

Board-Seeker

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*Your Guidebook and Career Map
into the Corporate Boardroom*

Ralph Ward



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Board-Seeker: Your Guidebook and Career Map into the Corporate Boardroom
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Advanced Quotes for Board-Seeker

If your bull's eye is to land a board seat, this book has all the arrows in one quiver! It's loaded with advice, practical steps to take, and wisdom from those who have succeeded. It's a highly readable set of ideas that can make your board pursuit both effective and smart.

Donna Hamlin,
CEO, BoardWise
BoardWise.biz

Ralph Ward has pulled together all of his experience and wisdom to help executives make the leap to board service. Finally a true 'guidebook' full of detailed, actionable steps for getting onto a board, including examples and templates. Ralph also includes up-to-date advice on digital engagement and how to manage your social media to best present yourself for opportunities. Follow his comprehensive advice, including a tailored board bio, talking points, how to research the existing board and company, and how to make connections with people who have board access, and you will land a board seat.

Betsy Atkins
Board member, Wynn Resorts, Volvo Cars Group,
Founder, Baja LLC

Not everyone can be a member of a corporate board—one of the most coveted spots in business. Reading this book will win you a seat at the corporate table.

Jeffrey Hayzlett
President, C-Suite Network, Primetime TV & Podcast Host,
Speaker, Author and Part-Time Cowboy

Abstract

There is a magic moment in the career trajectory of business leaders. Perhaps they're executives who've made it to the C- or VP level and built strong operational and P&L success. They may have built a startup into a strong company. Their network includes CEOs and venture capital people, and they're on the radar of top headhunters. These rising stars look to the next step on their career paths, and the thought strikes—*I could join a board of directors.*

This is a real, achievable goal for these business leaders, but they quickly realize how little they really know about the boardroom. They don't know how board searches actually happen. They doubt their own “boardability,” much less how to sell themselves for it. Despite the savvy they've accumulated in their careers, they discover the path and tools needed for a successful “board wannabe” are beyond them.

Board-Seeker: Your Guidebook and Career Map into the Corporate Boardroom will change that. This is the first practical guide written specifically to help board-ready leaders and executives gain the knowledge, resources, and confidence to shape their successful personal “onboarding” program. Assess the experience you've gained that makes you valuable to a board (there's more than you think). Shape this into a powerful outreach portfolio, including a board resume, online image, and personal pitch. Gain the allies and mentors you'll need (especially your boss), and build a targeted board network. Learn step by step how board searches really happen and how to master each stage. Prepare for the board interview and vetting process, and get ready for your first board meeting.

With leads, links, checklists, and first-hand success stories, *Board-Seeker* spells out each step you'll take into the boardroom—and beyond.

Keywords

boardroom, boards of directors, career, career coaching, careers, C-level, corporate boards, corporate governance, executive, governance

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Acknowledgment

Once again, for the marvellous Marianne.

Introduction

I call it the Magic Moment. It arrives at some point in every highly successful business career. Maybe it's gaining your first C-level executive position, when you've either achieved it, or it's in sight. You're running a division and built solid P&L success. You've built a startup into a real company, maybe even done it several times. You and your firm have invested in enough ventures to build a good idea of what works and doesn't. You've accumulated a few decades of career achievement, and now wonder what new challenges (and opportunities) post-retirement life could offer.

These are a few of the career profiles I've encountered in the past few years. Many different paths; men, women, job titles, nationalities, but all shared that one Magic Moment. A light bulb went off over the head of each achiever, and the thought occurred "I could join a board of directors."

It's breathtaking and audacious, really. We spent most of our careers viewing The Board as a mighty, Oz-like entity to be feared and supplicated. As we climbed the corporate ladder, shaped our own companies, drew closer to power, we pulled back the curtain a bit. We sat in on board meetings, briefed directors, served on committees with them. We saw board members as not only smart, committed people, but also just as frail at the rest of us. Furthermore, we realized we often knew more on the specifics of things than those boardroom solons did. And that's the moment the light bulb sparks to life.

At this point your "board-wannabe" interest may remain only that—a spark. Despite the business seasoning you've accumulated (and despite much hard-earned career savvy), you realize that the boardroom world involves many unanswered questions. What do you need to know? What makes someone more (or less) boardable? Biggest unknown of all—how does *it* actually happen? Just how *are* board prospects identified, vetted, and actually selected?

For starters, not very logically. The hiring and promotion of *management* at the top of a major company by definition is based on focusing talent needs to the narrowest of points. There are only so many “C” level positions, and any company will obsess over finding the top talent, the best fit, and the greatest leadership potential. Grooming internal candidates, setting up a succession “horse race,” nurturing skills, and recruiting (and retaining) high-potentials are crucial tasks for any executive team.

When hiring from the outside for a top position, the standards are even tougher. Background, credentials, achievements, and skills are closely examined and weighed. All involved realize that selection of a top C-level talent (especially the CEO) is a decision made for high (possibly “bet the company”) stakes.

