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How to Become a Corporate Board Member

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Leadership

I write about marketing, branding and business strategy.

In the past, joining a corporate board conjured visions of networking at posh resorts with politicians and celebrities. “People used to look at board membership as a cushy way of making a lot of money,” says [Elaine Eisenman](#), Dean of Executive Education at Babson College and a founding member of [Women Corporate Directors](#). Up until the millennium, she says, “what was important for very large, high visibility boards was having star names on them - celebrities, political people, anybody who would give a halo effect to say how important your company was.”

But those days are over. Post [Sarbanes-Oxley](#), a 2002 law imposing stringent new corporate requirements, board membership has become a tightly regulated, formal affair. Searches are often handled by professional search firms and, says Eisenman, “the definition of qualified has significantly been altered. There are very clear regulations for independent directors in terms of the credentials necessary to be a financial expert or compensation expert. You need to demonstrate proof in past experiences, degrees, focus, and the skill sets board members bring.”

So if you're not a former Fortune 500 CFO or CEO, how can you make yourself a credible candidate for a corporate board seat? First, develop and leverage the right professional skills. “The best background for any board at this time is probably having a financial background and being available to sit on the audit committee,” says Eisenman, who was recently lauded as a “Director to Watch”

by *Directors & Boards* magazine. “Also, a hot area right now is that everybody wants a social media expert to help inform them.”

Now it’s time to seek out experience on actual boards. “Nonprofit boards serve as a great launching pad for corporate board service,” she says. Be sure to seek a seat on the Board of Trustees with fiduciary responsibility, rather than serving on an advisory board. Startup or private company boards may also be a good starting point. “It’s often easier to get on non-public company boards,” she says. “People view those as critical foundational experiences.”

The next step is ensuring that interested companies can find you. “People need to be more visible in raising their hand for board work,” says Eisenman. “They have to put themselves out there instead of waiting for the world to come to them.” She suggests that aspiring board members may want to attend events held by the [National Association of Corporate Directors](#), which are frequently open to interested members of the public. (Eisenman is a faculty member for NACD’s Board Advisory Services.) Additionally, she says, “all of the big search firms that have board practices have websites that you can post your resume on...If you have a unique skill set or industry knowledge, it’s a great way of getting the door open.” Eisenman also suggests you should reach out to your colleagues who are already board members: “It’s fine to call people you know who sit on boards and say, ‘Here’s my skill set, I’ve got experience in this industry, I’m a financial expert, I’m a compensation expert...How do I find a board in this industry or with this kind of need?’”

Finally, it’s critical to recognize the intense time commitment corporate board service requires. “You’re going to have telephone committee meetings, there may be a crisis, or suddenly you need to vote on something,” she says. A program called [OnBoard Bootcamps](#) provides training that may be helpful for

new and aspiring board members, in order to acclimate them to the unusual demands. “Be prepared to be sequestered with your board if there's a crisis,” says Eisenman, “and think carefully if you don't have a job that tolerates it or a life that can allow it.”

Winning a corporate board seat isn't easy. But if you have the right skills and pursue opportunities assiduously, it can be a powerful way to accelerate your career and make a contribution.

Do you hope to win a corporate board seat? Or are you already serving on one? What strategies have worked for you?

Dorie Clark is a marketing strategist who teaches at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. She is the author of [Reinventing You](#) and [Stand Out](#), and you can receive her free [Stand Out Self-Assessment Workbook](#).