

Securing Your First NED Role

Becoming a non-executive director can seem like a dark art to the uninitiated. Attendees of the Criticaleye Senior Women Business Leaders Group recently shared their experiences of how they successfully secured their seat on the board



Taking on a non-executive directorship will help executives broaden their knowledge and make better decisions in the 'day job', while for retiring executives it can offer variety, a good work/life balance and an opportunity to give something back by sharing years of accumulated knowledge.

It shouldn't come as a surprise to learn that competition is fierce when it comes to securing a position in the boardroom, especially for first-timers. At a recent Criticaleye Senior Women Business Leaders Event, attendees shared tips and advice based on how they embarked upon their portfolio career.

1. From Decision-Maker to Influencer

It's important to realise how the duties of a NED will differ from those of an executive. **Ruth Cairnie**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and Non-executive Director at Keller Group, ABF and Rolls-Royce, says: "It's a different role and >



you need to be attentive, understanding... and patient, because the reality is that you are there as an influencer.

“You don’t have direct authority, and you shouldn’t be telling the executives what to do but rather provide the input, stimulus and challenge to help them formulate their views... The satisfaction comes over a period of time, when you see the executives starting to embrace new ideas.”

A similar point is made by **Jane Furniss**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and Deputy Chair of homeless charity Crisis: “It is very different from being an executive, where generally your job is to be hands-on and involved... Being a non-exec is about taking a step back and asking questions. Most people who move into non-exec roles say that initially they find the transition difficult and need to learn new ways of operating.”

2. Gain the Right Skills

A successful executive career gives no guarantee of a NED position – the competition for places is often very intense, especially as companies are increasingly looking for people with international know-how.

Vanda Murray, Criticaleye Board Mentor and Senior Independent Director at manufacturing company Fenner, says: “Get some experience of a NED role... There are lots of charities, not-for-profits, schools, colleges and universities. All kinds of organisations are out there which have good corporate governance regimes which will teach you the basics of being a NED.”

For **Jane**, getting a trustee role was key: “I learned what the charity commission required, how you set up an organisation,

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how you chaired a committee, ensuring that all the financial regulations were followed, and worked with a group of committee members who were volunteers, so you weren’t in a position to direct them as if you were the senior manager.”

This isn’t to suggest charity roles are easy to obtain. **Ella Bennett**, Group HRD at Home Living Group and Trustee at London’s performing arts and concert venue, the Roundhouse, says: “Getting a trustee role is more than a stepping stone to gaining your first NED appointment; it has to be a goal within itself and you need to be passionate about it.”

A common mistake is to only think about a NED role once the curtains have come down on an executive career. In reality, planning has to start much earlier, although balancing the two roles needs to be handled carefully. **Genie Turton**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and Non-executive Director at search firm Rockpools, explains: “If you are taking a NED role in addition to your full time executive role, it’s

important to get buy-in from your company. It is not about them doing you a favour and letting you take on a NED role, but seeing that the experience you gain will benefit them.”

3. Make Time

The time NEDs need to devote to their roles continues to increase, namely because of mounting levels of governance and the complexity of running a business, particularly if it’s global.

For those balancing an executive and non-executive career, it’s something to bear in mind as otherwise you risk doing both roles badly. **Anne Stevens**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and Board Trustee at UK children’s charity Over The Wall, comments: “You have to be realistic about what you have time to do – if you’re already in a demanding executive role, it’s unlikely you will have time to take on more than one trustee or non-executive role and do it well.”

Ruth says: “The rule of thumb is around 20 days a year... for a non-executive role, but it can be different from what it says on the tin, so you have to enquire and find out what is really expected and necessary to do the job well.”

4. Create a Network

Developing a professional network and raising your profile are fundamental when looking for a NED role.

Vanda comments: “A prerequisite is being good in the day job and building your reputation, being visible so that people know who you are, so that when you go and talk to someone for the first time about a NED role they can >



reference you and say: 'That person is so-and-so in that company, they've got a good reputation.'

"You should build your network over the course of your early and mid-career... This might be attending networking events, speaking, having your name referenced in articles or writing articles... You need to be visible."

Ella says: "You need to actively think about what people do beyond their business card and explore this. My trustee role came about because it was something I really wanted and then I discovered I had a connection to The Roundhouse through someone I had met in an unrelated work context – it started my journey."

5. Do Your Homework

If a company does offer you a position, there will obviously be a strong temptation to take it. However, some thought needs to be given to the organisation and due diligence undertaken.

Vanda comments: "You have to find the right organisation for you and that might not be the first one you're offered, so there is an element of doing your own due diligence... You need to believe that you can make a valuable contribution to that company, that you're interested in it [and] that it's the right culture."

“You should build your network over the course of your earlier and mid-career...”

"You need to ask a series of questions, such as: 'Does this group of people share the values that I have? Will I fit well into that group? Will we be able to work together as a team?' Talk to the auditor, talk to people who know the company."

Jane says: "It's not just about due diligence, but finding out the current position of the company and the board to build a picture of what your role will be like."

"What are the challenges the organisation is facing? What is the board worrying about? Where is it now and where does it want to be in five years' time? Those are really important questions and you should talk to people in the organisation, stakeholders or customers to find out what they think."

It's where a strong network of contacts can prove useful, as they can be called upon for advice should an opportunity arise. **Ruth** says: "It comes down to due diligence and that comes back to a network. Who do you know in your network that knows this company? Who knows the chairman or the directors? Just ask around."

The mistake is to fall into a position which, if it's wrong, will only serve to tarnish a reputation that has taken years to build. **Genie** says: "A NED role is about both the relevant experience you can bring to the company and about what you can get out of it. Be as focused on achieving the right NED role and doing it well as you were your executive role." ■

Featuring Commentary From:



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This article was inspired by a [Criticaleye Senior Women Business Leaders Event](#) discussing NED and trustee roles. For further information on these events please contact Jamie Wilson, Marketing and Innovation Director of Criticaleye at jw@criticaleye.com