ENTER THE
BOARDROOM
COMMUNITY
by NUROLE

How to build a board-level network

Drawn from Nurole's decade of search data and 200 conversations on the Enter the Boardroom podcast.

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A note from our team



Madeleine Milne

Head of the Enter the Boardroom Community

The question I hear most often from people building towards a board career is: I have the experience. I know what I could offer. Why am I not getting through?

The answer is rarely a lack of credentials. It is a lack of visibility. Ninety percent of board opportunities never reach the public domain. They surface through conversations, recommendations, and people thinking of you at the right moment.

This paper is about how to build that infrastructure deliberately. Not through performative networking, but through precision.

If you want structured support to accelerate the process, take a look at the **Enter the Boardroom Community.**



Oliver Cummings

CEO, Nurole | Host, Enter the Boardroom podcast

After 200 podcast conversations and thousands of placements, one pattern stands out. The candidates who build board careers fastest are not always the most accomplished. They are the most legible. They communicate their expertise, ambition and reputation clearly.
The first role rarely comes through a cold application. It comes through visibility, credibility, and being known to someone who matters. This paper shows you how to develop across those three fronts.

Five Key Findings

Five things in this paper should change how you think about getting your first board role.

Sources are noted below each finding.

01

Ninety percent of board opportunities never reach the public domain. They surface through conversations and recommendations. A network built during your executive career and left untended is not an asset. It is a liability in slow decline.

Source: Nurole brief and placement data
Corroborated across Enter the Boardroom podcast episodes.

02

Your first board can emerge from adjacency, as well as applications. Nurole data shows first roles consistently emerge from existing networks, as well as formal search processes. That is why it is critical for you to continue to find opportunities to engage with and build your network. Adjacency does not only mean sector. A lawyer specialising in arts and media joining an arts organisation board is not making a sector leap. They are activating an existing connection between their expertise, their network, and an organisation that needs what they have. The question is not which pro bono role to apply for. It is where your professional expertise, your personal interests, and your existing relationships already intersect with an organisation that needs someone shaped like you.

Source: Nurole brief and placement data
Figures are directional.

03

Visibility is accumulated through your executive career, then activated through networks. Your market visibility with headhunters and chairs requires active maintenance. But dormant relationships in your existing network often hold more value than you realise. Reactivating them costs almost nothing and returns disproportionately.

Source: Nurole brief and placement data.
Professor Isabel Fernandez-Mateo, London Business School (Ep. 87); Sarah Flannigan (Ep. 52).

04

Boards prefer candidates that can clearly demonstrate what they can add now, rather than betting on future potential. First-time NED hiring can be less about potential and more about risk minimisation. Boards optimise for credibility over novelty. The most important networking question is not who do I know, but how clearly can the people who know me describe what I bring.

Source: Nurole brief and placement data
Cathy Turner (Ep. 61), Sara Weller (Ep. 99), Shellye Archambeau (Ep. 45).

05

How you show up in every professional context right now is already building or undermining your board prospects. The candidates who get their first role fastest are not those who networked hardest in the months before applying. They are those who had already built a reputation, in their executive role, in their sector, in their professional community, that made someone confident enough to say: I know exactly who you should speak to. Reputation is not built for board roles. It is built long before them.

Source: Nurole brief and placement data.
Sarah Flannigan (Ep. 52), Cindy Rampersaud (Ep. 117), Shellye Archambeau (Ep. 45).

SECTION 03

Why board networking is different

1. The instincts that built your executive career will not build your board career. This is the mistake most candidates make, and it costs them years.

In executive life, visibility is a byproduct of performance. You delivered results and rose through structures designed to surface talent. The system worked for you.

The board market has no such system. Most opportunities never reach a job board or search platform. They surface through a chair mentioning a name over dinner, a fellow NED recommending someone they have worked with, a headhunter recalling a conversation from six months ago.

