ENTER THE BOARDROOM COMMUNITY
by NUROLE

Landing your first paid board role

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

CONTENTS

In this paper

01 Foreword
From Madeleine Milne, Head of Community, and Oliver Cummings, CEO, Nurole

02 Five key findings at a glance
What this paper establishes, grounded in Nurole search data

03 The transition challenge
Why the jump from pro bono to paid is harder than it looks

04 What the data shows
Board backgrounds, sector patterns, and the committee chair effect

05 What paid boards are really looking for
How the brief changes and what most candidates miss

06 How to position yourself
How to reframe what you offer for a paid audience

07 Making the case
Targeting, relationships, networking, and the patience required

08 Your first 90 days
How a paid board is different and what to do in your first 90 days

09 Practical checklist
Before you apply, during the process, in your first year

10 Recommended listening
The Enter the Boardroom podcast episodes most relevant to this paper

FOREWORD

A note from our team



Madeleine Milne

Head of Community, Enter the Boardroom

The question we hear most often from people looking for their first paid board role is some version of the same thing: I have governance experience. I have served on boards. I know I could add real value to a commercial organisation. Why am I not converting?

In almost every case, the answer is not a lack of experience. It is a gap between how candidates present themselves and what paid boards are actually assessing. Pro bono experience is genuine board experience. But it requires translation into the language, expectations, and framing of a paid brief.

This paper does that translation. 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 thousands of placements, one thing stands out about the pro bono to paid transition: it is almost never about governance competence. The candidates who successfully make the jump are not the ones with the strongest pro bono records. They are the ones who understand what paid boards are buying and who can make that case directly. The data in this paper shows what that means in practice. The episodes at the end are where I would start.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Five Key Findings

The pathway from pro bono to paid is well-trodden but rarely explained. This paper sets out the rules of a market that most candidates enter without understanding how it works.

Sources are noted below each finding.

01

The typical transition takes two to five years. The data shows that those who successfully land their first paid role typically held one to three prior board roles beforehand. Shorter transitions are possible with strong sector alignment; longer ones reflect broader governance portfolios built alongside executive careers.

Source: Nurole placement data.

02

Paid roles are significantly more competitive than pro bono ones. On average, paid NED roles attract around 30 applications per place. Pro bono roles attract around 10. Understanding that shift in competition is the first step to targeting and positioning effectively.

Source: Nurole search brief analysis. The majority of education and charity boards are open to early-stage NEDs. Financial services: 21% open.

03

Committee chair roles convert at materially higher rates. Those who held audit, risk, or remuneration committee chair roles in prior board settings convert to paid appointments significantly more often than those with general trustee experience alone. Audit committee experience is the single strongest predictor.

Source: Nurole placement data. Corroborated by Cathy Turner (Ep. 61), Shellye Archambeau (Ep. 47).

04

Paid briefs raise the bar substantially. Financial literacy and oversight requirements appear in 55 to 65 percent of paid briefs. Prior board or NED experience is required or strongly preferred in 50 to 60 percent. These figures are materially higher than equivalent requirements in pro bono briefs.

Source: Nurole search brief analysis.

05

The proposition shift is the critical variable. Those who successfully make the jump are not those with the strongest pro bono records. They are those who understand what paid boards are buying and who present accordingly: leading with specific expertise rather than governance credentials.

Source: Synthesised from Cindy Rampersaud (Ep. 117), Dorothy Burwell (Ep. 122), Sara Weller (Ep. 99), Lucy Walker (Ep. 83), Cathy Turner (Ep. 61).

SECTION 03

The transition challenges

Pro bono board experience is genuinely valuable. The legal duties, fiduciary responsibilities, and governance expectations on a charity or housing association board are not materially different from those on a paid one. The oversight of management, the scrutiny of financial performance, the challenge of strategy: these are real board skills, developed in real board rooms.

And yet the transition to paid rarely happens automatically. Those with strong pro bono portfolios are frequently frustrated to find that their experience, which feels more than sufficient, is not converting into paid appointments. The reason is structural: paid briefs are written differently, assessed differently, and weight experience differently. What got you the pro bono role is not what will get you the paid one.

The gap is also competitive. Paid NED roles attract an average of around 30 applications per place. Pro bono roles attract around 10. That threefold increase in competition requires a different approach to targeting, positioning, and presentation.

> *"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

2-5 years is the typical time between a candidate's first board appointment and their first paid NED placement. Shorter transitions are possible where experience is directly aligned with the paid role's sector. Longer transitions reflect broader governance portfolios built alongside executive careers.

Source: Nurole placement data. Figures are directional.

Sara Weller CBE, whose portfolio spans BT, Lloyds Banking Group, and multiple government roles, puts it plainly: start building non-exec experience early, because headhunters need to see a track record before they will put you forward at the right level. If you leave it too late, you come out of executive life without the non-exec credibility to compete at the tier you were operating at as an executive, and headhunters will size you lower than your experience warrants.

