day. Though ODK’s focus is on the social impact sector, the software is greatly beneficial across many different fields. Their core beliefs lie in producing a public good, making it as widely available as possible and helping folks who are helping others through their work.

Key Takeaways:

0:29 - Introduction to this episode of Hanselminutes.

1:12 - Why are powerful offline forms so important?

3:28 - How ODK conducts surveys for data collection.

5:23 - The birth of ODK.

7:14 - Yaw unpacks the idea of his life's work.

11:38 - The user interface affordances of ODK.

16:30 - When Yaw knew ODK had found success.

24:12 - The core values of Yaw and ODK.

Links:

Learn more about [Yaw Anokwa](#) and [ODK](#).

Get in contact with Yaw directly by emailing him at yanokwa@odk.org

Learn more about the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) at acm.org.

Learn more about the ACM ByteCast podcast at acm.org/bytecast.

Tags:

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