

## THE CHALLENGE OF OBTAINING YOUR FIRST NED ROLE

How are well qualified individuals with the right skills and qualities to get their first non-executive role without prior NED experience? All too often such experience is a pre-requisite for any application.

In this paper we look at some of the ways of tackling this conundrum.

### Using the Search Industry

There is a well established and active niche within the recruitment industry dedicated to board practice and NED appointments. FTSE 250 companies usually engage these firms when looking to appoint their board members and a proven NED track record is invariably part of their brief.

Global executive search firms, such as Korn Ferry and Spencer Stuart are active in this area, along with a number of substantial UK headquartered players like Odgers Berndtson and Norman Broadbent, as well as boutique agencies, for example Zygos Partnership, Eric Salmon and Directorbank.

All these firms work on a “Don’t call us, we’ll call you” basis. They operate to tightly defined requirements, and they have limited opportunity for flexibility in the way they fulfil their brief.

But don’t ignore the Search Industry. They place many interesting roles on an ongoing basis. The challenge is how to get your name on their books without a compelling NED pedigree.

This is where your network will help.

### Working your network

For the majority of people, their first NED appointment is secured through a known contact who understands their capabilities, who trusts them, and who is prepared effectively to sponsor their application by putting their name to it.

All search firms respond to referrals from influential clients and an introduction from someone suitably well connected should secure you a hearing, the possibility a meeting, and registration of your CV on their database. Once that personal contact is made, stay in touch, as this will keep you at the front of their mind.

In the search for a NED appointment, there is no substitute for actively working your little black book.

Many people are reluctant to exploit their contacts but there are ways of doing this that are completely unthreatening. Letting someone know that you are receptive to an opportunity, if they hear of anything, rarely causes offence. Our experience tends to be quite the opposite, as most people are only too pleased to help.

Above all, you will need to be organised and systematic. Draw up a list of potential contacts, decide who will help, and who may not, and then work your way through it over time.

## Looking beyond your network

It is certainly worthwhile thinking about joining a networking group. These often offer educational content, in terms of NED-specific topics, as well as opportunities to widen your own network.

Some groups, for example the FT NED Club and those run by business schools, offer formal programmes; others are more informal networking groups.

Details of some of the ones we recommend are set out opposite.

## Appointments beyond the FTSE 250

While listed companies may default to head hunters to secure their board members, as much to be seen to have been through a transparent and diligent process as anything else, smaller companies, charities and academy trusts are far more likely to consider referrals or seek alternative recruitment options.

Looking to gain experience at this level while still working full time in practice is the ideal way to test whether the reality of being a NED lives up to the expectation, as well building your CV for applying for bigger roles in the future.

There are various databases that you can join that will give access to this market if your personal network is not generating the required volume of opportunity, including the Institute of Directors ([www.iod.com/connect/leadership/articles/how-to-become-a-non-executive-director](http://www.iod.com/connect/leadership/articles/how-to-become-a-non-executive-director)) and the appropriately named [www.nonexecdirectors.com](http://www.nonexecdirectors.com)

## Getting started

Competition for the best quality NED roles is intense, despite the increased regulatory and reputational risks, but the challenge is the same for everyone, and finding the right role is very worthwhile.

Our experience is that pre-planning for a portfolio career ahead of time is critical. Getting that first role and then building a credible track record can take a surprising amount of time.

## Networking Groups

- Financial Times NED Club ([www.non-execs.com](http://www.non-execs.com)) : offers everything from introductory sessions to a six month highly credible Diploma
- Cranfield University School of Management ([www.cranfield.ac.uk](http://www.cranfield.ac.uk)) : hosts a bi-annual introductory two day residential NED seminar
- BCKR ([www.bckr.com](http://www.bckr.com)) : looks to bridge law and the boardroom
- Next Generation Non-Executive Network ([www.nextgennetwork.com](http://www.nextgennetwork.com)) : sponsored by Simmons & Simmons

If you would like to learn more about how Milestones can help you prepare to get that first NED role, call or email either

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