But shopping for another top-level role at the corporation—the board of directors—is handled very differently. Board selection typically involves no aptitude testing, no job descriptions, and no outside certification. Going through a search firm to find qualified board candidates remains uncommon—most directors, even at the Fortune 500 level, are still recruited through a “who knows who” network. When specific skills *are* sought (such as finance background), qualification is often based on title, such as being a CFO or former audit firm partner, rather than any tactical achievements.

“Interviewing” of board prospects in the conventional hiring sense is also amateurish. Yes, there will likely be multiple rounds of interviews, but these are based less on a systematic winnowing plan than on the busy schedules of current directors who just want to “get comfortable” with the prospect.

In short, those who hold the corporation’s most powerful office are picked through its most casual, opaque, and subjective selection process. At least when a guy is hired as janitor, he has to pass a drug test.

All of which leaves you, the career achiever, with a light bulb over your head that’s already starting to flicker. If gaining a corporate board seat is a mysterious process, and the more you dig into it, the more incoherent it becomes, what hope is there for you?

Quite a bit, actually. If gaining a board seat is on your career checklist, the timing has never been better. The “small circle of friends” that made

up most corporate boards for decades has grown far more democratic. A recent study of major U.S. corporate boards¹ found that in 2000, a cadre of 61 well-networked directors each served on five boards or more. By 2012, there was only one such boardroom “ace” left.

Board diversity, long a “yeah, we gotta do something about that someday” matter, has now become a very hot governance topic. Most European corporations today face either mandated or “comply or explain” gender requirements for boards, and in the United States, proxy campaigns and “name and shame” campaigns have made the exclusively pale, male board untenable.

Broader, yet more technical, board skill demands have also opened the pipeline. Being tapped for a board opportunity was long based on who-knows-who among folks already in the boardroom. Skills and vitae? It was important to hold a CEO title, and the board could use someone with financial chops for the audit committee, but little beyond that. Now, boards are prodding themselves to deepen their talent bench. Technology (in such areas as cybersecurity, social media, and marketing), risk management, finance, M&A, government regulation, and global markets are skills boards increasingly seek. Even narrow (but proven) skills can meet specific boardroom demands. A pharma industry exec with strong bones in bringing new drugs to market can be just what a biotech startup needs as its founders try to get their new molecule approved.

So yes, the boardroom door is now opening, and you may just be able to make your way in. But even for someone with your level of career savvy, the board search will demand some new skills, new tools, and an attitude adjustment. That well-crafted résumé of yours is likely burying any board-specific nuggets. You may have a solid, instantly deliverable elevator speech on your career assets and goals—but it says little on why a *board* should want you. And if you honestly assess your wider career network at this moment, how many *specifically* know that you’re seeking a board seat?

¹J.S.G. Chu, and G.F. Davis. November, 2016. “Who Killed the Inner Circle? The Decline of the American Corporate Interlock Network.” *American Journal of Sociology*. webuser.bus.umich.edu/gfdavis/Papers/Chu_Davis_2016.pdf

Yes, you have many of the raw materials available to make your boardroom dreams a reality (in fact, likely more than you give yourself credit for). But first, you have some work to do on making yourself “boardable.” This starts with asking yourself a few tough questions.

CHAPTER 1

So What Makes You “Boardable”?

I’ve worked with and written on corporate boards for a couple of decades now, so you’d expect me to view them as a life priority, sort of the way a barber judges world leaders by their haircuts. But the matter of how well potential board duties fit in with the *rest* of your life responsibilities is an important aspect of boardmanship, and one that board wannabes give too little attention.

Step back and hit yourself with a big philosophical question—why, specifically, do you want to serve on a board? “I’m at the point in my career when I can think about a board seat” is not enough. What exactly do you hope to accomplish with a board presence? Overall career growth? Added income? Teeing up a post-retirement portfolio? Giving back to business, to the community, to younger companies, and to the people who could benefit from what you’ve learned?

You may want to help shape a fast-growing organization, enjoy the prestige of participating on a board, seek the opportunity to learn a new market, or expand your professional network significantly.

Where would a board seat fit in as part of your overall career advancement plan? Are you seeking the boardroom exposure to build your prospects with your current company or to shop your skills to others? It helps (at least for the moment) to consider yourself in a seller’s market. What would tempt *you* to accept a board offer? Strong support of the organization’s mission? Interest in its growth prospects? Belief that being affiliated with its board will be a strong résumé booster?

All are of these are legitimate drivers for your boardroom quest, and for most of us the motivators are probably a combination of some or all of them. But be assured that, at a critical moment in your board-wannabe

effort, someone will ask you this specific question, so it's wise to be ready. Weigh and judge these factors for yourself. Write up your own personal list of motivators, and don't worry at this point if some of them sound vague or self-serving.

Also, enter into your board search with due respect for the legal responsibilities involved. I'll offer more detail on the workload and effort involved, but serving on a board of directors differs from any other "job" in that it is a legal *trust*. You don't just shake hands in the boardroom and update your résumé when elected to a board. You take on a "fiduciary duty" to represent the interests of investors and the enterprise itself. Said duty is very well enforced, as disgruntled shareholders, corporate counsel, and regulators are eager to let you know. Although the greatest fiduciary obligations fall on the directors of publicly traded companies, private firms and nonprofits are no longer safe havens. Devote some time to studying the powers (and dangers) you assume through election to a board.

