

# TURN OFF THE SPOTLIGHT & TURN ON THE FLOODLIGHTS. HOW TO RECRUIT FOR DIVERSITY ON YOUR BOARD.

**“The drive for diversity in the boardroom reflects the importance of getting the best talent into the roles with most potential for influence. Successfully broadening the perspectives and priorities in non-executive roles will underpin the strength of the UK economy.**

The current challenge to achieving diversity at the top is rooted in the time where women, BAME individuals and other under-represented groups faced outright discrimination in access to education and jobs. Although overt discrimination has been illegal for several decades, the prejudice and bias that accompanied it is proving hard to shift, as are structural barriers such as combining caring responsibilities with long-hours cultures.

Given this legacy, the pipeline of senior white men is inevitably fuller than that of similarly experienced women and BAME candidates. This does not mean, however, that there are insufficient well-qualified diverse candidates to fill a significant proportion of the board roles in the UK. But it does mean that those candidates are much less likely to fit the traditional mould.

To improve the odds of successfully appointing from the broadest possible pool of top talent, the research suggests that you need to change your recruitment process. Here we make some suggestions on how that can be done.



Our recommendations are grounded in the research but are highly practical, based on our own experience and that of companies who are now reaping the benefits of a diverse board.

We are here to help you achieve the same and become one of those leading firms.”

**ROWENA IRONSIDE,**  
**Founding Chair of Women on Boards UK**

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## THE IDEA THAT DIVERSITY IS AN ADD-ON TO CORE BUSINESS HAS BEEN DEBUNKED.

The business case for diverse boards is compelling and substantial. Boardroom diversity is proven to be far from a 'nice thing' driven by feminism, equality and fairness (though it is that too), but a key component in equipping companies to successfully navigate today's fast changing operating environment.

Numerous research studies have found that diverse boards correlate with better business performance. This is true of gender diversity and ethnic diversity. Firms listed in the FTSE indices are hearing this message, albeit slowly: over 30% of NEDs in the FTSE 350 are female, up from 23% in 2016 (Hampton Alexander Review, 2019); FTSE 100 firms with no director of colour on their board has decreased to 37%, from over 50% in 2017 (Parker Review, 2020).



More progress is needed and at a pace, but the consensus on the benefits of diversity is bedding in.

So why do diverse boards deliver more? Much as some may like to think so, women and BAME individuals do not make better NEDs per se. Nor should we be aiming to remove white men from boards. Improved performance comes from decision making informed by a range of perspectives. It is the 'diversity of thought' which is important to critiquing assumptions, bringing in a broader range of factors for consideration and fully understanding the company's customer base.

Seeking board diversity is not about giving those from under-represented groups preferential treatment. It is about shifting your recruitment lens to consider the widest possible pool of candidates and assessing them objectively based on their expertise – whilst considering your genuine business need for cognitive diversity in the boardroom.

All change can feel risky, particularly in a climate where risks are high. Yet, risk is also apparent in continuing with decades-old models of business-as-usual in a fast-changing world. Our suggestions here are not prejudging hiring decisions. Rather we are challenging boards to turn off the spotlight which finds new board talent in a particular mould - and turn on the floodlights to considering candidates with different styles of leadership and background.

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# StepONE

## GETTING EVERYONE ON BOARD

The first stage to turning on the floodlights to new boardroom talent is to make sure there is a consensus on your board - or nominations committee - that this approach will be beneficial. Or at least, acceptable.

We have set out so far why diverse boards are a genuine business need and recruiting for diversity requires a shift in approach. Here are a few quick points for those who may need more convincing.

- Highly successful companies in the FTSE are diversifying their boards
- Companies with diverse boards are more profitable
- Gender diverse boards correlate with less excessive risk-taking and business failure
- Financial services regulators are encouraging diversity
- Shareholders and investors are increasingly positive about diversity, or even demanding it
- There's an increasing reputational risk in a lack of diversity, with customers and staff
- Any additional care taken over selection of NEDs should generate a strong return on investment, given the value of an effective board to organisational effectiveness and resilience
- What is there to lose?