This creates a specific problem for accomplished executives. Their visibility is real but ineffective. They are known in their function, their sector, their organisation. But they are not yet known in the board community, the chairs, headhunters, fellow NEDs, and investors who actually decide who gets considered.

Closing that gap requires a different kind of effort. Not more effort. More intentional effort, directed at the right places.



"You're trying to join a club where you don't have the right badge. The moment that you get a role, you've joined the club."

Jane Routledge NED, M&G Credit Income Investment Trust. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 40*

2. The tone and targeting of board networking are different from executive networking

The second difference catches most candidates off guard. In executive life, networking is transactional and everyone knows it. That logic does not transfer to the board world, where the most effective board networkers are often the most generous.

Professor Isabel Fernandez-Mateo of London Business School, whose research spans tens of thousands of hiring processes, is direct: ignore the instinct to identify which relationships are most valuable and invest in those. You cannot know in advance which connection will matter. The most durable board networks are built by people who give without keeping score.



"Think about the unique skill that you have rather than your board experience because you don't have it. Focus on your editorial line about yourself — what you are very, very good at. Because that's what's going to get you to your first board seat."

Anne de Kerckhove Chair, Eagle Eye Solutions; SID, 888 Holdings. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 73*



"The better phrase is net giving. If you go through life always being curious and looking to add value, it's amazing how people go, oh, actually I quite like the way they thought. If you are living how you might show up in a boardroom, people tend to then recommend you."

Amanda Mackenzie OBE NED, British Land; Lloyds Banking Group. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 155*

3. The paradox of board networking is that it requires a combination of patience and pro-activeness

Executive careers reward pace. Board careers reward consistency. Thirty conversations before one converts is a figure that comes up repeatedly across our podcast guests. It is not a counsel of despair. It is an argument for starting long before you feel ready and treating the process with the same discipline you would bring to a major business initiative.

Most candidates navigate this alone, hoping the instincts that served them in executive life will carry them here. The Enter the Boardroom Community exists to change that.



"It's not just a question of applying. It's taking time to talk to senior people and saying: this is my experience, this is what I can do. Nobody knows what you do because everyone is busy. If you are interested, put your hand up and say so."

Nadhim Zahawi former Chancellor of the Exchequer; Founder, YouGov. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 107*

SECTION 04

What the data shows

1. Your visibility starts in your executive career, not when you start looking.

Before any board role, most candidates already have two things: a senior executive title and external-facing responsibilities, clients, investors, regulators. Their board visibility does not begin when they decide they want a role. It begins years earlier.

Most candidates treat networking as something that starts when they decide they want a board role. The data says it has already been happening, or failing to happen, for years.

2. First board roles are adjacent, not discovered

The pathway the data describes is consistent. Executive career. First governance role through an existing connection, a sector you know, a cause you care about, a network you are already in. Further trustee and committee positions. First paid NED role.

Each stage activates the next. A senior finance leader becomes a trustee of a pension scheme or financial charity. An investment professional joins a foundation board. A sector expert moves onto a public-interest board aligned with their industry. None of them found the role through a search. Someone in an existing network said: I thought of you.

The practical implication is direct. You do not need to build a new network from scratch. You need to identify where you already have credibility, connection, and genuine interest, and start having conversations there.

The strategic implication:

Stop asking which board role to apply for. Start asking which adjacency you are not yet activating.

Source: Nurole brief and placement data. Figures are directional.

SECTION 05

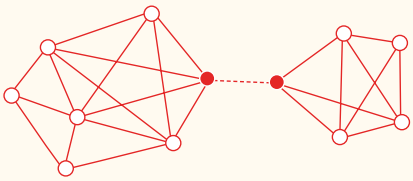
Weak ties and dormant connections

The relationship capital you already have and are not using

Most candidates make the same mistake when they start building towards a board role. They think about who they know well. They call their closest colleagues. But often those people cannot open the doors you need opening.

The reason is structural. Your close network shares your world. They know the same people, move in the same circles, have access to the same information. They cannot introduce you to opportunities that exist outside your existing horizon. Those opportunities are, by definition, outside the network you share.

