

Boarding Now



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I recently contributed to a global report for International Women's Day 2025, examining the status of Women on Boards. The report highlighted the key role that independent directors play in corporate governance. They provide oversight, strategic perspectives and insights to the executive on behalf of the shareholders by evaluating performance, managing risk, and upholding accountability.

Building a fulfilling board career can be rewarding, but starting out can be tricky. The statistics indicate that significant progress is still required to achieve gender parity, but I found the practical advice shared in the report to be particularly valuable for everyone wanting to take this path. The report also includes strategies for Chairs to prepare their boards for embracing inclusivity, as well as tips for women aspiring to join boards.

This is my advice, based on my personal experience:

1. Scope the scape

Learn about board structures, legislation, risks and commitments. These vary considerably between countries and jurisdictions but get to know what is relevant for you. If you are employed, check for any restrictions by your employer and any potential conflicts.

Consider your targets. There is a wide universe of entities – listed and unlisted companies, multinational, government or promoter management, start-ups to mid-sized to PE portfolios, large listed, conglomerate subsidiaries, hold cos, not-for-profits, and then some. Depending on the structure, strategic situation and complexity, the ask, commitment and risks can vary.

Think through your portfolio strategy. For example, a great way to start may be to serve on an NGO or not-for-profit board in an advisory role or even as an operating partner in a PE environment. Understand commitments, from the cadence of the meetings, expectations at meetings, committees and the preparation needed, and occasionally follow-up items. Get yourself board-ready and brush up on your financial literacy, if required, via certification and courses. Prepare a one-page board CV and update your LinkedIn profile to reflect those micro-credentials and enhance your “marketability”.

2. Define your hashtags

This is about what you bring to the table. View your experiences and skillsets through a wider lens. Apart from professional achievements and core functional experience, your hashtags could include various industries you have been exposed to, geographies you have worked in, and exposure across different ownership structures and cultures. Deep dive further - have you driven a turnaround? Been involved in a merger or an integration? What about digital adoption? Sustainability? Do you have access to networks within a particular function or industry? Bring these into play in your board CV.

Equally important, how are you perceived? What are you an expert at? Ask mentors and professionals who know you for honest advice. Do a media check on yourself to check what pops up online, and look at your privacy settings, particularly your socials. Is there anything there you wouldn't want a board to see? Set up a professional email ID and in due course, an appropriate billing entity.

3. Get an invitation to the party

Most board appointments are still through networks, mainly through existing board members. So, expand your network and put yourself out there. Tell people you know, particularly those in boards, that you are keen to serve, share your targets, ask about openings and proactively ask for introductions and referrals.

Get on the radar of people you don't know. Check in with executive search firms who run board searches and keep them updated as you pick up assignments. Ask for advice from senior or experienced board members.

Being visible is key – keep your LinkedIn profile updated and active. Writing, liking and commenting are free – and get you noticed, and help recruiters form an opinion when they are researching you. Consider attending industry events and joining industry associations, accept speaking engagements, and perfect your elevator pitch (know your hashtags!).

4. Due diligence

As a first-timer, appreciate that you may need to start with baby steps, so carefully consider all opportunities that give you relevant board experience as you build your portfolio. First, check for conflicts of interest on your own part.

Apart from the basic questions around expectations, commitments and potential pay, research for “fit” – governance standards obviously, but also board culture, existing and past board members who you can reach out to. Have a look at the existing board, their experience and skills mix and tenures on the board. What other boards are they on? If it is a family-controlled company, check for the friends and family composition of the overall board.

Prep for the interviews – research the company, industry, relevant regulation, trends, press and social media coverage, LinkedIn, analyst reports et al. What are the key imperatives or challenges facing the company? Where can you contribute?

This is a two-way street – you are assessing them and your ability to fit in and vice versa.

5. When on board

Ask for an orientation – consider informal coffee chats with existing board members, or members of the executive team if possible. Can a factory visit be arranged? Is there history / dynamics that you should be aware of?

Stay updated – on regulations, industry trends, competitor imperatives, and potential dilemmas. Read the board papers, prepare your questions in advance. Ask clarificatory questions in advance, if appropriate.

Finally

There is speculation that DEI imperatives make it easy for “unqualified” women to make it to boards. I disagree.

As the global chair of a C-suite executive search partnership, I have the opportunity to exchange notes with colleagues from all over the world, and our collective experience is this – all credible companies will carefully curate a mix of board members, and invite candidates primarily based on reputation, experience, and insights. No matter what your route to the board - I assure you that a seat at the table very much needs to be earned.

Use your voice wisely and well.