See Women on Boards **'Voice for Women'** for the research and evidence behind these points

### Diverse recruitment in practice.

In 2018, Polypipe plc, a construction sector firm, were recruiting a new NED. Keen to ensure they got the best candidate, they developed a candidate brief specifying the construction sector experience and knowledge the board required.

Moni Mannings, the sole female NED on the board at the time, suggested they also specify a preference for a female candidate to take the opportunity to strengthen the board's diversity. Concerned that there may be a shortage of female candidates with the required experience, the Nominations Committee agreed gender would be a desirable criterion but not a requirement.



Polypipe plc worked with a headhunter on this basis. They stipulated a gender diverse shortlist and that the role should be advertised on the Women on Boards website, as one way to open the pool. Three extremely qualified female candidates were taken forward to interview, which resulted in a difficult decision over who to appoint.

*"It was important to make the case for a gender diverse appointment, whilst being clear the candidates' expertise would be the overriding selection criteria. I was delighted (though not surprised) that it resulted in such a strong field of candidates and ultimately a stronger board."*

**- MONI MANNINGS, PORTFOLIO NED  
(FORMERLY AT POLYPIPE PLC)**

Louise Hardy was selected to join the board, after seeing it advertised on the Women on Boards' site. Although Moni Mannings has rotated off the board, Polypipe plc now has three female non-executives creating a truly gender diverse board.

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## StepTWO

### REFINE YOUR REQUIREMENTS

**If you keep asking the same question, you'll keep getting the same answer.**

The board sets the candidate briefs for new non-executive directors. You may not intend your candidate brief to narrow down the pool of candidates to a particular demographic, but it can do. Given the history of the labour market, the vast majority of ex-CEOs with a finance background and significant NED experience are white men. But is this truly the skill set which is missing from your board?

Often briefs are based on a number of 'standing' requirements for generic skill sets and/or become padded with a wish list from everyone on the nominations committee. Research shows that the longer the list of requirements for a role is, the less likely women are to apply for it - or be appointed.

Previous experience as a NED is often a pre-requisite which is given little thought. However, many candidates have a good understanding of the role, having worked alongside NEDs as an executive board member or in a board advisory capacity, without technically fulfilling this criterion.

- **SLIM DOWN YOUR RECRUITMENT BRIEFS** to the must-haves for the new board member. In reality this usually comes down to 2 or 3 areas of experience that no one else on the board can provide.

*"I am a real-life example that transparent advertising works and of the value added by Women on Boards UK!"*

**SUSANA GOMEZ SMITH, MANAGING DIRECTOR, SANTANDER UK, APPOINTED AS A NON-EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBER AT LEONTEQ AGM, AFTER SEEING THE ADVERT POSTED BY A HEADHUNTER ON OUR VACANCY BOARD.**

*"As a listed public company, we were anxious to gain access to a broad range of diverse candidates to bring fresh experience and perspectives. [Recruiting through] Women on Boards exceeded our expectations."*

There is also a tendency to prejudge the career history required to develop the skills your board needs. Yet, a professional can gain relevant expertise in a number of different contexts. Gathering people from a variety of backgrounds can also bring benefits in adding a different perspective to your board discussions.

Current best practice is considering the board as a collective bringing together all the required skills and experience.

Yes, they all need to be able to understand a balance sheet but not all need to be qualified accountants.

Yes, they should have expertise in their area, but this may have been gained as an entrepreneur or consultant rather than as a C-Suite executive.

Yes, they should demonstrate they understand the role of a NED, but - if your current board is well-run and includes experienced NEDs - not all need to have held non-executive roles previously.

Yes, they all need to understand your industry's regulations, but those experienced in operating in regulatory contexts will be able to learn sector specific requirements quickly, supported by existing expertise on the board.