Professor Fernandez-Mateo's research identifies two types of relationship that most candidates undervalue.



1. Weak ties

Weak ties are the casual acquaintances at the edge of your professional circle. Someone you met at a conference two years ago. A former client you worked with briefly. A peer from an industry body you used to attend.

Because weak ties connect you to different networks, they carry information and opportunities your immediate circle cannot access. A casual contact might know a chair assembling a new board. A former client might mention your name in a conversation you will never hear about.

Investing in relationships that feel peripheral is not a distraction from building a board career. It is the work.

2. Dormant Connections

Dormant connections are the people you used to know closely and have lost touch with. Former colleagues. Peers from a previous organisation. People you worked alongside years ago and drifted away from through the natural passage of time.

The instinct is to overlook them. The research says this is wrong.

Dormant connections carry something active relationships rarely match: an existing foundation of trust combined with entirely new experiences and networks accumulated since you last spoke. Reactivating a dormant connection is not starting a new relationship. It is unlocking one that has been quietly appreciating in value.



"Because you used to have a strong bond, there is already trust and shared history. But while you have been out of touch, they have had time to gather new experiences and insights. I try to make myself every couple of months to reach out to somebody I haven't spoken with for two or three years. It's incredibly helpful. You never know what you're going to get."

Professor Isabel Fernandez-Mateo London Business School. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 87*

3. The giving principle

Both weak ties and dormant connections are activated most effectively not by asking but by offering. The research is consistent: the most effective board networkers are givers. They share knowledge, make introductions, offer time, and build trust before they ever need to draw on it.

You cannot know which relationship will matter. The only strategy that captures the full value of a network invests broadly and without keeping score. This is also, not coincidentally, how the best board members operate in the room. The habits of a great board networker and the habits of a great board member are the same habits practised in different rooms.



"Maybe I spent too much time in California, but I think to do that Californian thing and pay it forward. Be a valuable asset to the broader ecosystem around you because at some point karma will work out and something will come back your way. I'm a firm believer in that's how it happens."

Priya Guha MBE Venture Partner, Merian Ventures; NED, Reach plc; Herald Investment Trust.
Enter the Boardroom, Episode 79

SECTION 06

The adjacency principle

1. Your first governance role is probably closer than you think

Most candidates ask the wrong question. Not which pro bono role should I apply for, but which of the adjacencies I have already built am I not activating?

First governance roles - trustee, governor, advisory positions - often arrive through informal as well as formal networks. On the formal side, Nurole has placed more than 4000 candidates on boards. But candidates require a dual-track strategy: not just developing relationships with headhunters, but also through professional networks, sector ecosystems and personal connections that already exist.

A senior finance leader becomes a trustee of a pension scheme or financial charity. An investment professional joins a foundation board. A technology executive who has spent years working with schools on digital skills programmes does not need to cold-apply to join an education board. They are already known, already credible, already trusted by the people who make those appointments. When a vacancy arises, the call comes to them.

Beyond formal applications, many first-time roles come through informal processes. They emerge because someone in an existing network said: I thought of you.



"I was known to the investment trust sector having been an investor. I had a call where the person said, I've got no idea if this is something you would even consider, but we just thought that maybe you might."

Lucy Walker Chair, Aurora Investment Trust. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 83*

2. Be intentional once you are in the room

First governance roles rarely arise from strategy. They emerge from genuine alignment. But once you are in those roles, intentionality matters.

The governance experience matters. So does the quality of the relationships you build while you are there. Fellow trustees become referees, advocates, and connectors. The chair of the board you sit on may have more influence over your board career than almost anyone else in your network.



"Think strategically about who you are sitting next to, because they're going to be your referees. They're going to be your connections."

Fiona Hathorn CEO, WB Directors. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 139*

3. The practical exercise

Map the adjacencies that already exist in your professional and personal life. Ask honestly which of those you have been leaving unactivated.

