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Profile - Mark Williams

SA's least-known bank had its first television advertisement last week. Teba Bank has been rebranded as ubank and Mark Williams (43), the CEO since 2007, says he is determined to broaden the customer base from its core in the mining industry.

To do this he will raise its profile. "Like our clients, we have spent most of our working lives underground," he jokes.

Teba started life as The Employment Bureau of Africa in 1907, bringing workers from neighbouring countries and helping them to remit income to their families.

"Our aim is to be the bank of choice for the workers," says Williams, "and our research shows that industrial workers considered the Teba name to be too closely associated with mineworkers."

Born in Port Elizabeth, Williams began his banking career in 1989 as a filing clerk at the local branch of Trust Bank.

Most recently he spent five years at Barclays Africa, building retail networks in 13 different countries. Williams first came to the attention of the Teba board after an article in the authoritative London-based Banker magazine about the way he had persuaded traders in Ghana, who did not trust the banking system, to start depositing their cash at Barclays.

"There is still a lot of scope to persuade working people to put their money in the bank — it is estimated that there is at least R15bn under mattresses in SA."

Ubank will have quite a different profile from the old Teba Bank if Williams' vision comes true. It is predominantly rural and it will now start building branches in the urban areas to serve an expanding client base. It will expand its lending base, which is still small, as it has focused on taking deposits.

The bank has assets of R3,5bn, but advances account for just 20% of this — it is severely underleveraged as advances account for up to 90% of the assets of a conventional bank. To expand it will build a network of new bricks-and-mortar branches and it is about to launch a pilot scheme to introduce cellphone banking.

Williams has no plans to move into the overtraded middle-income and private-banking markets. "There are at least 7,5m people in our target market and we will stay focused."

He also admits that ubank had to expand to make up for the decline of the mining industry — in particular, its historically highly profitable business of remitting income



for mineworkers from Zambia, Mozambique, Lesotho and other countries is in steep decline. Historically, neighbouring countries accounted for a third of the mine workforce but that is now falling fast.