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## StepTHREE

### REMOVE POTENTIAL FOR UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

**'Blind' auditions for orchestras have been found to increase – by 50% – the probability that a woman will be advanced, and several fold the likelihood that a woman will be selected finally.**

Very few of us believe we select candidates on anything other than merit. Yet, merit is far from an objective measure, particularly for complex roles like that of a non-executive. Considerations such as 'cultural fit' with the organisation can lead to selection in the image of current successful post-holders, if not interpreted with care.

Recent research indicates that whilst we can each become more aware of our own biases and stereotypes, they are extremely hard to shift. This is exaggerated when under time or other pressures. Unconscious bias training has even been shown to increase the likelihood for biased outcomes, by "normalising" our biases.

- **ANONYMISE THE EARLY SELECTION STEPS.** Instead of considering whether you believe you really need to remove candidate names, dates of qualifications and even university or school names, we suggest you flip the question. Why would you not anonymise the applications?

A CV gives a lot of information about an individual's demographics and background. At this stage, initial evaluation should be focused purely on skills and experience. A fuller picture of a candidate can be gained at interview, where an individual's approach and leadership style can be more accurately assessed rather than assumed.

- **SCORE CANDIDATES AGAINST THE 2 OR 3 CORE REQUIREMENTS IN YOUR BRIEF.** This approach not only ensures a skills-focus, but gives a framework to question and justify your selection as a panel, resulting in more robust choices.

*"Whilst it runs contrary to the human instinct to want to know a candidate's back-story, these steps are crucial to opening the door to non-traditional applicants."*

**ROWENA IRONSIDE, FOUNDING CHAIR OF WOMEN ON BOARDS UK**

[Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of "Blind" Auditions on Female Musicians" Claudia Goldin, Cecilia Rouse, 1997]

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## StepFOUR

### WIDEN YOUR CANDIDATE POOL

**“Turn off the spotlight, and turn on the floodlights.”**

Many boards still recruit their non-executives through networks. This gives a greater degree of security in that you have a deeper knowledge of the person (directly or by proxy through a trusted connection). However, it also carries risk. Risk that you have settled for the first ‘good enough’ person you find, rather than looking at a full range of available candidates. And by definition, bringing together people who are all linked increases the risk of shared blind spots and/or ‘group think’ which both reduce the quality of decision making.

Many headhunters work in this way, albeit with larger networks than the average professional. Some will produce a diverse shortlist automatically, but for many their economic models don’t encourage them to invest time searching beyond the ‘usual suspects’. It is always beneficial to emphasise to your headhunter that you are looking for diversity - and insist on a shortlist which reflects that.

#### Diverse recruitment in practice

“British Pearl, a property investment platform, wanted to add marketing expertise to its board shortly after its launch. The company felt more diversity on their board would enhance their ability to ‘reach out to all members of society’, however it was not a requirement. The best qualified candidate would get the position.

Jane Williams at People Innovation Ltd understood that reaching out of established recruitment patterns would be the best way to meet this brief. In developing a detailed role specification, they identified that the existing board had strong governance expertise so would be open to candidates with less non-executive experience.

They included ‘support to develop NED skills’ as a non-financial benefit in the compensation package.

When it came to sourcing candidates, Jane’s first choice was the Women on Boards Vacancy Board along with traditional routes.

*“The outcome was a quality long list of nine candidates of the highest quality predominantly from the advertisement on Women on Boards. Their evidenced track record of results was amazing,”*

**- JANE WILLIAMS, PEOPLE INNOVATION LTD**

*Julia Porter, who found the position on the Women on Boards website, was appointed.*

*“Since I joined the board, we’ve refocused the marketing efforts which has resulted in record levels of investment,” she says.*

- **ADVERTISE YOUR ROLE OPENLY AND TRANSPARENTLY** - Women on Boards host a non-executive vacancy board for our members; your own channels like social media and marketing should also not be underestimated as a source of candidates.