Where have you built genuine credibility? Which sectors, causes, or communities sit at the intersection of your professional background and your personal interests? Who in your existing network is already involved in governance and knows enough about what you offer to make an introduction?

The board opportunity is rarely where you go looking. It is usually where you already are.

SECTION 07

The headhunter relationship

1. What the headhunter relationship can and cannot do for you

The standard advice is correct: get on headhunters' radar, keep your CV current, make sure they know what you are looking for. But most candidates misunderstand what this achieves.

Headhunters do not create opportunities. They surface candidates for opportunities that already exist. Headhunter cultivation gets you onto a list. What determines whether you get the call is whether you are already credible within the ecosystem that list serves.

Cathy Turner's first role came through a headhunter who called her, not one she had cultivated. Cindy Rampersaud's first paid role came through a recommendation to a headhunter she had never met. In both cases the headhunter was the transmission mechanism, not the starting point.



"Develop a relationship with headhunters. Make sure they know you, make sure they have your current CV, make sure they know you're in the market, make sure they can easily access what your particular spikes are."

Cathy Turner NED, Lloyds Banking Group; Rentokil; Spectris. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 61*

It is up to you to build a reputation headhunters can transmit.

2. Keeping relationships fresh

Once established, headhunter relationships require maintenance. A brief annual touchpoint, an updated CV, a note about what you are looking for. Not a sales pitch. A reminder that you exist, your profile has evolved, and you remain interested.



"You can build your own experience, do the best you can to make yourself marketable, and then you need a little bit of luck."

Sara Weller CBE Chair, Money and Pensions Service; NED, BT. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 99*

SECTION 08

Building the habit

Four things that compound

The candidates who build board careers fastest are not those who network most intensively just before they want a role. They are those who have been consistently visible, in small regular ways, for years before the search begins.



"I thought as an experienced global tech CEO I'd be a hugely valuable commodity in the board market. It turns out it wasn't quite that way. You need to start thinking about where you're going to be useful and get established in networks."

Adam Warby Chair, Ocado Group; former CEO, Avanade. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 164*

The most effective board networking looks nothing like that. It is built on four qualities: clear, consistent, generous, visible. These are not four separate activities. They are four dimensions of a single professional practice.

1. Be clear

Anyone who knows you professionally should be able to describe in one sentence what you bring and what you are looking for. Versatility without a clear spike makes you hard to place. The chair looking for a specific profile needs to match you to that gap quickly.



"You have to take a punt and assert: this is where I think I might be able to help you. If you don't make that assertion, no one else is going to do it on your behalf."

Anand Aithal Lead Non-Executive, Cabinet Office. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 59*



"Be known for something specific. Share what you know, not what you think. The companies want to know what you know."

Shellye Archambeau, Fortune 500 Committee Chair. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 45*

2. Be consistent

A burst of activity followed by six months of silence leaves you exactly where you started. Experience has a half-life. So does visibility. The board member who was well-connected at the point of their last executive role but has stopped investing is not standing still. They are falling behind.

3. Be generous

Give before you ask. Share knowledge. Make introductions. Offer time. You cannot know which relationship will matter. The only strategy that captures the full value of a network is investing broadly, without keeping score.

This is also precisely how the best board members operate in the room. The habits of a great board networker and the habits of a great board member are the same habits practised in different rooms.

