

Brett van Aswegen

 By [Dries Badenhorst](#)

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Having been appointed as CEO of Wonga South Africa - an online lender of small, short-term loans - in April this year, Brett van Aswegen has the massive task of steadying the ship, plotting the course and ensuring timeous arrival at the next destination. The road to his appointment as CEO of Wonga was not one without a map. It was in fact a well-planned journey and one that he openly shares with us...



Here, he tells us more about the challenges he's faced throughout his career and how he overcame them. But first, who is Brett van Aswegen, what experience does he have and why did he join Wonga?

In his early twenties, Brett was in a junior position at the Edcon Group when he told his peers that he was going to be a director of a listed company by the age of 35. Although they scoffed at this declaration, he was not deterred, and achieved his goal at 31.

■ What initial steps did you need to take to get to where you are today?

I knew that I could not only keep my eyes on the prize. I had to have a plan with lots of short-term goals to steer me towards achieving this goal. Because I was already working, I had to optimise my current circumstances.

I decided to study part-time through UNISA for a BCom degree. I chose my subjects as I progressed in my career, always ensuring that my studies had relevance to my job. I suppose this gave me an advantage over full-time students and my work colleagues, as I was able to apply my theoretical knowledge within my career in order to maximise my learning.

It was at Lewis Group Ltd, where Brett's ambition met opportunity and where he could unleash his education, experience and passion completely. It was here where he became known as a business innovator, renowned for using technology to improve experience and to solve problems. He was able to pursue his passion of seeing how he could influence consumer behaviour through this experience.

■ Explain your role at Lewis Group?

I offered high-level strategic, planning and management expertise in the areas of credit risk management, customer relationship management, direct marketing and credit IT systems development in the retail and financial services sectors. I also applied customer data in innovative ways to maximize the profitability of each client and obtained specialised experience in targeting the low-income to middle-income market.

An opportunity in Africa to do something that had not been done before was just a challenge that Brett could not ignore. The thrill of this opportunity bit and it bit hard. Brett assumed the position of MD of Cards at AFB, a consumer finance business pioneering unsecured credit in Africa.

■ Tell us more about your role of MD of Cards at AFB?

What was amazing about the AFB role was that we had nothing. We had absolutely nothing. There was myself and two colleagues who started up the cards team. We took three months to go flying around Africa. We went from Ghana to Kenya to Zambia.

We were looking around and were not even sure what we were looking for. We were just going in to see where we thought we could start a retail cards business.

We decided that we were going to do a six-month revolving card product in Kenya and we committed to launching in three months.

Brett launched and successfully led a team of more than 500 people to build the first retail credit card operation in Kenya, innovating credit operations and distribution for an underserved mobile African market. Under Brett's leadership, AFB Cards developed strategic partnerships with some of the largest retailers in Kenya and issued the most credit cards in the market.

■ Brett, why did you join Wonga?

I joined Wonga because I believe that there is a cultural alignment between myself and the direction that the group is embarking on. A significant transformation program, which speaks to my personal values, is in motion and is something I would like to play a part in.

When Andy Haste was appointed as chairman of the group, he brought a deep level of integrity to the business. Doing the right thing for consumers, with a very high degree of corporate ethics, which in turn play a positive role in the community that they operate in, is a philosophy that I completely bought into and is one to which I would like to actively contribute.

Wonga's immediate success, shortly after the launch, presented challenges that Brett embraced. Founded in 2006 by South Africans, Errol Damelin and Jonty Hurwitz in the UK, the company entered the local market in 2012 and has already granted over two-million loans.

■ With this sudden success, what is your current challenge and how are you overcoming it?

This sudden growth means that we have to go through a process of re-evaluating ourselves to ensure that the business is in a position to enter the future with confidence.

I knew I was not coming into a business that was without its challenges and I knew that I needed to make sure that the business was positioned for the future.

In accepting this challenge, I had to look at the past record of the company, evaluate the present model and think about the future.

With regards to the past, we want to make sure that the past conduct is in line with the future vision of the business. We are committed to putting our customers first. If we have made mistakes in the past, we need to identify the problem, make sure our customers are not negatively impacted and ensure that we have the systems and processes in place to avoid any repeats.

When looking at the present it is imperative to establish the foundations to ensure that we have a strong business. This challenge forces us to look at the business through a microscope that covers the entire span of the operation.

Looking at the future is the most exciting part of my challenge. The end goal is to identify how Wonga is going to be a relevant business in South Africa that will benefit their consumers in the long term.

■ **On a more personal note, who are you when you're not at work?**

I hope that I am not too dissimilar away from work to who I am at work. I am very conscious about being authentic between work and play.

I have a wife and two kids who I am absolutely mad about and most of my time is spent with them. We are a very tight knit unit and enjoy spending time with one another.

I do however have a pretty unique interest that I use to keep myself centred. I paint little figurines.

I got into this when I was looking for a constructive way to spend some time with my son. He has an interest in the table strategy game, Warhammer 40,000. I discovered that we needed an army and I bought the little figurines and started painting them. By absolute chance I discovered that this is just the most amazing hobby I have ever done.

Other than that I have been a social boxer for the past 10 years and has recently made a bit of a change to yoga.

■ **What would your career advice be to others, especially youngsters starting out?**

When you look at people starting out, a lot of people study for the sake of studying. An education is very valuable, don't ever underestimate that. But, experience always trumps education. Always!

And another really important thing that people often don't think about is their energy. The passion that people have for doing what they love is experienced by others as their energy. A great energy is contagious to people around them and can help build success in a team.

The sooner people can get into the job market and discover their passion, the better for them. If you can follow that passion and get someone to pay you for doing it, then you are already on the road to success.

Watch this space. I believe Wonga is in capable hands and set to turn the short-term loan market on its head. With Brett at the helm, you can rest assured that a plan is already formulated, with short-term goals in place and an implementation strategy well on its way.

ABOUT DRIES BADENHORST

Keller Williams Realty, Inc. is an international real estate franchise company with real estate agents across the United States, Canada, Indonesia, Vietnam and South Africa. On its 30th anniversary, Keller Williams Realty celebrated becoming the no. 1 Real Estate Company by agent count in the United States.
* [In conversation with] Brett van Aswegen - 23 Sep 2015

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