

Jennifer Gottlieb

Head of Credit Commercial Property Finance
Absa

Q Where did your corporate finance journey begin, and what led you to pursue a career in the space that you are in?

A My journey in banking commenced in 2010, post-completion of my articles at Ernst & Young. I started as a credit analyst in the Project Finance team at Absa Corporate and Business Bank, although only for 8 months. In retrospect, if I were to start within a Credit function today, it would be in mainstream Credit, to get a base knowledge of credit before entering a more specialised area.

Since then, I have remained in Credit Risk within Absa Corporate and Investment Bank, but gained experience as an analyst in Corporate Sectors. I was the head of Mid-Corporate Sandton for two years, before joining Commercial Property Finance as a Sector Head for the Corporate and Investment Bank. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was fortunate to be promoted to my current designation as Head of Commercial Property Finance.

Q Did you have a mentor at any point in your career? If so, who were they and what did you learn from them?

A I have had both informal and formal mentors, as well as coaches who have assisted me in various aspects of both my personal and professional development.

More importantly, I have been blessed to find a few close friends along the way, who can and do give me honest feedback, without which I would not be the person or the leader that I am today. Hence I do believe that I have a responsibility to “pay it forward” and help others along their paths.

Lessons have been learnt along the way, most of which were not technical; the most important of which is that empathy goes a long way, as we are all human beings with our own context and emotions. On a personal level, I try to remind myself that I need to consistently evolve in thought and emotion, given the ever-changing external environment that I live within.

Q What was the toughest deal you ever worked on and why?

A There are always different challenges, depending on what role you are in at the time. The learning curve is steep when starting out as an analyst, so hours spent writing pages of unnecessary information can be quite demotivating.

The progression to senior roles brings with it the management of multiple deals with tight deadlines, but also allows you to see the deal from a holistic perspective. It is here where, if necessary, the final structuring takes place, as any risks or gaps are much more evident.

In my experience, the toughest deals are not those that are technically challenging, but those that bring about conflict in the team. I always try to remember that each member of the deal team has a different obligation to fulfil, which is not personal.

Q What, in your opinion, is the hardest part of structuring deals?

A One of the most difficult parts of structuring deals is finding the balance between client requirements, growth targets, and a deal that has an acceptable risk profile. In many deals, there is a requirement to

synthesize a complicated deal, in limited pages, that sufficiently mitigates the risk and obtains approval, all under timing pressure.

The external environment that our clients face is ever-changing, so future-proofing any structure for unforeseen events is becoming more challenging when contemplating events such as COVID-19.

Q What advice would you give a young woman joining your team?

A Don't be afraid to let your opinion or voice be heard; be brave.

Find colleagues and friends who will give you honest, non-judgemental feedback, and more importantly, ask for feedback and be willing to receive it.

You are here to achieve something great, so believe in yourself and go for it. Find opportunities, and make sure that you are ready to take them.

FUN FACTS

Current book on your nightstand:

There is no book at the moment; I'm still trying to find time to get through the three self-care books on my desk.

Preferred music genre: 80s all the way.

Preferred holiday destination: It depends on the type of holiday I need. For pure relaxation and soul searching, it would have to be Mauritius.

Three words that your colleagues would use to describe you: Reliable, decisive and agile. 🐶