



So you want to join a board...

Three steps will help aspiring directors find the right corporate board.

Step 1: Approach your board search as you would a job search

Bring to the task the same due diligence you would bring to any career move. Ask yourself what industry sector best suits your talents and interests. Consider also what type of company appeals to you: public, PE-backed, venture-backed, family-controlled? The cultures, dynamics, and approaches to governance of boards can differ greatly, and so can the cultures of the companies themselves, ranging from the highly traditional to the entrepreneurial and innovative. Also ask yourself whether or not you're comfortable joining a board that is facing challenges.

Once you've zeroed in on what really excites you, use your network to research companies that fit the bill. Seek out peers who are already on boards; if you're a CMO, for example, talk with fellow CMOs who are also directors. Discuss your resume and your career with them. Ask for advice about how you might fit on a board and seek a frank assessment of your readiness.

At this point, also assess yourself on all these points—understand what makes you attractive to boards. Consider how you might customize the case for your readiness for board service in various instances and be thoughtful about targeting your approach. Begin to develop a list of people you know who might have connections to the sector or to companies that intrigue you. Develop your own elevator speech on why you're the right fit.

Finally, consider joining the board of a really strong nonprofit or private company (even if you are more interested in public company boards in the long term) to build your own experience. This can also be a helpful way to build your network when appropriate.

Step 2: Network, network, network

You'll also need a great network. According to a survey by the National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD), nearly 70% of directors said their board had used personal networking or word of mouth to identify the pool of candidates from which their most recently nominated director was chosen. You should therefore not only build a network based on your profession but also with board members and those who have relationships with boards: auditors, lawyers, and leadership or search consultants.

Find some sponsors, people who really want to help you join a board. They can help get your name in circulation, ensure your visibility, and act as powerful advocates for you.

Step 3: Assess the fit between you and the board

Find a board you're passionate about, one where your purpose is aligned with the organization's. Heidrick & Struggles research shows that thriving cultures are those that are purpose-driven and characterized by vitality and a growth mindset. Activated purpose energizes leaders by providing them with the opportunity to inspire employees and make everyone feel as if they're working toward some greater good.¹ You will be most effective as a board member at an organization where you share in the purpose.

Assess what you'll gain from being on a specific board, why the board wants you, and whether those two are in balance. Be crisp and clear about what you bring to a specific board and what experiences and roles you have had that would enable you to make a substantive contribution will improve your search. In parallel, does your understanding of what value you can contribute to a board align with the CEO's and board's hopes for you?

Assess who you'll be surrounding yourself with. Boards go through many ups and downs. Are its members people you want to be surrounded with in the down moments as much as the up moments? Many board members have reached a point where they want to work mostly with people they like, respect, and can collaborate with, in context where they know they can add value and can learn. If, again, you are someone with an identity that will be in the minority on the board—such as the only woman or person of color—do you have confidence that your fellow members will be open to your possibly different opinions and perspectives? Do you believe that the environment in the boardroom is one of respect and inclusion, even in difficult times? Equally important is what you think of the CEO: their values, and the culture they represent. Do you like this person? Are you willing to tie your brand to theirs?

All of these considerations should come into play only assuming the logistical basics work, such as dates of meetings and your ability to travel or join meetings remotely. It's important to remember that joining a board is not for the short term. Most often it's a commitment of 5 years at least, and often 9, 10, or more. If you're an active executive, you'll probably be able to join only one board. If you're retired, your plate will still fill faster than you might expect.

The time has never been better for people of all backgrounds to consider joining a corporate board. Boards are more dedicated than ever to finding new members with a wide range of experiences. And, when someone joins the right board, it is as enriching for the director as it is valuable for the company. One director we know once said that being on the right board was "like getting an MBA." With thoughtful dedication and preparation, you can avoid errors such as getting enchanted by the board's brand or joining a board where you don't share the organization's core purpose. Then, you'll be able to open the board book and be excited about the conversation that will unfold.

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¹ Alice Breeden, Rose Gailey, and Duncan Wardley, "Activating organizational purpose," Heidrick & Struggles, on heidrick.com.

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CEO & Board Practice

Heidrick & Struggles' CEO & Board Practice has been built on our ability to execute top-level assignments and counsel CEOs and board members on the complex issues directly affecting their businesses.

We pride ourselves on being our clients' most trusted advisor and offer an integrated suite of services to help manage these challenges and their leadership assets. This ranges from the acquisition of talent through executive search to providing counsel in areas that include succession planning, executive and board assessment, and board effectiveness reviews.

Our CEO & Board Practice leverages our most accomplished search and leadership consulting professionals globally who understand the ever-transforming nature of leadership. This expertise, combined with in-depth industry, sector, and regional knowledge; differentiated research capabilities; and intellectual capital, enables us to provide sound global coverage for our clients.

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