



Wessel Van Tonder

Fort Myers, Florida



[AXI International](#)

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Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Wessel Van Tonder:

In 2012, Wessel Van Tonder acquired AXI International becoming the CEO and majority owner. After serving as CEO of an oil company in Africa, Van Tonder saw an opportunity to re-brand AXI and set a new direction. Poirier and Van Tonder share the journey from a relatively small operation in 2012 to today's global business providing a variety of fuel management products for some of the largest companies in the world.

"The vision for AXI was to roll out clean fuel globally," Poirier said. "Coming from Africa, Wessel knew about the fuel issues experienced there, and had seen the same issues throughout the globe. He knew what AXI was capable of. Our main goal was to clean up the supply chain. Clean fuel is more efficient for an engine long-term and produces

much cleaner exhaust air."

AXI International produces intelligent fuel management products and solutions for backup power systems that keep mission critical data centers, healthcare centers, water treatment facilities and other important buildings online in the event of a primary power outage. They work with many well-known, hyper-scale data centers and high profile clients. The company provides services for an array of industries, including agriculture, government, marine, mining, transportation and more. By changing their focus from one of a reactionary company to that of a company intent on setting their place in the market, AXI has seen a tremendous amount of growth. Poirier shared what makes AXI so unique and how they've managed to grow at such a remarkable rate.

Keeping a competitive edge

"We're very dynamic and we're not centered on local business," he said.

"For us, it's global. We move quickly, have good lead times and can change things on the fly to comply with specifications. Every large end-user and hyper-scale data center want their own custom projects. Our quickness and agility allow us to ebb and flow with the market and give our clients the customization they desire. We're also very focused on education. That's what drives our sales and the market growth."

Van Tonder added, "We also have great leadership and drive from our top-level management, Jeff and our CFO, Michael Campbell."

AXI's internal culture can be described as very dynamic, quick to move and react, team oriented and critical about who they add to the team. AXI positions itself with a focus heavy on engineering and technical

background. According to Van Tonder, they're not the cheapest, but some of the implicit costs associated with their product lines are well worth doing business with AXI.

Notable community contributions

In terms of philanthropic activities and community involvement, AXI has sponsored some local sports teams. They've worked with AMIkids, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping youth develop into responsible and productive citizens. They've spoken with students at Florida Gulf Coast University and Dunbar High School. They're also planning on donating some systems after an upcoming inventory control exercise.

What it means to be a Florida Companies to Watch Honoree

"It's a great honor," Poirier said. "We love to be recognized. We're passionate without recognition, but it's good to take a pause and look back on our accomplishments. It's also great from a PR perspective. It gets the word out about what we're doing."

In terms of why AXI was selected, Van Tonder added, "We're a completely different company from the one I bought in 2012. Everything has improved from the caliber of staff to the corporate image, work environment, management team and how we approach business. We're very proactive, dynamic and innovative. It's been a hard journey, so it's nice to be recognized. You don't see what we do in this region very often. We're focused on innovation, putting out new R&D projects on a yearly basis and really making a name for ourselves. We're seeing more progress now than even two years ago. We're also starting to attract the

right people. I'm very blessed to have people like Jeff and Mike on our team."

Looking ahead, AXI International is focused on growth and potentially branching out into other countries. However, Van Tonder stressed that if they do expand globally, they'll likely open sales offices rather than manufacturing facilities. They attempted such a move back in 2014 and didn't see the desired results. Nevertheless, some of AXI's top clients have data centers in other countries and having a presence in those regions could be beneficial.

Advice for aspiring entrepreneurs

Both Van Tonder and Poirier shared some great advice for aspiring entrepreneurs looking to take the plunge into small business ownership. "Start something you can build up," Poirier said. "You don't have to leave your job. Take a small step and do something on the side."

Van Tonder added, "It's about taking risks, being a leader and having people follow you because of your ideas. I believe it's important to treat all human beings equal. As such, I have tried to create a culture where everyone has equal opportunities. When it comes to entrepreneurship, sometimes I wish I could get people to realize their own potential. Most people are their own worst enemy. They have all the opportunities to grow, but they don't."

You need to have a vision of where you can take your business. Start small and build up. We all know the Apple, Amazon, Microsoft and Facebook stories. Also, remember that money is not always the solution. It's usually a matter of HR, hard work and going through the

exercise repeatedly. You'll experience good times and bad times, but never quit. Keep on trying and eventually you'll succeed. Don't ever give up."

Awards and Recognition

