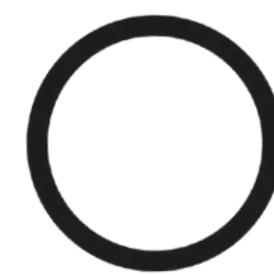# DISRUPTING THE FINANCIAL INDUSTRY WITH CLOUD BANKING

Ohpen was established following the global financial crisis of 2008. Founders Bas Wouwenaar, Chris Zadeh, Erik Drijkoningen, and Ilco van Bolhuis set out with the intention of modernizing and disrupting the banking industry with a fast, seamless, and secure digital platform. Over the past decade, the Dutch company has succeeded in creating an innovative alternative for the financial services sector in the form of a cloud banking system running on AWS.

Today, Ohpen employs more than 130 people across its Amsterdam and Barcelona offices. The company attracted investment of $40 million with a Series B in 2017 and a Series C in 2018, and has recently been featured on Wired's list of the 100 hottest startups in Europe.

ohpen

Bas Wouwenaar was out socializing with his now co-founder Chris Zadeh when they first got the idea for a disruptive cloud banking platform. Two years later, Ohpen was born and soon landed its first client – one of the world's largest asset management companies. Bas lives in Amsterdam with his wife. When he's not in the office, you'll find him perfecting his kickboxing moves in the gym.

Bas Wouwenaar

Co-founder & CIO of Ohpen

'My co-founder has a habit of pursuing challenging ideas'

Our startup's story began quite a while before we actually launched the company. One day, my good friend (and Ohpen co-founder) Chris called me up and said: 'I just quit university to work at an online brokerage startup. Come work with me.' This was the year 2000, and the dot com bubble had just burst. I told him he was insane, and that I already had a great job with benefits like a company car, laptop, and phone.

Chris convinced me to visit the rented offices anyway – just to take a look. When I got there, I realized all they had was an idea. But somehow I found myself thinking: 'I can always find another job in IT if I need to.' So I decided to join them. Over the next six years, we built the biggest internet brokerage firm in the Netherlands. We also became a bank.

AMSTERDAM
BARCELONA

STRATEGY

THE WEEKEND WE LAUNCHED, EVERYONE SLEPT UNDER THEIR DESKS AND DRANK RED BULL TO KEEP GOING. IT WAS THE BEST TIME OF OUR LIVES

'The idea for Ohpen came to us over beers'

That whole company, Binck, was built on a legacy system dating back to the late 1980s. There were some big flaws – it didn't scale, was difficult to make secure, and provided no audit trails. Plus, we had to spend tens of thousands of euros whenever we wanted to change something. On a night out, after one too many beers, we came up with the idea of building something better ourselves. That idea would eventually become Ohpen.

By this point in 2007, most of the people who had worked with us at Binck had left the company. Very few had the same drive and passion that had made starting a company fun and exciting. I was unhappy, so I quit and went traveling for a year. Sometime later, I got another call from Chris. He said: 'I want to start a new company.' I didn't even ask him what the company was. I just said: 'OK, let's do it.'

'Finding the right investor is crucial'

We had to find an investment company that saw value in our mission. We wanted to create a manageable, scalable, and secure platform that performed better than the legacy systems being used in the finance industry. It was a hard sell –

we had to tell investors we were starting from scratch, with no code, and for at least the next two years, there would be no products, services, customers or sales. Luckily, we managed to find an investor who believed in what we wanted to do, and they gave us the freedom to do our thing without piling on the pressure.

Once we'd secured investment, we rented a basement in Amsterdam and bought some IKEA desks, and started building the platform. It was just the four of us founders with two interns. The weekend we launched, everyone slept under their desks and drank Red Bull to keep going. It was the best time of our lives!

'My situation sounded like a bad pick-up line'

When I first met my wife, Emma, we were just starting Ohpen. I'd returned from traveling, and had recently come out of a long-term relationship, so I was living with my parents. All I had was a dream and a strategy. I remember taking Emma to the beach for our first date and telling her: 'I don't have a job, a house or a car at the moment, and I'm about to start a new company. But it's going to be awesome. We're going to conquer the world.' It must have been the worst pick-up line in the world.

'The first customer is an important win for a startup'

The craziest startup moment for me was when we signed our first customer. They were one of the world's largest asset management companies. Normally, when you're a startup, you have to start by onboarding a few small clients and build from there, because you haven't proven your platform will work yet. But this asset management firm believed in our vision. By taking a chance on us, they catapulted Ohpen three or four years ahead of our projections.

