ENTER THE BOARDROOM COMMUNITY
by NUROLE

What boards actually look for in an early-stage NED

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

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Madeleine Milne

Head of Community, Enter the Boardroom

The question we hear most often at Enter the Boardroom Community is some version of the same thing: I have the experience. I know I could add real value. Why am I not getting through?

In almost every case, the answer is not a lack of experience. It is a lack of understanding of how boards actually make appointment decisions. The criteria are rarely what the job specification says. The process is rarely as formal as it appears. And the barriers that feel structural are often, with the right knowledge, navigable.

That is why we commissioned this research. Nurole has placed over 4,000 NEDs and Chairs across every type of board over the past decade. That data is not widely available. The 200 conversations Oli has had on the podcast with the people who make these decisions are not always easy to distil. This paper does both. Read it with a highlighter. Then use the checklist at the end.



Oliver Cummings

CEO, Nurole | Host, Enter the Boardroom podcast

After 200 podcast conversations and 4,000+ placements, one thing surprises me more than anything else in our search data: the personal quality cited most often in early-stage NED briefs is not a functional skill at all. It is independence of thought. Boards are not primarily asking whether you can do the job. They are asking whether you bring a perspective that sharpens the quality of collective decisions. That insight reframes everything. The episodes listed at the end of this paper are where I would start.

Five Key Findings

Thepath into a board careeris more structuredthan most people believe, and more accessible than many assume. But it requires understanding the rules of a game that is rarely explained.

Sourcesarenotedbelow each finding.

01

Skill accounts for roughly a quarter of what boards look for. Nurole search brief data confirms it: personal qualities occupied 65–75% of all explicit criteria. The rest is personality, judgement, fit, and the ability to operate in a group setting.

Source: Fiona Hathorn, CEO WOB UK Ltd; Corporate Lead, Nurole (Ep. 139); corroborated by Nurole search brief analysis.

02

Only 22% ofsearch briefs explicitly welcome early-stage NEDs — but that 22% is concentrated in education, charity, and early-stage organisations. Financial services and large corporates remain largely closed.

Source: Nurole search brief analysis. Education and charity boards: 100% open to early-stage NEDs. Financial services: 21% open.

03

Most firstboard appointments are relationship-driven, not process-driven. Your network is your primary pipeline, particularly for the first role.

Source: Consistent across podcast guests including Amanda Mackenzie (Ep. 155), Malcolm John (Ep. 124), Sarah Flannigan (Ep. 52), Priya Guha (Ep. 79).

04

85% of candidates placed in their first commercial NED role through Nurole had prior trustee or pro bono experience on their profile. It is not a stepping stone. It is the primary pathway.

Source: Nurole placement data. Corroborated by Fiona Hathorn (Ep. 139), Amanda Mackenzie (Ep. 155), Cindy Rampersaud (Ep. 117).

05

Thebiggestbarrier to a first board role is rarely a lack of experience. It is the inability to articulateclearly what you bring to a specific board — and why that board needs it now.

Source: Synthesised from Fiona Hathorn (Ep. 139), Anand Aithal (Ep. 59), Baroness Dambisa Moyo (Ep. 64), Jane Routledge (Ep. 40).

SECTION 03

The experience paradox

The most frustrating structural reality of board careers is that the system appears to reward experience you cannot yet have. Most board role specifications list prior board experience as a requirement. For candidates without it, this creates a circular trap that can stop a board career before it starts.

◆ NUROLE SEARCH BRIEF DATA ◆

66%
of briefs require or strongly prefer prior board experience

22%
explicitly welcome candidates without prior board experience

12%
do not specify a board experience requirement either way

Source: Nurole search brief analysis.

The trap is real, but it is not absolute. Boards do appoint people to their first board role. What they are looking for is not a prior board seat, but specific, credible evidence that you can operate at the level of judgement, oversight and collective decision-making that a non-executive role requires.

The paradox, then, is not really about experience. It is about demonstration. The candidate who understands what boards genuinely assess, and can speak to that clearly, has a significant advantage over the candidate who simply accumulates credentials and hopes the logic is self-evident.

> "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; Brown Advisory US Smaller Companies Trust
> *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 40*

This is the experience paradox in its most practical form: any board role, no matter how small, unlocks access to the next one. The first appointment is the hardest not because you are unqualified, but because you have not yet demonstrated your qualification in the one context that matters to boards.

