

Getting on Board

Being a member of a board of directors isn't easy, but offers great rewards. Here are the eight points to help improve your chances of being selected for a board.

By Dora Vell

CEO, VELL Executive Search | Feb 01, 2006

While the country club days are long gone, board membership still delivers substantial—even unparalleled—dividends. A powerful door opener and career accelerator, its benefits are numerous, from networking with an elite class of executives to the cachet it provides, positioning you as a first-rate leader, strategist and communicator.

CIOs seeking membership to this once ultra-exclusive club are in a prime position: Regulatory changes, IT's bottom-line importance and decreases in the director-supply are opening the doors wider than ever before. Even with these developments, getting there still isn't easy: Tough selection criteria, stiff competition and the relatively few CIOs on boards—a recent study reported only eight percent of North American boards include a former or current CIO or CTO—make it challenging.

Before jumping in, determine whether your interest is strong, honest and unwavering. Board membership is serious business requiring time, effort and risk in the form of liability: Board members can get sued personally. Are you ready to make that level of commitment and—importantly—for how long? Early departures aren't viewed positively and may leave a smudge on your record.

Once you've confirmed your commitment, there are eight activities you can undertake to help improve your odds while allowing you to maximize the professional opportunity.

Be a "new age" CIO.

Harnessing technology to solve big business issues sets you apart from the CIOs of yesteryear and marks you as a progressive, "new age" CIO. Boards want technologists who are strategists, focused on great solutions—the ones who consider costs, risks and the company's mission rather than the coolest technology. Undertake initiatives that clearly

advance the organization's goals.

Compile some serious results.

Most directors don't just have strong track records, they have outstanding ones, putting them at the forefront of their industry. Their initiatives haven't just benefited the company but have significantly improved—even fundamentally altered—its situation. One really key initiative can be enough, turning heads while instilling confidence that you've got the right stuff. A CIO board candidate I interviewed transformed his IT organization from a fire-fighting unit into a strategic weapon, expanding its customer base while deepening client ties. His efforts stood out because of their incredible impact and, as a result, so did he.

Develop broad-based business skills.

As a director, your only function isn't bridging the divide between business and IT. Rather, you need to proactively review and provide input on a wide variety of topics, from financials to marketing strategy. Cultivate broad as well as deep business skills by participating at your company's or business unit's executive table and, importantly, adding value beyond your role; acting as a liaison between business and IT groups; running a business unit; or joining other organizations such as nonprofits. Your goal is to be a strong generalist as well as exceptional specialist.

Crank up your leadership, interpersonal and communication skills.

Maybe they're A-1 already but if they're not top-notch you need to improve them. These skills are essential because you can't be effective without them: Boards require members who can spearhead issues, offer constructive feedback and work collaboratively.

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Develop a reputation that speaks (positive) volumes by listening and acting on 360-degree feedback, hiring a leadership coach, speaking publicly and being a collegial team player who gets things achieved through consensus.

Increase your visibility.

New director searches are done largely undercover with executives typically only learning of their candidacy during the final stages. Make absolutely sure you're on hiring teams' radar: Attend conferences, speak at industry events, write articles for publications, contact search consultants handling board placements and network with key industry influencers and board-level decision-makers. Put yourself in the public domain. Also, many countries have national director organizations. If yours does, consider joining. They can be great places to network while learning the ins and outs of membership.

Act with integrity always.

From the company you keep personally to your professional initiatives, make sure you always act in accordance with the highest standards of integrity. It's of the utmost importance and even the smallest mark against you will quickly defeat a board candidacy. In this era, companies cannot afford to take a chance on anyone whose integrity is less than stellar.

Start small.

Few executives start on a Fortune 500 board. Begin with startups (often in need of CIO guidance) and nonprofits and grow into a more demanding director role at a larger company. Look for boards requiring your expertise that can help you professionally (for example, providing exposure to verticals your company sells to) or that you feel connected to, such as your alma mater. Your genuine interest will help you to make a more positive contribution

Assess opportunities carefully.

When asked to join a board, don't jump blindly. Critically review the opportunity, confirming the quality of the company and its board members. Don't rely solely on the information offered to you by the company. Do some digging and confirm that the company's directors and officers insurance covers your needs. Hopefully it won't be required but it needs to be there just in case. Also ask the CEO questions to give you a good understanding of the board and how it interrelates to the company as well as what will be required of you.

For CIOs with their sights set on directorships, there's no question, the time is right. A personally fulfilling and professionally enriching experience, board membership is more possible than ever before. Stay focused while cultivating the expertise essential to being deemed board material. If you do, as boards continue to face pressure to improve their tech know-how while delivering exceptional oversight and guidance, there is a very good chance you'll succeed in getting on board.

Dora Vell is the CEO of VELL Executive Search, a premier retained technology executive search firm in Boston. Ms. Vell is an internationally recognized expert in executive search for technology CEOs, COOs, CIOs, Vice Presidents and board members. She works with start-up organizations through Fortune 50 Firms. She can be reached at dora@vell.com.