**CITATION: BRIAN JOFFE**

Brian Joffe is chief executive and founder of the JSE-listed Bidvest Group, which he built, from its somewhat humble beginnings, into being one of the leading corporations in South Africa with a turnover of over R 204 billion, employing more than 145 000 people, over 125 000 in South Africa. Bidvest is today active in foodservices, freight management, banking, insurance, outsourced corporate services, automotive retailing, travel and aviation, industrial products and services, office supplies, electrical products, printing and new media, consumer products, pharmaceuticals and the fishing industry. The group is the largest food distribution company in the world. Bidvest and its subsidiaries have a footprint in Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Holland, Belgium, the UK, Italy, Spain, Chile, Brazil, South and southern Africa, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, Australia and New Zealand.

Joffe is the son of Lithuanian immigrants and one of South Africa’s most successful entrepreneurs and job creators. He was born in Johannesburg in 1947 and was educated in Greenside High School and the University of Witwatersrand, where he graduated as a chartered accountant (CA SA).

His early influences shaped the future deal-maker and business leader. As a schoolboy, Joffe packed birdseed at his father’s micro grain and milling business, earning a few cents an hour. He diversified by helping his pharmacist uncle. That job entailed counting out tablets and dropping them one by one into phials. Joffe recalls: “I learned you only make a profit by meticulously managing your assets, down to the last pill.”

His own entrepreneurial career began in 1978 when he borrowed R49 000 to buy an interest in a small pet food manufacturer. A year later Joffe borrowed again to acquire full ownership and expand the company. Within six months his business – using largely discarded machinery on a makeshift production line – held 15% of South Africa’s canned dog food market. He subsequently sold his business to a major industrial group.

Joffe launched Bidvest in 1989 and built it to be the company it is today. He looked beyond apartheid to a democratic future in which South Africa would again be integrated into the global economy. He bought businesses that others were eager to sell, consistently expressing his faith in South Africa’s ability to transform and grow. In the process, he developed a uniquely empowered business model driven by autonomous entrepreneurs, each responsible for growing their own operations. Following acquisition by Bidvest, under-performing operations were often transformed into industry leaders. Countless jobs were saved and the basis established for a diversified group. Joffe also looked beyond the received wisdom of focussing on ‘core strengths’. Instead, he built a diversified company with interests in sectors as spread out as food services, travel services and pharmaceuticals. Rather than focussing on one market, Joffe built his company on consolidating diverse markets.

Joffe sought also to build a strategically diversified company by building an international set of activities. The first international acquisition occurred in 1995 when Manettas Australia (now Bidvest Australia) was acquired. The business had hit hard times and needed a substantial capital injection. Today, the business is Australia’s leading national foodservice supplier. Strategic diversification, across sectors and geographies, creates built-in stability. When the local economy faces challenges and the rand comes under pressure, offshore businesses generally provide a strong counter-weight. Similarly, representation across numerous sectors ensures that a degree of growth is achieved overall, even in difficult trading conditions.

A common theme for Bidvest is usually sector entry via an underperforming business followed by redefinition of the market and expansion into related areas until niche leadership has been secured. Critical mass enables greater efficiency, drives further growth and helps secure the jobs of employees who had feared for their future only a few months earlier. Reinvention and a wider vision are critical. For example, Walton’s, chiefly a stationery supplier, created an entry-point into the office sector. The strategic base was widened by adding office furniture and office technology to the mix, developing the critical mass that permits sustained growth and competitive advantage.

The Rennies acquisition created potential for strategic expansion into banking, freight, shipping services and the travel industry. Subsequently, the acquisition of the McCarthy automotive retailing business and associated operations enabled the creation of a broadly based financial services business when car financing, leasing and insurance were added to Bidvest Bank (originally Rennies Bank, a niche foreign exchange business).

The creation of critical mass ahead of renewed growth was also evident in 2014 when Bidvest acquired the Mvelaserve group of corporate service businesses, thereby bulking up its own services and rental and products operations at a time when corporate outsourcing faced increasing pressure.

Bidvest simultaneously responded to the growing importance of the consumer economy by purchasing the Home of Living Brands, supplier of a wide range of consumer products to major retailers. Entry into another important consumer-facing sector was then achieved with the 2014 purchase of a strategic stake in the pharmaceutical company, Adcock Ingram.

Brian Joffe’s work extends beyond the world of commerce. He is a past president of Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Sandton (the Sandton Shul) and is president of ORT SA, the non-profit developmental organisation with a commitment to help build South Africa through education; specifically by contributing to improved schooling in mathematics, science and technology. Primary schools in Alexandra are one focus area. Brian Joffe is also a Platinum Supporter of the Pillars of the Community through the Chevra Kadisha (the Jewish Helping Hand) and a regular contributor to a range of Jewish charities in South Africa, Lithuania, Israel, the UK and USA.

The business he leads makes a sustained contribution to communities and worthy causes, locally and in all markets where its subsidiaries are active. It is estimated that over the past decade, Bidvest’s social investment has topped R540 million. The contribution of the Johannesburg Corporate office alone tops R120 million. Corporate projects include: Reach For A Dream, QuadPara (to develop the potential of quadriplegics and paraplegics), Sagda (graduate development), Hear For Life, the Chefs Association, Wits University, Hospice, Bethany House, the Nkosi Haven, ORT SA and PinkDrive.

Joffe has been recognized by *Sunday Times* as one of SA’s five businessmen of the year (1992). In 2004 he won the SA chapter of the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur Award and subsequently SA representative at World Entrepreneur Awards. In 2008 he was awarded an Honorary doctorate in Commerce from the University of South Africa. In 2010, he was profiled as one of *‘South Africa’s Greatest Entrepreneurs’* by MME Media in association with Gordon Institute of Business Science and named by *Wits Business School Journal* as one of SA’s top 25 business leaders with significant impact on SA business over the preceding five years. In 2011 he received the *Sunday Times* Lifetime Achiever Award, and in 2012 was included in the Forbes list of the 20 most influential people in Africa and therefore deserves the recognition of being awarded an honorary doctorate degree from the University.