

Five Tactics for Landing a Board Seat

By Marie C. Baca

published on BNET.com 10/15/2008

Corporate directorships are invitation-only positions — boardrooms seek out qualified individuals, not the other way around. “This is not like looking for a job,” says Ted Dysart, managing partner of Americas for the Global Board of Directors Practice for executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles. “If you act like it is, you are probably going to get knocked out of the process.”

That said, experts agree that there are certain things you can do to increase your odds of being on the short list of board candidates. Consider these five strategies:

1. Start Small

Experience in the boardroom can be a huge differentiator between candidates, and directors often find that one board seat leads to another. That may sound like a chicken-egg phenomenon, but there is a way to break into the cycle: Find a small company, startup, or community organization, and approach it about serving on its board. Although any board experience is beneficial, corporations are likely to value for-profit board experience over a directorship at a nonprofit, says Steve Mader, managing director and vice chairman at recruiter Korn/Ferry International. He also notes the importance of being upfront with stepping-stone organizations about your timeline. “If you see yourself moving on in five years, don’t sign up for a position that lasts a decade,” he says. “You want to think short-term, and you want to do that in good conscience.”

2. Brand Your Skills

It pays to take inventory of your relevant skill set to determine what you will be able to contribute to the boardroom. Are you best at being a financial expert? The technology guru? A regulatory genius? Mader suggests analyzing the “skill map” of the average boardroom and determining where your background fits in. “No one individual has enough knowledge to make the board function,” he says. “It’s a team effort. The question is, what will you bring to the party?” Once you isolate your particular contribution, look for new ways to develop those skills within your current organization or as part of your long-term career plan.

3. Put the “Work” Back in Networking

Board appointments are typically facilitated by personal connections, particularly in the case of private and small public companies. “I’d say that seven out of every 10 board seats are won because of a prior relationship with the board or a referral from a board member to a recruiter,” says Bob Concannon, managing partner at executive search firm Boyden. “If you don’t have those connections, the odds are already against you.” In order to develop stronger ties, make a list of 20 relationships you have with high-ranking executives and then ask these individuals to introduce you to their CEO or

a board member, Concannon says. In addition, participate in independent professional associations and, Mader recommends, socialize with the professional services firms your business works with — like accounting or law firms — which may be able to act as intermediaries between you and relevant industry contacts.

4. Consider a Training Program

Several educational institutions and professional organizations offer [board director training programs](#). While many of these are aimed at educating current board members, some are relevant to future directors, as well. UCLA, for example, offers a [Director Education and Certification Program](#) designed to inform both experienced directors and hopefuls about corporate governance regulations. “A training program will definitely help a candidate stand out, especially if it was completed recently,” Concannon says. Mader agrees but warns that if you decide to pursue a training program aimed solely at directors-to-be, don’t rely on the program for networking purposes — it’s unlikely that anyone in attendance will be able to help you reach your goals.

5. Stay in Touch With Recruiters

You never know when that recruiter you’ve been ignoring for other placements will suddenly be assigned to a board-director search. So maintain your relationships with search firms and update them about your progress in your field. You may also want to consider using the NASDAQ site [BoardRecruiting.com](#), which matches directors and board opportunities based on profile criteria. It’s best to avoid asking search organizations outright about boardroom opportunities, however: If your background would be a good fit for a particular board seat, the recruiters will come to you.