Being open and transparent about your search not only ensures a strong pool of candidates but can also increase your customers and staff confidence in the successful appointment. This open approach is often successfully combined with employing a headhunter’s expertise. Indeed, many headhunters welcome the opportunity to expand their networks through open advertising.

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## StepFIVE

### CONSIDER YOUR INTERVIEW PROCESS

There is nothing like a full discussion at interview to truly assess a candidate's suitability for a particular board. Whilst which candidate is 'best' will always be a subjective judgement, there are some key steps to make sure this assessment is rooted in the skills and the requirements of the board.

Although interviews will naturally follow a candidate's experience, some level of standardisation of questions allows for better comparison between candidates. Having a prepared list of questions also helps ensure the interview focuses on the skills needed for the role, rather than being side-tracked into shared interests or experiences.

- **PREPARE A LIST OF QUESTIONS**

which require interviewees to evidence the skills required in the candidate brief and their understanding of the organisation's context and challenges. Ask them all at each interview and compare responses.

Considering the diversity of people who are interviewing is an obvious issue. Whilst it is important that interviewees do not feel like the 'odd one out', simply bringing in one 'diverse' team member has been shown to have minimal impact on hiring decisions.

Everyone will believe they are selecting on 'merit', but it is important that everyone also understands that 'merit' is a highly subjective quality. Ideally interviewers would have been part of creating the candidate brief, or have been thoroughly acquainted with it in relation to the needs of the board.

- **TAKE TIME TO ENSURE A COLLECTIVE UNDERSTANDING** of which skills and experience are lacking and which are already strong within the current non-executive team.

Few hiring processes produce a candidate who excels across every desirable criterion, so most result in a decision which balances the importance of the relative strengths and weaknesses of different candidates. It is all too easy to prioritise the 'safe pair of hands' who has the strongest experience in a core area, such as governance, finance or regulation, even if this is already well served on the board. Yet, this risks 'over stuffing' the board with one type of experience, which is a missed opportunity at best.

If you are balancing relative strengths and weaknesses, consider not only areas your board is already strong in, but also which areas a new NED could get up to speed on with relative ease. If they are bringing wider benefits, whether in diversity or their area of expertise, it can be worth investing a little time supporting a new board member to fill in any weaker areas. Ultimately it comes down to, what can each candidate bring which you do not already have on the board?

*"The process [of advertising with Women on Boards] was simple, well managed and we gained access to an excellent range of candidates. Our only difficulty was selecting between a number of able and highly qualified individuals."*

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# TURN ON THE FLOODLIGHTS

## HOW WOMEN ON BOARDS CAN HELP

Women on Boards Non-Executive Vacancy board has shared roles from FTSE 100 firms, major public bodies, innovative start-ups, financial services companies as well as charities of all sizes. Our network is comprised of women (and some men) from a huge range of sectors with a breadth of professional skills. We offer three levels of support with your recruitment:

### OUR BASIC PACKAGE

is **FREE**. It shares the role on our Vacancy Board.

### OUR STANDARD PACKAGE

ensures a high profile for the duration of your recruitment window on our busy board.

### OUR PREMIUM PACKAGE

includes a review of your advert by one of our experts to optimise your reach and targeted outreach within our broad network.

FOR PRICING AND TO POST YOUR ROLE VISIT OUR WEBSITE | [CLICK HERE](#)

*"We have worked in collaboration with Women on Boards for only a few months, but already the relationship has paid dividends. In our ongoing quest to help our clients to maintain well balanced boards, Women on Boards have made an invaluable contribution."*

- **LONGWATER PARTNERS**

*"I would highly recommend Women on Boards. Efficient and effective even in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis. And we have recruited an excellent WOB candidate as the new Chair of our Board of Governors."*

- **ST GEORGE'S UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

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