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How to Get on a Board

It's neither as simple nor as difficult as people may think. Following this practical advice can increase your chances of being able to serve on a board

by [Beverly Behan](#)

There are three popular myths about getting on a board:

Myth No. 1: Because of the shortage of directors willing to serve, it's easy to get on a board today.

Reality: Most active chief executive officers now limit their outside board seats to one, and even retired executives seldom serve on more than three or four. Directors are being more selective about the board invitations they accept, and some highly qualified execs refuse to consider serving at all. Board invitations are, indeed, rolling in for experienced directors. But landing your first board seat is still no easy matter. At a conference in Las Vegas of 1,200 chief financial officers—presumably the most hunted animal in Corporate America since Sarbanes-Oxley mandated a "financial expert" on every board's Audit Committee—the question most commonly asked was, "How do I get on a board?"

Myth No. 2: The best way to get a board seat is to send your CV to a search firm.

Reality: Search firms are retained to find directors to serve on boards, not to find board seats for potential directors. While some do add unsolicited CVs to their databanks, others simply ignore them. Meeting with a recruiter to express interest in board service seldom yields results either. If the stars align such that you happen to meet when he/she is conducting a search where your background is a fit, your name may be put forward. But many who take this approach wait by the phone in vain.

Myth No. 3: Serving on a not-for-profit board will get you on a for-profit board.

Reality: Only if someone on that board serves on a for-profit board that is looking for a new director and puts your name forward. Most search-firm databases focus on directors serving on public company boards, in part because many of the databases are comprised of information gleaned from proxy circulars. Serving on a not-for-profit board can give you a taste of whether you enjoy being a board member. It can also provide references from fellow trustees that are often useful when you're being considered for a for-profit board. But it is by no means a straight shot from the not-for-profit boardroom to the Standard & Poor's 1500.

So, if you've never served on the board of a public company, how do you go about getting on one?

Your Own Board May Be Your Best Resource

While some boards refuse to allow their chief executives to accept another board seat, the more enlightened ones recognize the benefits of having their CEO serve elsewhere. If your board is supportive, your directors may be your best resource in finding another board to serve on. Senior executives approaching retirement, such as a chief financial officer or leader of a major business unit, may also be able to provide leads. Letting directors with

whom you've worked know of your interest in taking on a board seat post-retirement may be the easiest way for you to find one.

If you're a new CEO or recently appointed president/chief operating officer with some assurance that the corner office lies ahead, serving on another board can be an important step in your professional development, helping you understand how better to work with your own board.

Tap into Director Registries

The Nasdaq recently launched a [new registry of prospective directors](#). The Web site creates a profile through a series of questions that can then be retrieved by boards searching for new directors. The National Association of Corporate Directors offers a similar director registry; it is being relaunched in October, 2007, at www.nacdonline.org.

For prospective directors who offer diversity, three other associations may be able to help.

[Catalyst](#) keeps a database on women executives. [The Executive Leadership Council](#) helps to provide board opportunities for African-American executives. [The Hispanic Association on Corporate Responsibility](#) serves as a resource for Hispanic executives interested in board service.

Target and Network

Consider the type of board where your experience would have greatest relevance and develop a list of target companies where your background might be a particular asset. Then pull up bios of their current board members: Do they have directors who already bring the skills you offer? Are any approaching retirement? Do you know anyone on that board or someone who is likely to know one of the directors through business, social or political contacts?

Many directors have found their first board seat through other networks involving auditors, executive compensation consultants, or lawyers they've worked with who service several board clients. Others have landed their first seat by expressing interest to contacts in venture capital firms who might become involved in initial public offerings.

Getting that first board seat remains a challenge, even for highly qualified business leaders. But once you land your first, more board invitations will follow.

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