Finally, a note on the structure of this book. In producing my *Boardroom INSIDER* publication, a monthly feature is a Q&A column. Often these questions come from attendees at my Boardroom Masterclass programs or in counseling execs on board-readiness. Many questions involve personal onboarding campaigns, and illustrate just how much mystery still surrounds the process. I'll present a number of these queries throughout this book, starting with what looks like an ideal kickoff question.

Q: *Last year I was named divisional president for the subsidiary of a major business-to-business (B2B) marketing company. Going forward in my career, I'd like to develop some outside board-of-director opportunities. I have a strong résumé and some boardroom experience with committees of our company, joint ventures, and a nonprofit council for our industry, but realize that I still have a ways to go. What specific things should I do to make myself more "board-ready" as I proceed?*

A: It's refreshing to find a "board wannabe" who admits that he still needs to add a few arrows to his quiver. A first step, too often overlooked, is to gain more knowledge on the specific duties, liabilities, and demands involved. "It's a complicated, risky role," notes Patricia Lenkov, president of Agility Executive Search.

Study up on the legalities and exposures of a board member, particularly for a public company (the top level when it comes to boards). This isn't just general background research (or an attempt to scare yourself away from the job). It instead makes you smarter on what specifically is being sought, and how you can personally fill a board's needs.

At some point early in vetting as a board prospect, you'll need to not just tell about yourself, but be able to ask targeted, intelligent questions on how the company's board does its job. You'll make the best impression if you've done your governance homework.

Next, what is your boardroom value proposition? This is something hidden away inside your full, professional résumé and should focus your search. “It's very important to understand what you can bring to the board table, and what your strong suit would be on a board,” says Lenkov.

This is what movie execs pitch as a “high concept”—your short, simple, strongest value delivery. “Are you a marketing guy, M&A, finance?” asks Lenkov. “I see so many fabulous resumes, but often people don't know where they'll fit [on the board].” While this boardroom “high concept” handle may seem limiting in your search, it is a reality you can put to advantage by figuring out your strongest board value and then targeting it hard.

To make the boardroom sale, your résumé and references will have to tell a strong story. Yes, you held this or that title at a company that was a major player in the X industry. Now, put meat on those bones. How big was your division, how specifically did you grow revenues from Down There to Up Here, what new products did you roll out, and how hands-on were you? What tough decisions were you active in, and what was your P&L responsibility?

Related to this will be backup from your “soft references.” How well do you work as a team member with other high performers? What will references say about your emotional IQ, and how you work under pressure? Start now to get this narrative together for a “boardability” campaign.

There is plenty of good intelligence for board wannabes here, but I have no illusions about knowing everything on the topic. That's why I also tap (and am happy to plug) good outside resources for the board hopeful.

Jill Griffin, business consultant, writer, and board member at Luby's/
Fuddruckers Restaurants, recently published the book *Earn Your Seat on a*

Corporate Board.¹ This spells out some important steps needed in an effective board campaign, from gauging board-readiness to vetting a potential board offer, and is well worth adding to any board-wannabe library. However, to save you some reading time, I culled a few insights through an interview with the author:

- “Gaining a board seat differs from gaining a new job because you don’t just go out and apply for a board. That means building your personal brand into someone a board will find attractive. It’s not just establishing your expertise, but building visibility and recognition. That’s what’s so valuable with resources like LinkedIn.”
- “The first thing to think about is to really understand your skills. What kind of companies would value you on their board? Work by industry, but look at ‘adjacent’ industries to help deal with non-compete and conflict issues. For example, I know a woman who worked with Continental Airlines. She got a board seat with a helicopter company—her skills put her on their radar screen, but they weren’t a direct competitor.”
- “It’s easier than you think to look up information on public companies. Even smaller companies have public filings, and you can research their annual reports to find out the ages and skills of their current board members. But it’s a meticulous process—this is a long path, and you have to persevere.”
- “When networking, try to find out where company directors are, and that includes online. It’s not hard to put a person’s name in a search box and find out who’s who, and who they serve on a board with.”
- “Yes, nonprofit boards are a good starter, but look carefully at who *else* is on that nonprofit board. Who’s sitting at that table with you, and can they help sponsor you onto a corporate board? Also [for nonprofits], the closer you can work with the organization’s CEO, the better, and if you can get involved with the financial end of the board, like a finance or audit committee, that’s a power piece for your corporate board search—a real stepping stone.”

¹J. Griffin. 2016. *Earn Your Seat on a Corporate Board*. <http://jillgriffin.net/books/board-seat>

Board-Seeker Action Items

- List your top five “boardability” assets you can bring to a board.
- What do you view as the top three specific benefits serving on a board could add to your career?
- What do you view as your three biggest deficits in pursuing a board seat?
- Name the top five companies on your current board “wish list.”
- For these companies, do you know the names of their current board members?

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