The implication is clear. The priority is not to spend years becoming more senior before attempting to enter a board career. The priority is to find the route to a first appointment, any first appointment in the right category, as early and as strategically as possible.

25%

Nurole search brief data confirms it. Across briefs explicitly open to early-stage NEDs, functional skills occupied only 25–35% of explicit requirements. Personal qualities occupied the remaining 65–75% — a near-exact match for the practitioner estimate.

(Fiona Hathorn, Ep. 139; Nurole search brief analysis)

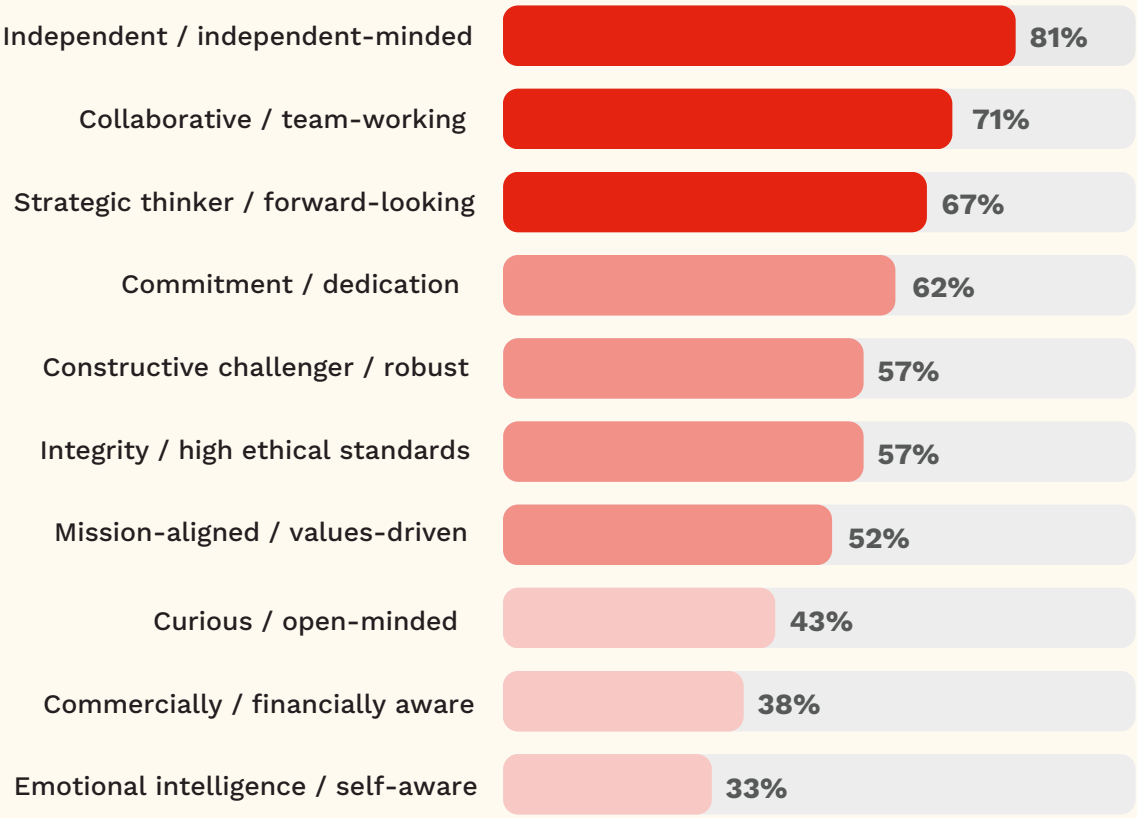
SECTION 04

What the data shows

Nurole analysed search briefs explicitly open to early-stage NEDs across its database of 10+ years and 4,000+ placements. Two patterns are striking.

The personal qualities boards cite most in early-stage NED briefs

Across briefs explicitly welcoming early-stage NEDs or requiring limited prior experience, these personal qualities appeared most frequently. The headline finding: independence of thought is cited more than any other quality — more than mission alignment, more than collaboration, and more than any functional skill.