'We want our staff to love where they work'

I used to work at companies based in industrial areas outside of town, where there were no bars or anything. Everybody hated it. I wanted to avoid that at Ohpen, which is why our office is next to the biggest shopping street in Amsterdam. It's difficult to reach by car, so it's awful for our customers in that sense, but we want our employees to be at the center of everything. If you're working somewhere 40 hours a week, it's important you have fun too. Our building has a great gym that offers kickboxing training and yoga lessons. We believe in the 'work hard, play hard' philosophy.

'You can tell a lot about a person by their attitude towards sports'

I've been kickboxing as a hobby for a few months now, and I also like to play tennis. Personally, I enjoy playing explosive sports rather than relaxing with yoga or meditation. Chris and I are outrageously competitive with each other in work and sports. It's a lot of fun. I think someone's approach to sports tells you a lot about the person too. When a new team member goes for their first kickboxing lesson, some will take a very half-hearted approach and some we have to tell to slow down. It's not an HR-approved method of staff appraisal, but often, this reflects their workstyle too!

'AWS gave us the competitive edge'

At my previous company, we built our own server room, but at Ohpen, that wasn't an option. We were a two-person IT army – me and one of the other founders, Ilco. We only knew Amazon as an online bookstore at the time, but when we found out about AWS, it seemed like the perfect solution. It was awesome – with AWS, you could turn off machines and not lose any data, which was not the norm for cloud providers at all back then.

At the time, processes such as interest or performance calculation on financial products like investment accounts normally took one or two days to run for

a complete client database. Thanks to AWS, we started our system from scratch and redesigned all the heavy processes involved. That meant we could run the same thing in 20 minutes. It was next-level and people in the industry were blown away.

