

# Opaque path that leads to the boardroom

By Alison Maitland

Women receive more advice and encouragement to join boards as independent directors, but are less likely to have the powerful sponsors that will see them through to the big table.

This is one of the findings of a study that seeks to illuminate the opaque path men and women take to becoming non-executive directors (NEDs) on UK boards.

In *Opening the Black Box of Board Appointments*, published on Thursday, researchers at King's College London surveyed 182 aspiring NEDs and conducted in-depth interviews with 30 men and women to find out whether their experiences differed.

There were some similarities. Both groups were ambitious and generally found appointments through their own networks because board positions are almost never advertised. Meanwhile, formal NED networks and training for women rarely led to appointments.

Several men said they believe it is now easier for women to be appointed than men. One said a headhunter told him: "If you wore a skirt, I'd get you to any boardroom you want." Another said: "I feel that if I was a woman, I would have been welcomed with open arms." But this impression is neither supported by the numbers, nor by the experiences of women. Of FTSE 100 and 250 appointments, 70 per cent went to men between September 2011 and February this year. The share of female directors reached 23 per cent for FTSE 100 boards, and 18 per cent on the FTSE 250.

One female candidate explains how she challenged a board: "They are a large retail business, and the board is all very wealthy individuals; they're Oxbridge-educated, pale and male. And I said to them: 'Where does the consumer insight come from?' And the chief

executive replied: ‘From my PA.’”

Another reports being told by a headhunter: “Your skills are great, but you may just be too fruity for them, a bit more provocative than they need.’ I said: ‘But isn’t that the point?’ I don’t think men get described as ‘fruity’.”

Kate Grussing, managing director of Sapphire Partners, a search firm that co-funded the study with the Economic and Social Research Council, says: “We instigated this research to shine a light on the labyrinth of NED appointments.

“It shows that the path remains opaque, in spite of all the focus on good governance and the voluntary code for headhunters. It underscores how fundamental these networks are — and men have been leveraging them more effectively for longer.”

“The role of chair is absolutely egoless. It is for someone who wants to be selfless”

Report authors Scarlett Brown, Elisabeth Kelan and Anne Humbert say: “For women, the perceived benefit of being a woman was often part of their motivation for seeking non executive directorships. However, this was often contradicted when they faced barriers, particularly boards that did not appear genuinely committed to the benefits of diversity.”

Career experience, such as a finance background, was found to be less important than knowing people on boards. Four times as many men as women said they had been recommended for a position by an NED contact. Meanwhile, formal women’s networks and training rarely led to appointments.

On top of powerful sponsors and NED contacts, men could rely on headhunters more often too. Some 43 per cent of men compared with 30 per cent of women reported being put forward by a headhunter.

[Helena Morrissey](#), founder of the [30% Club](#), which is supporting the research launch, says boards should now show “a little more boldness” in experimenting when advertising positions. However,

women could be bolder too. The study found that men tended to want to chair boards, while women simply sought a seat at the table. Noel Gordon, who sits on the board of NHS England among others, speaks of one instance where it was made clear to him the board wanted to appoint a woman to increase female representation, but he does not resent that. “I understand that, and I agree with it. Even getting to 25 per cent representation is not far enough.”

Robert Swannell, Marks and Spencer chairman, says he hopes more women want to chair boards than the research suggests. “I think the role of chair is absolutely egoless. It’s a role for somebody who ... genuinely wants to be selfless in the interests of the company. I’d expect to see the number of [women] chairs increase significantly over the next few years.”

That is the goal of Sharon Baylay, a former BBC and Microsoft senior executive: “We need more women on boards and we need more women in chair positions. That’s my personal driver.”

At present, three women and 97 men chair the boards of the UK’s 100 biggest listed companies.

---

### **Case study: Networks are necessary for non-exec roles**

Noel Gordon, like many people looking to get a seat on a board, wishes he had started looking for non-executive roles earlier.

“I was very bad at building an extracurricular network while I was working,” says Mr Gordon, 58, who retired from a senior position at Accenture in 2012. “What would I have done differently? I would have started the process of originating new contacts that would lead to interesting positions one or two years before I retired.”

After he left, he drew up plans to make 100 contacts in 100 days and succeeded in meeting 80 people. He investigated a broad range of options including private equity, social enterprise, financial institutions and the art world, which he loves. “Every contact you meet gives you another one or two contacts, and so it goes on.”

He now sits on the boards of NHS England and Allen International, a privately held design consultancy focused on financial services, and chairs the trustees of User Voice, a charity that works to reduce

reoffending.

Moving from a corporate to a non-executive life is a transition from success to significance in one's field, he says. His criteria for roles are: working for disruptive organisations; working with people who have positive energy; and only taking opportunities where he can influence change.

He says the experience of headhunters is "very hit and miss", and timing is everything. He contacted about 10, generating five opportunities, "four of which didn't meet my criteria". As for his aspirations, "I definitely have the appetite for a FTSE directorship over the next year or so."

---

### **Case study: 'I'm looking for the opportunity to learn'**

"If you aren't on a plc, the perspective is that you're a risk," says Sharon Baylay, 46, former marketing director at the BBC. After she joined [ITE Group](#), a conference and exhibition specialist, her first plc board, the phone calls and contacts quickly increased.

She says she is selective about what she does, so she has time to do a great job and stay current. "If a FTSE 100 came knocking in the next three months, I'd want to have space to fit that in."

Ms Baylay began to create a plural career in 2012 after taking redundancy following a BBC restructuring. She considered what her ideal day would be like, taking into account her young family, and decided to encompass strategy, international work and people, the things she most enjoyed at the BBC and another previous employer, Microsoft UK. As well as board roles, she is a leadership coach.

"This is career number two. I'm looking for experiences that are going to round out my opportunity to learn, develop and continue to be successful," she says.

Ms Baylay says networks and headhunters are important. "The networking I do is very women-centric. A lot more of these women are reaching out to help one another ... I don't think it's any easier for a woman than it is for a man. I just think there's more awareness. That in itself is a good thing."

*Available online at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/50539e78-c355-11e4-9c27-00144feab7de.html#axzz3b5K98duA>*