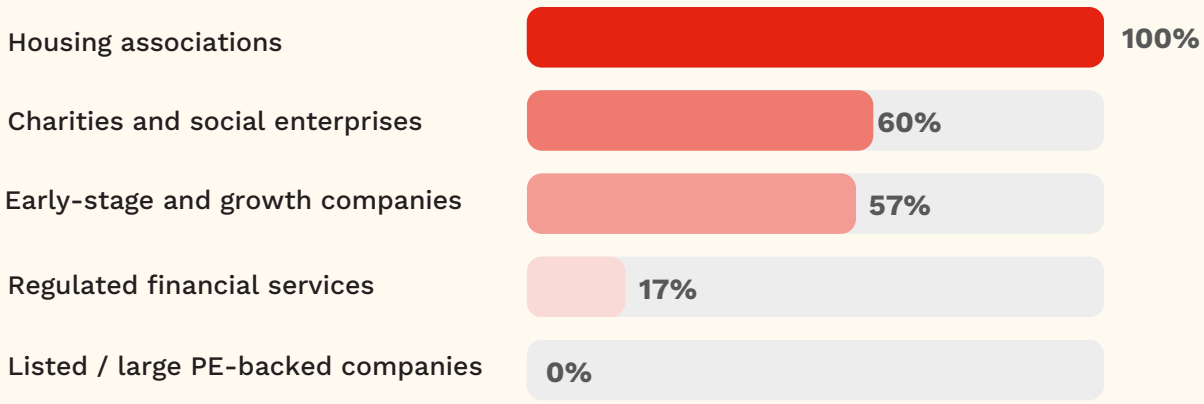
Source: Nurole search brief analysis.

The most important finding: boards are not looking for people who will agree. Independence of thought is the single most valued quality, cited in 81% of early-stage NED briefs. Functional expertise does not appear in the top ten personal qualities at all.

SECTION 04

How open is each sector to early-stage NEDs?

Not all sectors are equally accessible. Where you target matters as much as what you offer.



Source: Nurole search brief analysis.

If you are targeting listed companies or large PE-backed businesses as your entry point, you are competing at a level where prior board experience is almost universally expected. The most effective starting point is the sector that matches your experience and is genuinely open to developing early-stage NEDs.

SECTION 05

What boards are really looking for

Five themes emerge consistently across Nurole's conversations with Chairs, NEDs, board advisers and academics. Together, they reframe the question from "do you have the right CV?" to something considerably more nuanced.

1. Judgement, not credentials

The most frequently repeated insight from experienced board members is that formal credentials are table stakes, not differentiators. Boards assume a baseline of competence. What they are actually evaluating is whether you exercise good judgement, whether you bring perspective that improves the quality of collective decisions, and whether you understand what it means to operate in a non-executive capacity.

Nurole's search brief data confirms this. Across briefs explicitly open to early-stage NEDs, personal qualities occupied 65–75% of all explicit criteria. Independence of thought was the single most cited quality, appearing in 81% of briefs analysed. Not financial acumen. Not sector expertise. Independence of thought.

> "The most important thing in the boardroom is having good judgment."

Baroness Dambisa Moyo
NED, Chevron, Condé Nast;
Author, How Boards Work

Enter the Boardroom, Episode 64

> "Skill is only about 25% of it. You've got to think about your style, how you make decisions, how you influence."

Fiona Hathorn
CEO, WOB UK Ltd;
Corporate Lead, Nurole

Enter the Boardroom, Episode 139

2. Fit and chemistry

The reality of how board appointments are made is more candid than most candidates expect. By the time a shortlist exists, all candidates are broadly qualified. The decision comes down to how boards answer a deceptively simple question: can I imagine this person in the boardroom?

> "It's a personality contest... could I imagine this person in the boardroom and their style of speaking?"

Fiona Hathorn
CEO, WOB UK Ltd; Corporate Lead, Nurole
Enter the Boardroom, Episode 139

Sarah Flannigan, Chair across multiple private equity-backed businesses, confirms this from the other side of the table. What boards remember is rarely the strongest answer. It is a quality of presence, energy, and coherence that they could not easily articulate but recognised immediately.

> "What they remembered wouldn't have been any of those things. They would have talked about fit and style, values, energy."

Sarah Flannigan
Chair, Bionic; Yeo Valley; Riverford Organic Farmers; Sawday's
Enter the Boardroom, Episode 52

3. A specific, complementary contribution

Boards do not hire the best available person. They hire the right missing piece. Every appointment is made against a specific gap in the board's collective capability, perspective, or experience.

