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Women in boardrooms: networking and qualifications are key

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Serving on a board of directors can be a rewarding experience. But to attain one of these coveted spots you have to be qualified and well connected. The board search process is a major undertaking that can take years. For a woman, it is even more difficult to secure a board seat, so it is important to develop a plan of action to become board ready. Below is some insight into the process.

Step 1: Network

According to Malli Gero, Executive Director of 2020 Women on Boards, it will probably take years before you have the right background and expertise to serve on a corporate board, and you need to continuously work your network while preparing to serve. “You need to be in front of people who can make crucial introductions for you. If you are not an extremely visible person, it is harder to get on a board. Often before a candidate is considered, companies will receive a list of candidates and ask whom on the board knows the person,” said **Toni Wolfman**, Executive Advisor at the Center for Women and Business at [Bentley University](#).

Identify whom you know that can attest to your personal and professional qualities. Connect with people from your past about what they see opening and what you might be a good fit for. “People who know you and your skills are likely to be willing to help you, so it’s important to maintain good relationships with them. It is also important to be strategic in terms of whom you ask for assistance and the manner in which you do so,” said Wolfman.

Board positions can open for various reasons, such as mandatory retirement ages and term limits. Some boards are interested in diversifying the board, go outside the network, and often use search firms to tap a larger pool of candidates. Other boards look ahead, build a pipeline of talent, put someone on a committee, and groom them to serve.

“Some boards will only bring on a new member whom a current board member knows, and that very often means relying on the same old network,” said Wolfman. Interestingly enough, women are now getting into those networks. Once someone gets on a board, they are often suggested for other board positions.

Step 2: Build your board resume

Experience matters. As you develop your skills, think about developing your board resume, which is different than your professional resume.

People often think more information on a resume is better, but that is not always the case. A fine-tuned resume that clearly and concisely communicates your qualifications is more effective than a lengthy one that includes unnecessary information. Consider working with an advisor that specializes in boards to refine your resume and coach you through the process.

“Boards are very focused on C-titles, but we cannot get hung up on titles. We know there are many qualified women whom have the expertise to serve but do not have the C-title.” said Gero. “Often you only have 1 shot for a board’s consideration, and it is better to know in advance if something is missing than to lose the position.”

If you are not at the C-level and do not have a strong network, a good place to start is the senior leadership in your company if you have access to them. Other helpful resources include organizations such as The Boston Club, The National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD), and Women Corporate Directors.

The Boston Club’s work to get more women on corporate boards includes outreach, advocacy, and education. JoAnn Cavallaro, President of The Boston Club, said “We work with both companies and women. There is a large community of highly skilled, experienced executive and professional women in this region, and we want to make them aware of opportunities and work with them to help them prepare for board service. We also work with companies looking to add more women to their boards - or to find the first woman director for the company.”

The Boston Club also works with executives in the business community, some of whom serve on the Club’s Corporate Advisory Board. “Our Advisory Board members get it and are willing to advocate on behalf of our mission. They are willing to reach out to their networks on our behalf. Deloitte’s Bill Bacic, who currently chairs the Corporate Advisory Board, is a good example,” said Cavallaro.

Serving on a board is a powerful position to have and can be very rewarding, as Board members make strategic decisions that shape a company’s future. If you want to serve on a corporate board, do your research, get board ready, and when in the position to make a choice, make sure it is the right fit for you.