



Fit and Ready for the Board

Making the move from executive to non-executive is becoming harder.
Criticaleye finds out how to get yourself in shape for life in the boardroom

Plaudits garnered during an executive career are no guarantee of a breezy transition into a non-executive director role. This can come as a surprise to both an aspiring NED and one growing their portfolio. Often, they realise that competition is fierce and the criteria for candidates is only getting tougher.

Tom Taylor, Chairman of the Consumer Council for Water in Wales and former

Chief Executive of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, recalls that he applied for a NED role that had attracted 138 applicants: "It's a tough world, so start early is my advice. Companies are not waiting for you to be a NED. Life's not like that."

A shift is occurring in the market for non-execs, as **Andrew Tallents**, Director at Warren Partners, notes: "It's starting

to change. A number of boards we're speaking to now are saying: 'I want a contemporary non-exec director.' Particularly with digital experience."

As such, planning needs to begin while still in an executive role. **Ruth Cairnie**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and NED at Keller Group, ABF and Rolls-Royce, says that in the early stages of seeking a NED position, she took the >



opportunity to ask numerous contacts for feedback on her CV.

She realised that charting her progression through a set of impressive roles was not enough. "I can write a beautifully crafted list of what I'm good at, but the trick is in telling the story – helping people understand how your experience is relevant and what you can really bring to the table," she explains.

Bill Payne started to think about how to make the move into a NED role when he turned 50 and was General Manager of Customer Experiences and Industries at IBM. "I made an effort to build my network and my personal brand," he recalls.

"I wrote articles and became interested in lots of different things, including academia, so I did teaching. I also became involved in venture capital, investing in [companies] and doing pro-bono work for VC-backed businesses."

Bill, who is now a Non-executive Director at the AIM-listed technology and intellectual property services company Tekcapital, insists there has to be a degree of experimentation and discomfort when first transitioning to a NED role. "You need to create the time and space to do things that are different to your normal daily life," he says.

Balancing Act

Some companies are open to the idea of an executive taking a NED role, but this must be carefully scoped out and there has to be buy-in from the top. **Ruth**, who was Executive Vice President of Strategy & Planning at Royal Dutch Shell when she landed her role at Keller, says that "it

“You’ve got to make sure that you can work with the board’s chemistry and tone”

was important to know exactly how the final decision would be made”.

She was grateful to have had a line manager with board experience, which meant he understood the responsibility and supported her. "I could say: 'I'm sorry I can't do this internal meeting, it clashes with a board meeting,' and there was never any push-back or further discussion. If you have a line manager who doesn't understand the commitment, it could be very tricky," she warns.

Andrew notes that it's also essential to understand the board dynamics when applying for NED vacancies as an executive. "You need to convince the board that you're actually going to be a non-executive as opposed to an executive, which you obviously are in your day job. And that you've got the time to commit," he says.

It's all too easy to take that first offer of a NED role as soon as it's made.

Charlie Wagstaff, Managing Director of Executive Membership at Criticaleye, says: "Particularly if you're a first-time NED, it's flattering when you get the call

that says: 'Come and join this board.' But do your due diligence and work out if it's actually the right thing for you.

"Boards work brilliantly when you've got the appropriate level of challenge and support. You've got to make sure that you can work with the board's chemistry and tone, in particular that of the chairman, especially if you're simultaneously keeping an executive role going."

Don't be afraid to ask questions about company performance, risk management and the culture within the boardroom. Of course, there'll be conversations with the chairman and other directors, but also speak to advisors to get the fullest picture possible.

It takes patience and planning to make the transition to the boardroom. Relying on past glories just won't cut it anymore. ■

Featuring Commentary From:



Ruth Cairnie
NED
Rolls-Royce



Bill Payne
NED
Tekcapital



Tom Taylor
Chairman
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