

# How to win a board position

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Preparation and forethought are prerequisites to obtaining a board role. *Photo: Jessica Shapiro*

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From the perspective of an office junior or intern, taking a seat at a boardroom table can seem an impossible dream.

But commitment and persistence pay off, and a career punctuated by achievement can eventually mark you as a genuine contender.

You're unlikely to be successful at your first attempt, counsels Dr Judith MacCormick, a partner and CEO at recruitment firm Heidrick & Struggles.

"Once an individual starts the process, they can expect at least 18 months before they get their first gig, with a few false starts along the way," MacCormick says. "It's highly unlikely that someone will get the first board role. But through the process they should embrace every opportunity offered and go to interviews and learn as much as they can about what it takes to get a board role."

For Caltex Australia corporate counsel Irina Zvereva, it took more than a year before she acquired a board position on the NSW Procurement Industry Advisory Board.

Last year she attended a couple of courses to help her prepare for board roles. "The preparation was intensive, but I needed to do this before I felt ready to apply for any positions," she says.

"The courses also helped me to prepare my resume so that I had a board-ready resume. This is

different from a normal resume. I had to highlight the skills that were relevant for a board position.”

Zvereva applied for 10 board roles before landing one. “For the roles I missed out on, I discovered that I was against 150 to 200 candidates; it's competitive, but I hit the right target with my skills set when I landed the procurement role. I have a lot of experience in commercial procurement, and this is what got me over the line and the board position.”

Zvereva advises potential board candidates to prepare a resume with the right skillset for the relevant board position.

Next, become a member or attend courses with the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) or an organisation such as Women on Boards. These offer extensive courses and seminars, networking and mentoring programs, and also list and advertise board positions.

People typically join the AICD when they are starting to think about taking on a directorship role, says the Institute's manager of board and corporate service, Gabrielle Schroder.

“We assist them through providing access to director education; facilitating connections for mentorship, directorship opportunities and profile development,” she says.

“We encourage executives to start early and think early about the skills, experiences and attributes that they can bring to a board. Diversity is important. The more experience across sectors and companies all contribute to the value a person brings.”

Dr MacCormick agrees that successful applicants for board roles have typically built a diverse range of skills and knowledge.

“They want to make a difference to the board and they have a strong desire to share and contribute their skills and knowledge. They have a greater understanding of the marketplace,” she says.

“Stakeholders such as investors, consumers, suppliers and employees have a vested interest in the company and who runs their board. Boards are looking for people with specialised skills. For example, they may want someone who understands the digital side of their business, or investments, or someone who understands joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions.”

MacCormick says having a minimum of three years' experience in one area is important as it demonstrates the candidate has gained a deeper understanding of the business in question.

“This length of time shows that you have been through the ups and downs of a business, and that you have shown resilience and persistence. With many companies undergoing restructures and people going in and out of organisations, if you've held a position for this period you've shown you can work through these changes.”

Organisational psychologist and executive coach Dr Judith Chapman mentors candidates into board roles, and advises her clients to make a list of their core skill sets. “Ask yourself, what is my personal brand or niche?” she says. “Recruiters and board executives are interested in your personal brand.

Candidates need to consider and think about the areas where they really shine or stand out from the others."

Chapman quotes the example of a lawyer in a senior firm who applied for a board role. "While her legal experience was an asset, she also had very strong business acumen; this set her above the other legal candidates going for the same role," she says.

"Another example is someone who is the manager of a dysfunctional team, who can then turn this team around into a top-notch unit. This shows strong leadership skills.

"Everyone has a niche. Find yours."