

# The Non-Executive Director

## How to become a Non-Executive Director

Once I spoke with the president of the NED board of a bank with a skew towards sustainability and they made it public that they were looking for a non-executive director (NED). Specifically, they were searching for someone who had been a CFO in a public company, worked in at least two different countries, and had experience in an IPO process.

Now that's quite a high bar but nevertheless before long the bank had 700 applicants, many of them well known leaders.

The road to becoming a NED is usually long, difficult and surprisingly crowded. Many, many people are willing to switch to a non-executive track in their career, so it's very difficult to stand out from the competition, especially when applying for your first NED role.

To be appointed, it's clear you'll need a lot of experience, a great reputation and a bit of luck too. But how can you turn the odds in your favour?

### Seek experience early

Of those 700 people that applied for that NED role at the sustainable bank, probably 600 needn't have applied.



Even though they had held positions of great influence in publicly trading companies, many of them missed three out of five of the core criteria. You can't rely on knowledge, experience and personal connections alone. Non-executive directorship is becoming a more demanding role with an even more demanding entry requirement.

The best you can do is begin early. If you can keep an NED career in mind when you're starting to climb the executive ladder, you can make time to gain parallel experience. This might mean taking initiative in attending educational programs or global schools, or perhaps by taking a smaller, often unpaid NED role in the public sector, in a university or school.

You can also take time to network, get involved in related projects or take on consultancy work. The more you prepare, the more you can brace yourself for the potential risks associated with the NED board. Otherwise, even if you manage to get appointed to a non-executive position, you might not be ready for the implications<link to blog 01 'when is the right time to become an NED'>.

## Build your brand and your value

When executive searchers are involved, we are often asked to seek out the competencies of a board member. So just as you would do when preparing to apply for an executive role, you need to consider your executive branding to attract the right attention.

To build the right reputation, you might need to build knowledge in specialist areas, or step beyond your usual sphere of expertise. I know several NEDs who committed to deep training in a strategic field. Sometimes they are required to present on a particular topic, to keep the executive board informed of key issues – perhaps sustainability, cyber security, or evolving trends in online retail.

So it's worth becoming informed of issues you may not have touched upon yet in your career. I, for instance, knew that I would need to judge digital marketing qualities in potential Marketing Directors and CMOs, so I committed to a digital marketing training course.



As a result, I now know what questions to ask and what competencies to look out for. Although it is not my primary offering, it makes me more rounded as an executive search consultant and coach. So consider where you, too, might add to your value.

As an NED, you won't need to know everything, but you will need to know enough to find the right people. Even if you don't become a renowned specialist in say, data protection, you can learn to find the right experts on the subject so that when need arises on the board, you can bring them in.

Also, before you walk into any interview room, you need to learn to be able to explain succinctly, specifically and confidently – with relevant examples – where you bring value. It's not enough to have a decorative career and to be a good lunch partner. Strategic networking remains a part of life in business, but you need to be known for your capabilities, not just your position and personality.

### Learn a new way of being

That said, your personality does play a role. As an NED, it's important to be able to stand stable and strong against the executive board – but you also need to be able to do this in the right way.

I know a few tough board members who learned to shape the way they challenged people. Some of them initially had strong egos; they were used to being direct and forthright in their communication. In time though, they sanded down some of their own sharp edges and learned to focus their energy on asking challenging questions.

There are some leaders, however, who find it difficult to let go of their operational habits. Instead of stepping into a reflective capacity, they stay too hands-on – and I find this is often the case for those who have a long history in the professional service industry. So, before you apply for an NED role, a degree of self-reflection is required. If you want to continue acting as you have always done, you may not be the right fit for the position.



Finally, you need to learn how to keep a healthy distance. NED's need to get relatively close to the people on the board so they can build the necessary trust. But that trust must not turn into a skewed sense of loyalty. You need to learn to keep yourself sharp, to stay empathetic but keep good boundaries. If you struggle to maintain that sense of separation, it is worth practicing so you can better demonstrate your suitability for a non-executive board later.

So, as I say, it's not a simple career path. Nor is it an easy-going destination once you arrive. If you are serious about pursuing a non-executive career, contact me to help bring your way forward into focus.

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