4. Be visible

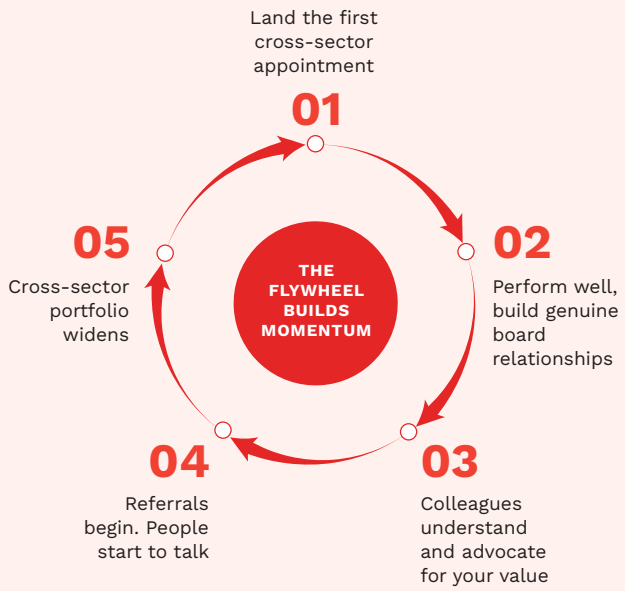
Your LinkedIn profile is the first thing anyone looks at when your name comes up. A profile that is out of date, unclear about your board ambitions, or silent on your expertise works against you even when everything else is right.

Visibility does not require volume. A small number of substantive contributions, a post that demonstrates genuine expertise, a comment that shows the quality of your thinking, will do more than a high frequency of content that says nothing distinctive.

Membership of a recognised board community is itself a visibility signal. It tells the market you approach board membership as a professional, not a passenger.

The referral flywheel

All four qualities build towards one outcome: someone knows your work, thinks of you when the right opportunity arises, and puts your name forward confidently.



Source: Nurole brief and placement data. Corroborated by Sarah Flannigan (Ep. 52), Fiona Hathorn (Ep. 139).



"Most of my roles since then were through referral and recommendation. Something magical did start to happen. People started to talk. You never know what conversations are taking place about you somewhere. And people do report back."

Sarah Flannigan Chair, Bionic; Yeo Valley; Riverford; Sawdays. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 52*

The flywheel starts slowly. Thirty conversations before one converts is realistic for the first role. But once it turns, it accelerates in a way that no amount of upfront networking effort alone can replicate.



"It can take two years to get your first corporate board role. People need to know that and be realistic about it. You probably have to have thirty conversations before one converts because there is a lot that needs to align."

Cindy Rampersaud NED, Sage Homes; former SID, Hipgnosis Songs Fund. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 117*

Board membership is a discipline, not a status. So is building a board career. The Enter the Boardroom Community is built for candidates who treat it that way.

SECTION 09

Practical checklist

BUILDING YOUR FOUNDATIONS

- [ ] **Can you describe in one sentence what you bring and what you are looking for?**
- [ ] **Is your LinkedIn profile current and clear about your board ambitions?**
- [ ] **Have you mapped the adjacencies in your professional and personal life where board opportunities are most likely to emerge?**
- [ ] **Have you identified one or two communities where the right people congregate and committed to showing up consistently?**

ACTIVATING YOUR NETWORK

- [ ] **Have you identified three to five people to reconnect with this month, former colleagues, weak ties, or dormant connections?**
- [ ] **Are you approaching those conversations with genuine curiosity, offering something before asking for anything?**
- [ ] **Have the people closest to you been told explicitly what you are looking for?**

THE HEADHUNTER RELATIONSHIP

- [ ] **Have you identified the headhunters most active in your target sectors and made contact with a clear articulation of what you are looking for?**
- [ ] **Do they have an up-to-date board CV that leads with your expertise spike?**
- [ ] **Are you maintaining those relationships with at least an annual touchpoint?**

IN GOVERNANCE ROLES

- [ ] **Are you treating every pro bono or trustee role with the same seriousness as a paid appointment?**
- [ ] **Are you investing in relationships with fellow board members and particularly the chair?**
- [ ] **Are you performing at a level that would make your fellow board members confident recommending you?**
- [ ] **Have you built a peer support group you can consult on sensitive matters?**

◆ THE DATA REMINDER ◆

First board roles emerge from adjacency.
Clear and current value beats unique and future potential. Visibility **compounds** after the first role. Be patient, be consistent, trust the compounding.

SECTION 10

Recommended listening

The **Enter the Boardroom** podcast has published more than 200 conversations with the people who build board careers and those who make the appointments. These are the episodes most relevant to this paper.

