

3 Tips for landing a board seat from our “Board Selection Process” panelists



The Athena Alliance
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On May 17th, members and supporters of The Athena Alliance gathered at Salesforce’s Heroku offices in downtown San Francisco for our panel on the board member selection process. Guided by our moderator, Basecamp COO and Athena Alliance board member Mercedes De Luca, panelists Ann Winblad, Wendy Beecham, Kathy Ullrich, Dan Scholnick, **Dora Vell**, and Alicia Litton covered a variety of topics — from what boards are looking for in a candidate to what qualified women need to do to ready themselves for a board role.

Here are three kinds of preparation our panelists agreed are crucial to securing a board seat:

1) Expand your network

Over 95% of board seat vacancies are sourced through networking, so the process of getting on a board is less about meeting recruiters and more about knowing the right people said Wendy Beecham, Managing Principal at Korn Ferry. Dan Scholnick of Trinity Ventures specified that, when it comes to filling boards seats, “founders want somebody who is not in the back pocket of investors and can be a mentor to the CEO and company management.” These people are sourced through the founder’s network, making the board selection process “tricky” for outsiders to crack. One way to open yourself up to opportunity? Make your network aware of your availability for a board placement and be proactive, said our panelists. Dan specifically suggested reaching out to venture capital firms with portfolio companies you think you’d be a fit for. Even if there isn’t a match now, says Dan, you will be top of mind for future opportunities.

2) Know your “value-add”

On average, only a handful of people are called upon to be considered for a single board seat, said **Dora Vell**, CEO of Vell Executive Search. To stand out, you need to be able to articulate the value that your unique experience will add to the board at that moment. For example, Ann Winblad, Co-Founder and Managing Director of HummertWinblad Venture Partners, noted that many companies are interested in choosing board members who can best “assist [company] growth at that time.” Other companies, said Dan Scholnick, are more interested in someone who has “seen the movie before” and “has grown a company from a small state to a very large stage... as a founder, CEO, or in another role at an early stage company.” Ask yourself — what is your domain of expertise and why is it invaluable to a board?

3) Be visible

Once you’ve established your unique value-add, make sure it is clearly communicated in any representation of you that exists online. This sounds like a no-brainer, but many panelists agreed that most board candidates didn’t focus enough on their visibility. Another no brainer? “Make it easy for people to get ahold of you!” said **Dora Vell**. Many thanks to our gracious hosts, Cheryl Porro, SVP of Technology and Products Salesforce.org and Andrea Leszek, VP of Technology Services Salesforce.com for making this night such a success. Athena members, you can see the full panel recording by emailing coco@athenaalliance.org.

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.