'The most important advice we ever got came from AWS CTO – Werner Vogels'
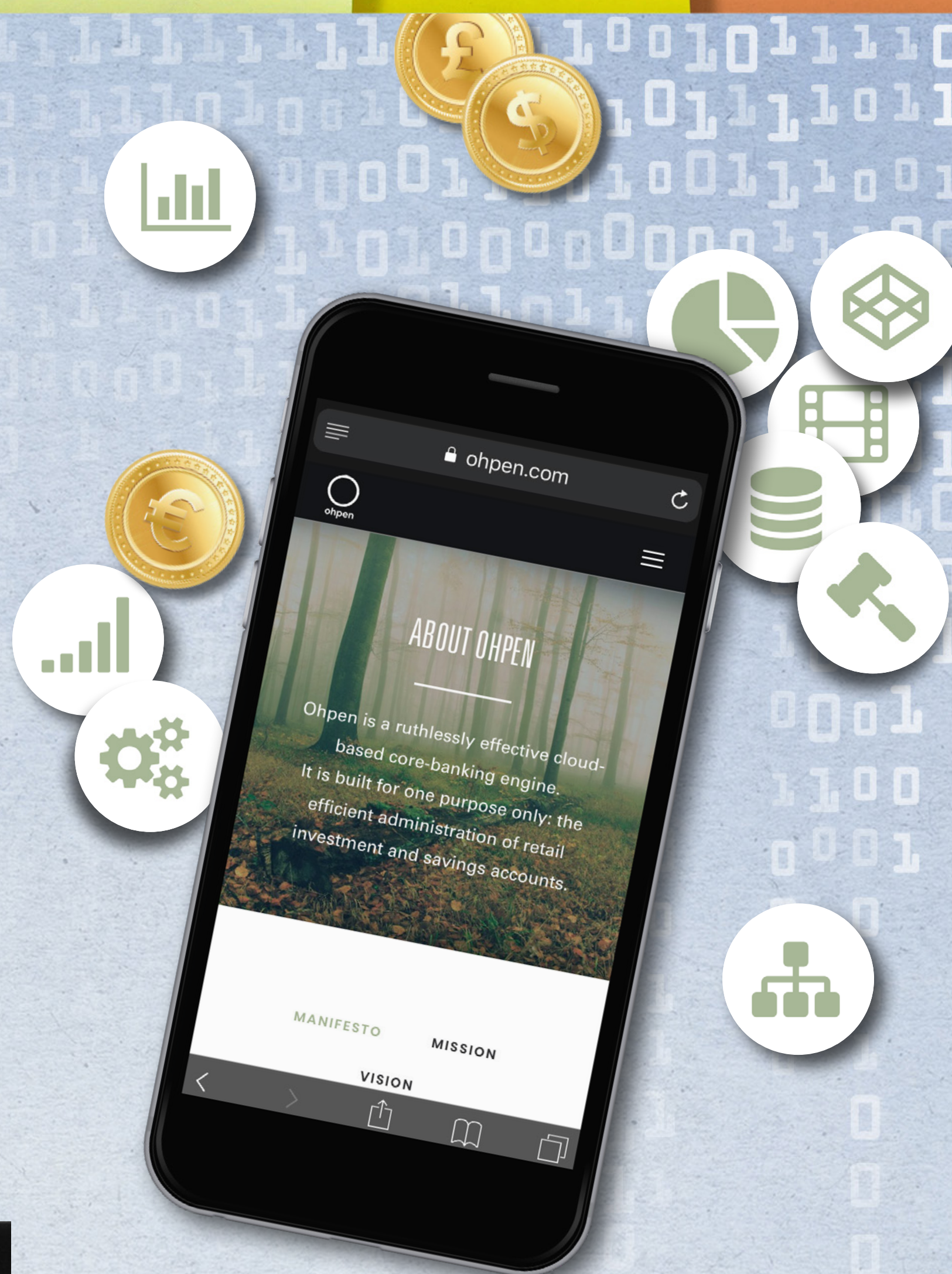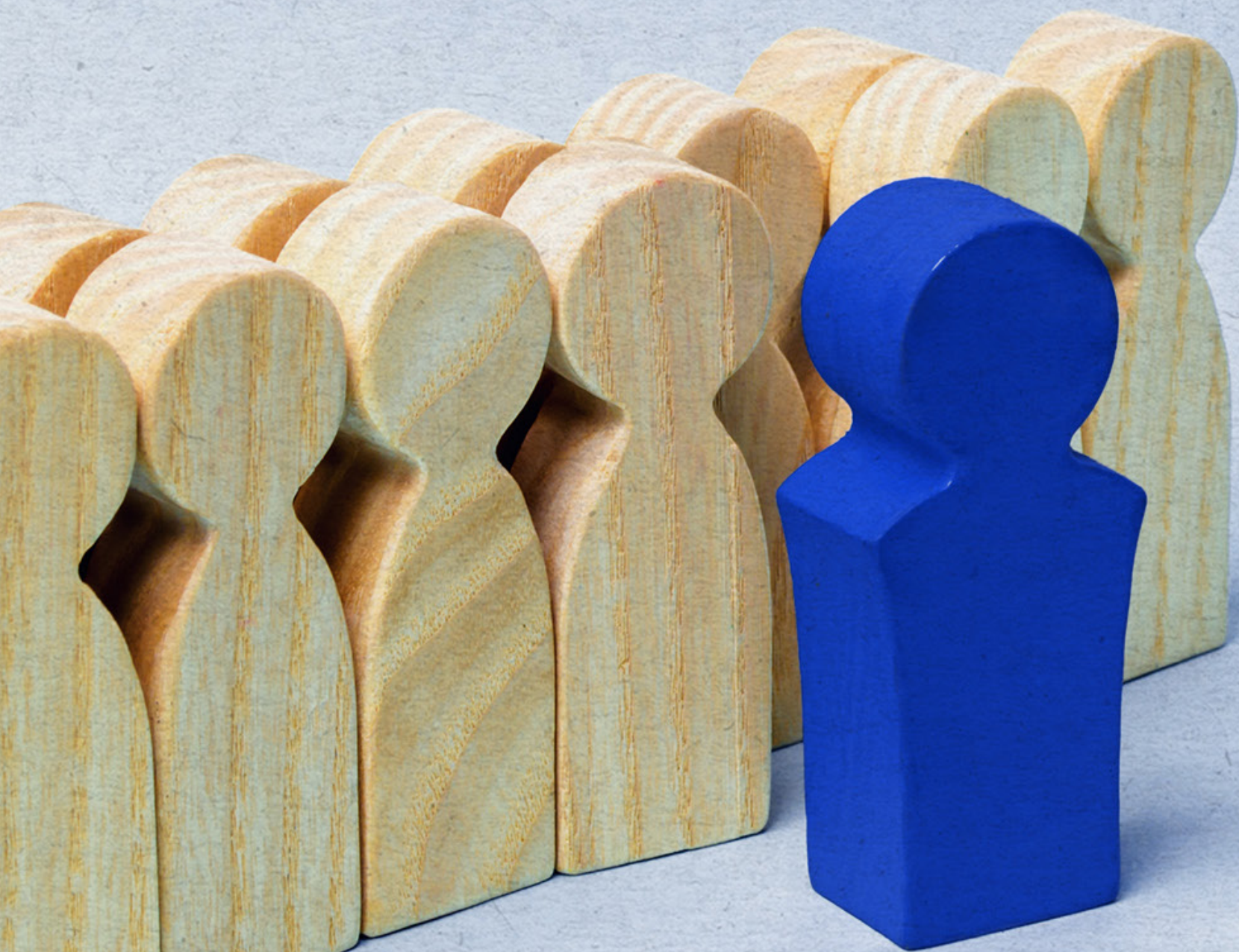
One of the biggest challenges we faced was compliance with EU privacy laws. Early on, we were at an AWS user group meeting in Amsterdam and took the AWS CTO Werner Vogels aside – a real 'god' figure to us – and said: 'Can you help with the challenges we're facing?' He couldn't help directly, but he gave us the most important advice the company has ever received: 'Make sure you encrypt everything, everywhere, all the time, and that you remain in control of the encryption keys.'

