



MAKING

THE LEAP

FROM

EXECUTIVE

TO

NED

Landing a first-time non-executive director role is extremely difficult.
Emily Jones, Senior Editor at Criticaleye, speaks to those who have made the transition and finds out why it's such a rewarding journey



As executives reach a certain point in their careers, they often hear the call for a new challenge. This moment can mark an exciting shift away from the structured executive world to the dynamic realm of non-executive directorships.

Mui Hoon Poh, Board Member at SERI (Singapore Eye Research Institute) and Board Mentor at Criticaleye, comments: “By becoming a NED, you have the opportunity to be part of the business, providing guidance and oversight without getting really enmeshed into the day-to-day operations of executive management.

“I actually began actively seeking a role as a NED while I was in my executive career, so I was more prepared for moving into this next chapter. It’s good to be able to leverage on a Board what I’ve already earned through many years of executive experience.”

A plural NED career presents an opportunity for candidates to recalibrate their executive skill set. **Nashwa Saleh**, Non-executive Director at Sandah Microfinance, also highlights this idea of wanting to be able to contribute more. “I discovered in senior executive roles that I’m not challenged enough ... The only way to grow is to start working on related roles as a NED and share experiences across different businesses,” she says.

While there can be some uncertainty when transitioning to a portfolio career, NEDs are afforded a unique advantage in gaining oversight over a wealth of different sectors. **Nashwa** adds: “Being a NED and having different mandates with different institutions means you’re satisfying your intellectual curiosity. And you want to enjoy your role and have a lively engagement while you’re doing that.”

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Nashwa Saleh

Robin Renee Sanders, Non-executive Director at SGI and Eurafrique, as well as being another Criticaleye Board Mentor, explains how she reflected on what she wanted to do after making the decision to move on from the US Diplomatic Corps. She asked herself: “What would allow me, as a professional, to bring all of my skills together, but also just focus on the sectors for which I am most passionate? What are the things that I’ve really learned and experienced over the years that I want to spend my time on, while making a global contribution?”

Robin found great satisfaction in transitioning to a non-executive director after her tenure in the Diplomatic Corps. By making this career shift, she was able to contribute to the broader business landscape, whilst aligning both personal and professional aspirations.

She realised that this new path allowed her to harmonise all her skills and

expertise while concentrating on the sectors she was most passionate about. It also enabled her to channel her accumulated knowledge and experiences into making a meaningful global impact.

In her plural career, **Robin** has found a fulfilling way to utilise her extensive background in international diplomacy and contribute to the broader business landscape, aligning her personal and professional aspirations seamlessly.

Knowledge Gap

When considering the switch to a portfolio career, it’s important to think about strengths and weaknesses. If looking to land a role on a Plc Board, what knowledge does a candidate have around corporate governance? How could they contribute to an audit or remuneration committee? Or perhaps they’re better suited to growth businesses, working closely with management teams backed by venture capital or private equity investors.

“You need to invest in your education around governance, so you’re informed about the different roles, rules and structures,” comments **Mui Hoon**. “Networking is obviously invaluable, but it should be genuine. Engage with the people who resonate with your aspirations and values.

“As part of the directorship journey, I became a member of the Singapore Institute of Directors and I started to be active and gain exposure. Additionally, I was also involved in preparation programmes, which connected me with potential opportunities.

“It took a bit of time, maybe about one to two years before I got my first >



position. But in the meantime, I had a chance to really find out what it means to be a director.”

Competition is intense, so landing a role takes patience and persistence.

Hanna Duer, Director of ALLIANZ Global Investors Fund, says: “Nothing was handed to me. I built up a network across firms, auditors and service providers, and gradually my little portfolio grew, and I was exposed to the various sponsors and asset managers of the world.”

The Right Fit

Successful NEDs distinguish themselves by dedicating time to enhance their education, bridging knowledge gaps and being clear on how to craft their CVs to articulate how their experience will make a difference on a given Board. Aspiring NEDs can bring business acumen as well as specific expertise, whether that’s sector related or around areas such as talent, ESG or innovation and technology.

Robin explains: “An organisation may identify a particular skill set it sees you filling – but you may have other skill sets

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Robin R. Sanders

that might not be as obvious to them, especially for those with a varied or seemingly unrelated backgrounds ...

Be vocal about how you can contribute to a Board, a committee and the goals of the organisation or company.”

It’s vital to undertake due diligence on a prospective organisation. This includes gaining a thorough understanding of the company’s USP, its governing laws and regulations across jurisdictions in which it trades, as well as the competitive landscape. According to **Hanna**, there’s a duty of care to map out to stakeholders

in order to capture the full spectrum of responsibilities taken on as a NED.

“You have to make up your mind as you’re going to spend a lot of time getting under the skin of an organisation,” she says.

“For example, are there sufficient internal controls and good reporting standards and processes in place which will give the Board the necessary information to properly govern and steer the company?”

“Because if not, it will take time to develop a strong governance framework which the organisation may not be amenable to. Don’t forget, the Board is responsible for everything the company does.”

The transition from executive to a portfolio career may not be straightforward and the liabilities on NEDs appear to be increasing, especially in more regulated sectors, but it’s evident that it remains a hugely rewarding role and, given the pressure on Boards at present, one that is of ever greater importance. ■

FIVE KEY FOCUS AREAS FOR NEDS

1. New technology – The rollout of 5G will be crucial
2. Better quality data and analytics
3. Collaboration and partnerships
4. The continued rise of distributed manufacturing
5. Increased focus on sustainability



Click here to find out more about Criticleye’s Chair-Ready Programme

Featuring commentary from:

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