

How to Get on Your First Board in the United States

A Thoughtful Approach for Senior Leaders



For many senior executives, serving on a board represents a culminating step in their career. It offers the opportunity to contribute at a strategic level, support leadership teams, and stay engaged with complex and evolving business challenges.

At the same time, the path to a first board seat can feel uncertain. Even executives at the pinnacle of their careers may not know what boards are truly looking for, or how to approach securing their first board appointment.

Add to that, boards are operating in a rapidly evolving environment. The pace of technological change, geopolitical uncertainty, and economic pressure are shaping board priorities and influencing how directors are selected. As a result, boards have become more deliberate and often more selective, particularly when considering first-time directors. They are increasingly looking for candidates with current, relevant operating experience, either in active executive roles or very recently retired, who can serve as a meaningful sounding board to the CEO. This often means individuals with broad-based executive perspective rather than singular functional expertise, and with experience leading through the complex enterprise-level challenges being faced by management teams today, such as navigating geopolitical risk, supply chain disruption, periods of economic volatility, and the rise of artificial intelligence.



Approaching your board search process with intention, clarity, and a grounded understanding of what boards are seeking in today's business climate can make a meaningful difference.

Defining Your Motivation and Commitment

Before pursuing a board role, it is important to be clear on your intentions. As a first step, reflect on why you want to serve and what you hope to gain from the experience.

Sitting on a board comes with a significant commitment of both time and energy. Directors are expected to contribute meaningfully through preparation, committee participation, and ongoing engagement. For many organizations, this also includes travel and a multi-year commitment, often spanning eight to ten years. There is also an element of unpredictability. In times of crisis, major transactions, leadership transitions, or shareholder activism, the time commitment required of Directors can increase significantly.

The most fulfilling board roles will be ones in which you are genuinely interested in the business and invested in the organization's purpose. Are you excited about the sector, leadership team, and strategy? Will you bring your passion to the table? If the work does not resonate, it is unlikely to be a fulfilling or sustainable commitment over time.



Understanding and Articulating Your Value

A critical step in preparing for a board role is developing a clear and honest understanding of the value you bring.

This is not about reshaping your experience to fit a trending narrative. It is about identifying the experience and perspective you have developed over your career and understanding how that translates into a boardroom context. Many candidates find it helpful to map their experience against the skills boards are seeking. While some needs are industry specific, there are also broadly relevant competencies across sectors, including enterprise operating leadership, oversight of strategy, governance experience, financial literacy, risk management, and the ability to advise and challenge executive leadership.

Creating a matrix of those competencies against your own can be a useful self-reflection exercise. Assess where your experience aligns, where you bring differentiated value, and where you may have gaps. A simple board readiness checklist or comparison against publicly disclosed board matrices can help structure this reflection and clarify the types of organizations where you are most likely to contribute effectively.

For executives in functional roles, this often means demonstrating an enterprise mindset that extends beyond a specific area of expertise. Boards are looking for individuals who can engage on a broad range of strategic issues, rather than solely as deep functional experts.

It is also essential to demonstrate a clear understanding of the distinction between management and governance. As a director, your role is to advise, challenge, and support the CEO and leadership team, not to operate the business. This requires humility in knowing your contributions are not as a final decision maker, but instead center on asking the right questions and ensuring the management team has considered the relevant inputs as part of its decision process.



Boards are often cautious when considering first-time directors and will look for evidence that candidates understand this boundary. Showing both an appreciation for the governance role and the judgment to engage constructively is essential.

Capturing your personal value proposition in a well-crafted board biography is a key step in demonstrating your board readiness. A board bio should clearly articulate the expertise you will bring to the boardroom and will differ from your executive resume in both content and structure. Typically, this includes a concise narrative highlighting governance-relevant experience, followed by a brief career chronology with select achievements framed through a board lens. The goal is to show how your background translates into boardroom value.



Targeting the Right Opportunities

Not all board roles are created equal, and a focused approach is far more effective than a broad one. Identifying where you can add the most value should guide your board search. This includes thinking about sector and industry alignment, organizational size and complexity, whether a company is public or private, and its stage of growth.

There are also more nuanced considerations that matter. These can include ownership structure, governance structure, the organization's strategic direction, and the overall boardroom culture, among other considerations.

Personal factors should also be considered when seeking the right opportunity. This may include your passion for the company's business and industry, affinity for its leadership, geographic relevance, and the network and exposure that a board role may provide. It is also important to weigh the expected time commitment against your personal and professional capacity, particularly given the preparation, committee work, and potential for increased involvement during periods of change or crisis.