From that point on, we weaved encryption into the DNA of our company. We began to encrypt everything multiple times, so that even if one layer failed, other layers would ensure the data remained secure. That's still how we work to this day. The fact that we're in control of the encryption keys gives peace of mind to the financial authorities and our clients.

WE BELIEVE IN THE 'WORK HARD, PLAY PLAY HARD' PHILOSOPHY AT OHPEN

THANKS TO AWS, WE STARTED OUR SYSTEM FROM SCRATCH AND REDESIGNED ALL THE HEAVY PROCESSES INVOLVED. IT WAS NEXT-LEVEL STUFF, AND PEOPLE IN THE INDUSTRY WERE BLOWN AWAY

AT A GLANCE

🚀 Bas Wouwenaar founded Ohpen in 2009 with Chris Zadeh, Erik Drijkoningen and Ilco van Bolhuis.

🏆 In 2010, through its partnership with AWS, Ohpen became the world's first core-banking engine to have all its production data in the cloud.

$ The company has raised funding of $40 million to date.

aws Ohpen uses Amazon WorkSpaces, Amazon Lambda, Amazon RDS, AWS IAM, and Amazon EC2, amongst other services.

🌐 www.ohpen.com

FOUNDER STORIES PLAYLIST
Listen on Spotify

aws **Founder Stories** ♫

CONCENTRATE	GET PUMPED	CHILL-OUT
Joep Beving	**State of Love and Trust (MTV Unplugged)** Pearl Jam	**I Guess I Just Feel Like** John Mayer

Spotify account & internet connection required

GIVING UP ON YOUR MISSION MEANS GIVING UP ON A DREAM, AND NOBODY SHOULD EVER DO THAT

ABOUT OHPEN

Ohpen is a ruthlessly effective cloud-based core-banking engine. It is built for one purpose only: the efficient administration of retail investment and savings accounts.

MANIFESTO   MISSION   VISION

'Everyone has a startup idea, but not everyone can execute'
I never considered giving up – not even once. Our mantra at Ohpen is: 'In life, you have three options – give in, give up or give it all.' Giving it your all is one of our core values as a company. It's so easy to give up when knockbacks happen, especially at the beginning, but my advice to other entrepreneurs is to never give up. Giving up on your mission means giving up on a dream, and nobody should ever do that.

I think most people have an idea for a company or product. Whether they actually take the plunge, though, comes down to their ability to execute. Is this person or group of people able to turn this dream into a reality? Having the right mindset is the first key to success and the second comes down to having the right team around you.

'A company is its culture, and vice versa'
When hiring staff, I look for an intrinsic drive to succeed. It doesn't have to be directly work-related, but I look for qualities that demonstrate someone is motivated to go after what they want in life. I also want employees who are dedicated to improving themselves. We look for people who want to become better at what they do. I believe that if they want to improve themselves, they will improve the products they work on and, ultimately, the processes of the company too.

We have 130 staff, and of course, not everyone fits that description exactly. Every company needs people who are just happy to work nine-to-five as well. But in the end, a company is its culture, and vice versa. Companies succeed and fail based on what the people in them want to achieve.