AVAILABLE ON: Spotify · Listen on Podcasts · Available on YouTube

EPISODE			
87	Professional relationships, weak ties and dormant connections	Isabel Fernandez-Mateo — London Business School	Listen
61	Building a plural board career: networking, expertise spikes, positioning	Cathy Turner — NED, Lloyds Banking Group; Rentokil; Spectris	Listen
52	Trustee to NED to Chair: building a board profile and portfolio career	Sarah Flannigan — Chair, Bionic; Yeo Valley; Riverford; Sawdays	Listen
155	From Advertising Executive to FTSE 100 NED	Amanda Mackenzie OBE — NED, British Land; Lloyds Banking Group	Listen
139	How and why to get board roles	Fiona Hathorn — CEO, WB Directors	Listen
117	How to excel as a trustee and transition to paid board roles	Cindy Rampersaud — NED, Sage Homes; former SID, Hipgnosis Songs Fund	Listen
99	Building a plural career across the private and public sectors	Sara Weller CBE — Chair, Money and Pensions Service; NED, BT	Listen
83	Chairing investment trusts and building a non-exec portfolio	Lucy Walker — Chair, Aurora Investment Trust	Listen
73	Technology boards, nominations, getting board roles	Anne de Kerckhove — Chair, Eagle Eye Solutions; SID, 888 Holdings	Listen
59	Building a board portfolio: listed, government and charity boards	Anand Aithal — Lead Non-Executive, Cabinet Office; NED, Saga plc	Listen
45	Building a board portfolio and managing impostor syndrome	Shellye Archambeau — Fortune 500 Committee Chair	Listen
40	Getting board roles: the non-exec leap, positioning, first 90 days	Jane Routledge — NED, M&G Credit Income Investment Trust	Listen
107	How government and business should leverage non-exec expertise	Nadhim Zahawi — former Chancellor of the Exchequer; Founder, YouGov	Listen

ALL EPISODES: nurole.com/nurole-podcast-enter-the-boardroom

SECTION 11

Upcoming events

Join fellow board members for peer insight, expert-led discussion, and high-quality connection. Find out more at **etb.nurole.com.**

◆ MAY 2026 ◆

Board Barometer - Optimism amidst uncertainty
Friday 1 May 1:00 - 1:45 PM BST | Virtual

Fireside chat - From geopolitics to geostrategy
Tuesday 5 May 5:00 - 6:00 PM BST | Virtual

Meet the headhunters
Thursday 7 May 5:00 - 6:30 PM BST | In person | Full

Welcome to our new Community
Monday 11 May 1:00 - 2:00 PM BST | Virtual

Boardroom Insights: From startup to scale - what boards need to know
Monday 11 May 5:00 - 6:00 PM BST | Virtual

Regional Networking: Birmingham
Tuesday 12 May 5:30 - 7:30 PM BST | In person

Networking drinks
Thursday 14 May 6:00 - 7:30 PM BST | In person

A live podcast with Nick Wheeler OBE, Founder of Charles Tyrwhitt
Tuesday 19 May 6:00 - 8:00 PM BST | In person

Behind the Mic: Unpacked
Friday 22 May 1:00 - 1:45 PM BST | Virtual

Welcome to our new Community
Tuesday 26 May 1:00 - 2:00 PM BST | Virtual

◆ JUNE 2026 ◆

A live podcast with Anne Richards DBE, Chair, Coutts
Wednesday 3 June 6:00 - 9:00 PM BST | Virtual

Cyber incident response and board oversight
Tuesday 9 June 4:30 - 6:00 PM BST | Virtual | Full

Boardroom Insights: Effective board governance and evaluation
Wednesday 24 June 1:00 - 2:00 PM BST | Virtual

Behind the Mic: Unpacked
Friday 26 June 1:00 - 1:45 PM BST | Virtual

✦ ENTER THE BOARDROOM COMMUNITY ✦

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by NUROLE