If you are not yet retired, you should also ensure support from your current organization, particularly regarding time and travel commitments and any guidance or limitations on the types of boards you could join.

Validating Your Positioning and Seeking Guidance

Before actively pursuing opportunities, taking the time to validate your positioning with a relevant, trusted audience can provide valuable perspective.

Once you have reflected on your motivations, value, and potentially relevant boards, we recommend engaging a small group of experienced board members within your network who can help pressure-test and refine your approach. These individuals can provide candid feedback on your board readiness and value proposition, your board bio, and the types of organizations where you are most likely to bring in-demand or differentiated perspective.

For many first-time directors, working with a retained advisor can also be beneficial. An advisor can help strengthen your understanding of governance expectations, refine your narrative, and prepare you for board-level conversations. This can be particularly helpful in ensuring that you are presenting yourself in a way that resonates with boards.

In some cases, retained specialist advisors can also support your commercial market connectivity and networking efforts. This may include helping you identify the most relevant boards based on your experience, and facilitating opportunistic introductions that expand your board network. For candidates who are new to the board ecosystem, this type of structured outreach can help build momentum and create access to conversations that may otherwise be difficult to initiate.



Activating Your Network and Building Visibility

Board appointments are typically the result of sustained relationships and visibility rather than a single point of entry.

Activating your network in a thoughtful and targeted way is essential. This includes colleagues and mentors, members of your own organization's board, and individuals who are already serving on boards that align with your interests. Executive search partners can also play an important role, particularly those who specialize in board work. Clarity is key. Being specific about the types of boards you are targeting and the value you bring makes it easier for others to advocate for you.

At the same time, continuing to build your external profile is important. Contributing to discussions on topics where you have expertise, whether through speaking engagements, panels, or written content, builds visibility and reinforces your credibility as a board candidate.

As you navigate these conversations, it is important to focus on your value alignment and contributions. While compensation is part of corporate board service, it should not be a leading topic early in the process.

A Long-Term Approach to Board Readiness

Securing a first board seat often takes time. It is a process that benefits from ongoing refinement, relationship building, and a willingness to seek feedback. Taking a thoughtful and measured approach also signals that you understand how the board ecosystem works. Unlike executive search processes, board appointments are often relationship-driven, deliberate, and unfold over time. Demonstrating patience, judgment, and tactfulness throughout the process can reinforce your credibility as a potential director.

For those who approach it thoughtfully, board service can be a meaningful extension of an executive career. It provides the opportunity to contribute at a strategic level, support organizations through complexity, and engage with leaders and issues that continue to evolve.



Taking a structured and intentional approach will not guarantee a board seat, but it will significantly strengthen your readiness when the right opportunity arises.



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Cathy is a Partner at Odgers, bringing over 30 years of business and executive search experience. Cathy currently leads the firm's US Board Practice and advises companies on their most senior and strategic leadership talent needs.

Cathy has recruited Board Directors and C-Level Executives to Fortune 50, mid-cap, private equity, Pre-IPO, and not-for-profit organizations. She has worked in the financial services, insurance, consumer, industrial, energy and technology sectors.

Cathy brings passion and expertise to diversity mandates, as well as a long track record of placing diverse individuals in both senior leadership positions and on corporate boards. She is a member of various industry organizations devoted to advancing women and ethnically diverse executives.

In executive search, Cathy has been engaged on searches for chief executive officers, chief financial officers, chief information officers, chief operating officers, general counsels, and other senior operating executives across markets and industry sectors. She also works closely with boards and companies to strategize and develop chief executive succession plans and advisory boards.

Prior to moving into the search industry, she held roles in high tech and information publishing. Cathy has a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from Boston College.



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Abby has 15 years of experience in board advisory and executive search and joined Odgers in 2025 as a member of the firm's Board Practice.

She brings deep expertise in building and cultivating Board-ready and C-suite talent networks and has successfully placed both first-time and experienced Independent Directors on corporate boards. Abby is passionate about identifying and connecting highly qualified board leaders with organizations seeking exceptional, diverse, and effective Directors.

Previously, Abby served as a client Partner with a Chicago-based board advisory firm, and earlier held a role within EY's Financial Services Organization, where she advised clients on board readiness, succession planning, board composition, and governance.

Through her board work, Abby has advised Boards and board candidates across a broad range of industries, including financial services, wealth and asset management, professional services, technology, consumer, retail, and utilities. Her placements have included CEOs, CFOs, Division Presidents, and senior officers serving on the boards of publicly traded, private equity-backed, spin-out, and pre-IPO companies.

Prior to her work supporting board recruitment and talent efforts, Abby held roles in executive search and recruiting. Abby holds a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from Michigan State University.

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