> "Before you say, I want to be on a board, ask yourself who from the management team is going to call me."

Baroness Dambisa Moyo
NED, Chevron, Condé Nast;
Author, How Boards Work

Enter the Boardroom, Episode 64

> "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;
NED, Saga plc

Enter the Boardroom, Episode 59

4. Evidence of the executive-to-NED mindset shift

One of the most consistent reasons boards hesitate to appoint early-stage NEDs is the concern that candidates will revert to executive behaviour in the boardroom. The hallmark of the executive mindset is urgency and action. The hallmark of the non-executive mindset is restraint, oversight, and contribution through the quality of your questions and judgement.

> "Lots of examples of people who cannot quite get the CEO muscle out. They're still pretending to be CEOs."

Sir Ian Cheshire Chair, Land Securities; former Chair, Barclays UK, Channel 4

Enter the Boardroom, Episode 159

> "I'm much more aware that I'm not there to do things. I'm there to support, engage, advise."

Fiona Hathorn
CEO, WOB UK Ltd;
Corporate Lead, Nurole

Enter the Boardroom, Episode 139

5. How you actually behave in the room

The final factor boards assess is the least discussed: the quality of your presence and behaviour in the interview itself. Interviews are proxies for boardroom behaviour. Boards watch for whether you listen, whether you build on others' points, and whether you are comfortable contributing without dominating.

Professor Amy Edmondson, ranked the world's number one management thinker by Thinkers50, identifies the single behaviour that most reliably signals that a candidate will be a poor board contributor. It is also, she notes, one of the most common behaviours candidates exhibit when they are trying hardest to impress.

> "Posturing. Taking all the air out of the room with long speeches to look good."
>
> **Professor Amy Edmondson** Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management, Harvard Business School; ranked No.1 management thinker, Thinkers50
>
> *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 100*

The candidates who impress boards most are not those who dominate the conversation. They are those who ask sharp, well-prepared questions, listen carefully to the answers, and demonstrate the composure to contribute without filling every silence.

WHAT CANDIDATES ASSUME BOARDS ASSESS	VS	WHAT BOARDS ACTUALLY ASSESS
Credentials and career history	→	Judgement and perspective
Technical depth in a specialist area	→	Mindset shift from operator to overseer
Breadth of senior experience	→	A specific, complementary contribution
Seniority and seniority signalling	→	Chemistry and team fit
Demonstrating expertise at every opportunity	→	Listening, building on others, composure

SECTION 06

How to position yourself

Three things determine whether a board seriously considers you. None of them is seniority. All of them are within your control.

1. Define your value in board terms

Most executive CVs describe what you did. A board CV needs to describe the impact you had and what it demonstrates about your judgement. The question to answer is not “what have I done?” It is “what would I add to this board that it does not already have?”

> “The mistake finance professionals can make is to try extra hard to demonstrate their numeracy. The person on the other side of the table already knows you’re very smart. What they’re trying to figure out is what else you can bring to the boardroom.”
>
> **Anand Aithal** Lead Non-Executive, Cabinet Office; NED, Saga plc, Polar Capital
> *Enter the Boardroom, Episode59*

2. Build a narrative, not a list

Board appointments are largely driven by advocacy: someone in the room saying “she is the person who…” Boards do not decode your CV. They depend on advocates who can translate your experience into a clear, compelling reason why you are right for this specific board. You must make that translation yourself.

> “What is that 30 seconds? ‘This is the person that did x.’ You have to help them.”
>
> **Amanda Mackenzie OBE** NED, British Land; Lloyds Banking Group
> *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 155*

3. Target the right boards

The instinct to wait for the “right” board is one of the most common reasons capable candidates remain stuck. The data is clear: the sectors most open to early-stage NEDs are housing associations, charities, and early-stage businesses. Starting there is not a compromise. It is the strategy.

> “If you wait for the perfect moment, for the perfect board, in the perfect market, you’re never going to find anything.”

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

> “Please don’t think about a non executive career as the thing you do that’s the last thing in life. It’s something you can do at lots of different points in your career journey.”

Priya Guha MBE
NED, Reach plc; Herald Investment Trust
Enter the Boardroom, Episode 79

SECTION 07

The pro bono pathway

Pro bono board experience is not a consolation prize. It is the mechanism by which aspiring NEDs build the credibility, relationships, and governance fluency to compete for paid commercial roles.

The most common misconception about pro bono and trustee roles is that they are second-tier experience. They are not. The legal duties, governance responsibilities, and personal liabilities are equivalent to those of a paid board role. And Nurole's placement data makes the case directly: 85% of candidates placed in their first commercial NED role through Nurole had prior trustee or pro bono experience on their profile. For the overwhelming majority of successful early-stage NEDs, pro bono was not preparation for the pathway. It was the pathway.

◆ NUROLE PLACEMENT DATA ◆

85%

of candidates placed in their first commercial NED role through Nurole had prior trustee or pro bono board experience on their profile.

50-65%	24-40%	<15%
Mixed (pro bono and paid experience)	Pro bono experience only	Paid experience only

Pro bono roles are not a side step.
For the overwhelming majority of early-stage NEDs,
they are the primary proving ground.

Source: Nurole placement data. Figures are directional.

> "Don't tell people it's only a pro bono role. The duties, responsibilities and liabilities are the same."

Fiona Hathorn
CEO, WOB UK Ltd; Corporate Lead, Nurole
Enter the Boardroom, Episode 139

Four principles for choosing pro bono roles strategically

Choose for mission fit and learning fit
Early NED roles are sustained by motivation, not pay. Choose an organisation whose purpose you believe in and whose challenges will stretch your thinking. Mechanical involvement in a role you find uninspiring will be visible in how you show up.

Think deliberately about who you are sitting next to
Fellow trustees become advocates, referees and connectors. Fiona Hathorn puts it directly: "Think strategically about who am I sitting next to, because they're going to be your referees." The Chair, in particular, has more influence over your future board career than almost anyone else in your network. (Episode 139)

Get the governance experience, not just the title
Cedi Frederick, Chair of NHS Kent and Medway, is direct: "Sitting around the board table will only take you so far. It really is about getting out and about, talking to people who are on the receiving end of services." (Episode 88) Engagement beyond the formal meeting is what develops genuine board judgement.

Transition through relationship, not application
Amanda Mackenzie describes pro bono roles as "nursery slopes" for the journey, and notes that both her first paid roles came through existing relationships. (Episode 155) The pro bono role is the environment in which the relationships that unlock the next opportunity are built.

SECTION 08

Your first 90 days

Getting the role is not the end of the challenge. The first 90 days are when boards form lasting impressions of how you will contribute.

Listen before speaking

The boards that are easiest to join at a second appointment are those where the new NED was known to listen attentively, contribute selectively, and never dominate in their first months.

Know when to speak

The most effective early NEDs invest time understanding the organisation from the inside: speaking to executives informally, visiting operations, and developing a grounded picture of where decisions are actually made.

> "Listen very carefully for the first three to six months. Then make sure you're contributing once you are in place."
>
> **Sir Ian Cheshire** Chair, Land Securities
>
> *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 159*

> "Knowing when to make a contribution. I don't expect to speak all the time."
>
> **Peju Adebajo**
> NED, Wolseley UK; Ibstock plc
>
> *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 36*

Understand the dynamics before joining them

Every board has informal dynamics that are invisible in the formal record. The NED who recognises these quickly, and navigates them with sensitivity, develops influence far faster than the NED who engages purely at the level of formal agenda items.

> "It's about relationships, understanding the group dynamics, and what role you play in that."
>
> **Malcolm John** Founder, Action for Trustee Racial Diversity; Trustee, Association of Chairs
>
> *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 124*

Boards are not looking for you to prove yourself quickly. They are looking to confirm that the judgement they saw in the appointment process holds up under the pressure of a real board dynamic. Patience, curiosity, and restraint in the early months are the most powerful signals you can send.

SECTION 09

Practical checklist

These are the questions that separate candidates who are genuinely ready from those who simply believe they are.

BEFORE YOU APPLY

- [ ] **Board value proposition**
  Can you describe in one sentence what you would add to a board that it does not already have?
- [ ] **Sector targeting**
  Have you clearly articulated your specific area of expertise and the type of board where you'd add most value? → Board Pathway
- [ ] **Board CV**
  Has your board CV been reviewed by someone who understands what paid boards are looking for? → CV Support
- [ ] **Regular networking**
  Are you meeting at least 20 CEOs or board members and making one new connection in the NED world each month? → Monthly 1:1 Matching
- [ ] **Pro bono foundation**
  Do you have at least one pro bono or trustee role that demonstrates governance experience in practice?
- [ ] **Board opportunities understanding**
  Are you regularly reviewing board opportunities to understand market patterns and stay visible? → Board roles
- [ ] **Personal board of advisors**
  Have you built a personal board of advisers who can guide your board career development? → Masterminds / Circles
- [ ] **Build board experience**
  Are you actively building governance experience through committee roles in your day job or volunteer positions? → Board Pathway

IN INTERVIEWS

- [ ] **Beyond the board papers**
  Have you spoken to customers, competitors, former employees, and conducted due diligence on the organisation's reputation and challenges?
- [ ] **Understanding the board in depth**
  Do you understand the board's specific challenges and where the organisation faces its biggest risks or strategic tensions?
- [ ] **Evidence of judgement**
  Have you prepared examples of exercising judgement under uncertainty, not just delivering against a plan? → Interview Support
- [ ] **NED mindset signals**
  Are you demonstrating curiosity about the organisation, or presenting your credentials at it?
- [ ] **Self-awareness**
  Are you comfortable acknowledging the limits of your experience and explaining how you will develop? → Board Pathway

IN YOUR FIRST ROLE

- [ ] **Onboarding clarity**
  Have you ensured the process is clear - understanding board rhythms, committee structures, and where you're expected to contribute most?
- [ ] **Early restraint**
  Are you listening more than speaking in your first three board meetings?
- [ ] **Executive relationships**
  Have you made contact with key executives outside formal board settings?
- [ ] **Organisational depth**
  Do you understand how the organisation operates beyond what board papers show?
- [ ] **Dynamic awareness**
  Do you understand the informal power dynamics and relationships on the board?
- [ ] **Contribution quality**
  When you speak, are you building on others' points or asserting your own position?
- [ ] **Support beyond the boardroom**
  Have you established a peer support group of fellow NEDs you can consult confidentially? → Masterminds
- [ ] **Pro bono commitment**
  If this is a pro bono role, are you treating it with the same seriousness as a paid appointment?
- [ ] **Building relationships**
  Are you building trust with both the chair and management team through consistent, constructive engagement and delivering on commitments?

◆ THE DATA REMINDER ◆

Independence of thought (81%), **collaboration (71%)**, and **strategic thinking (67%)** are the top three qualities in early-stage NED briefs — all behavioural, none functional.

22% of briefs explicitly welcome early-stage NEDs, concentrated in education, charity, and early-stage businesses.

85% of early-stage NED placements had prior pro bono experience. Credentials are table stakes. Everything else is demonstration.

SECTION 10

Recommended listening

The **Enter the Boardroom** podcast has published 200 conversations with the people who make board appointments and those who have navigated them. These are the episodes most directly relevant to getting your first NED role.

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

EPISODE			
139	How and why to get board roles	Fiona Hathorn	CEO, WOB UK Ltd; Corporate Lead, Nurole
155	From Advertising Executive to FTSE 100 NED	Amanda Mackenzie OBE	NED, British Land; Lloyds Banking Group
124	How to get board roles and what boards get wrong about racial diversity	Malcolm John	Founder, Action for Trustee Racial Diversity
117	How to excel as a trustee and transition to paid board roles	Cindy Rampersaud	NED, Sage Homes
99	Building a plural career across private and public sectors	Sara Weller CBE	Chair, Money and Pension Service; former NED, BT, Lloyds
88	Building a board portfolio: housing association and NHS Trust boards	Cedi Frederick	Chair, NHS Kent & Medway; NED, Sage Homes
79	Board opportunities: listed, government, start-up, charity and advisory boards	Priya Guha MBE	NED, Reach plc; Herald Investment Trust; Digital Catapult
64	Boardroom surprises, dual-track strategising and positioning as an unconventional board member	Baroness Dambisa Moyo	NED, Chevron, Condé Nast; Author, How Boards Work
59	Building a board portfolio: listed, government and charity boards	Anand Aithal	Lead Non-Executive, Cabinet Office; NED, Saga plc
40	Getting board roles: the non-exec leap, positioning yourself, your first 90 days	Jane Routledge	NED, M&G Credit Income Investment Trust
09	Getting board roles: the non-exec leap, positioning yourself, your first 90 days	Terri Duhon	NED, Risk Committee Chair, Morgan Stanley; Rathbone Brothers

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

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