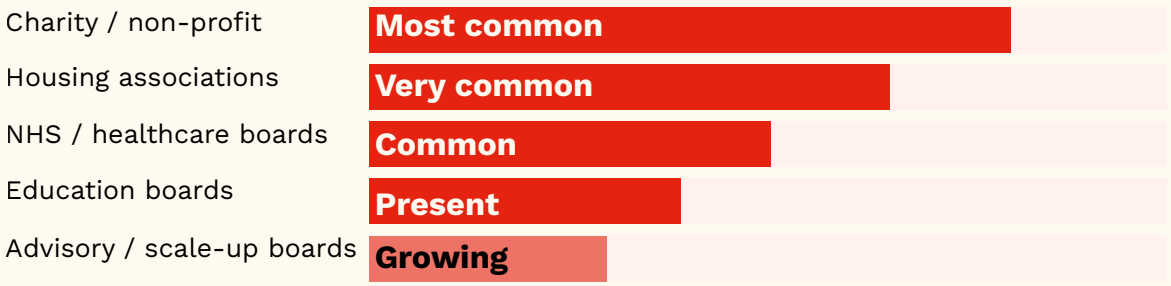
SECTION 04

What the data shows

A decade of placement data across thousands of first paid NED placements reveals consistent patterns in who successfully makes the transition and what kind of experience converts most reliably.

Board backgrounds that lead to more ambitious paid appointments

Not all board experience is equally valued by paid briefs. These sectors appear most frequently in the prior board backgrounds of those who go on to secure their first paid NED role.



Source: Nurole placement data. Figures are directional and reflect sector frequency, not exclusivity.

The paid sectors candidates most commonly transition into reflect a clear logic of adjacency. Housing association experience leads most naturally to paid roles in social housing, care providers, and public-sector real estate. NHS and health charity experience converts well into paid NHS trust, integrated care system, and private healthcare roles. Strong functional depth in finance, technology, or risk opens doors in scale-ups, consumer businesses, and mission-aligned commercial boards regardless of the prior board sector.

> *"For me it's more about the opportunity itself as opposed to whether or not it's pro bono or paid. The question is can I both offer something and bring something back? There was a kind of symbiotic balance between what I do every day and what the organisation did."*
>
> Dorothy Burwell, NED, Post Holdings; Pennon Group
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 122

The committee chair effect

Holding a committee chair role is the single strongest predictor of paid conversion in the data. Committee chairs demonstrate formal governance process, financial oversight, and the ability to provide strategic challenge: exactly what paid boards are assessing.



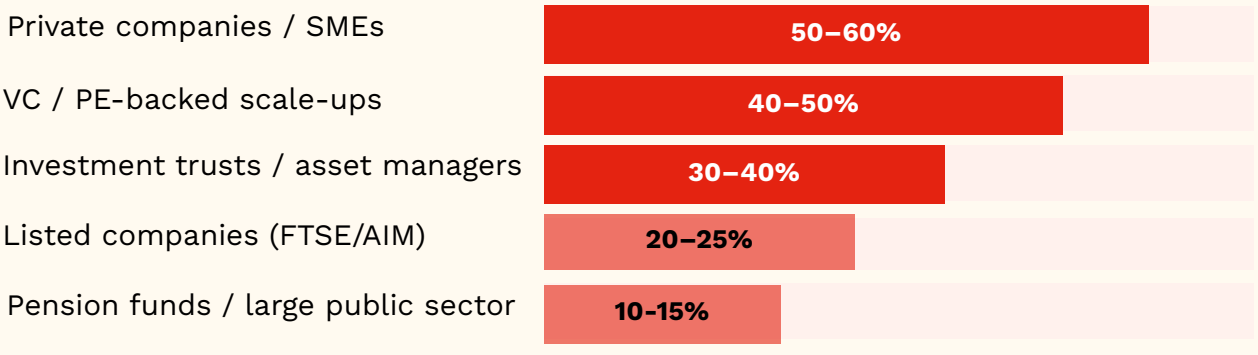
Source: Nurole placement data. Relative conversion rates, directional only.

The practical implication:

if you are currently in a board role without committee responsibility, the most valuable thing you can do is seek it. If you are choosing your next role, weight committee chair potential more heavily than the seniority or profile of the organisation. A committee chair role at a small housing association is more powerful evidence of paid-board readiness than a general trustee role.

How open is each sector to those looking for their first paid role?

Sector openness varies significantly. Targeting the right entry point accelerates the transition considerably.



Source: Nurole search brief analysis. Figures reflect % of briefs explicitly open to early-portfolio candidates. Directional.

Private companies and SMEs are the most accessible entry points. Listed companies and large pension funds remain largely closed to those without prior paid experience. A targeting strategy that concentrates effort on the most accessible sectors will convert more quickly, and the first paid role is what opens the door to the rest.

SECTION 05

What paid boards are looking for

The single most important thing to understand about paid board briefs is that they are written differently from pro bono ones. Most people applying for their first paid role are still presenting themselves as if they were applying for a pro bono one.

What pro bono briefs assess	What paid briefs assess
Governance familiarity and general leadership	Demonstrable board impact and committee track record
Sector knowledge or mission alignment	Deep expertise filling a specific board gap
Strategic mindset and cultural fit	Recency and relevance in a regulated or complex environment
General financial understanding	Financial literacy & audit/risk committee capability
Potential to contribute	Immediate, board-shaped value add

Financial literacy and oversight requirements appear in 55 to 65 percent of paid NED briefs. Prior board or NED experience is required or strongly preferred in 50 to 60 percent. Risk oversight and governance experience features in 45 to 55 percent. Specific functional expertise appears in 40 to 50 percent. These figures are materially higher than equivalent requirements in pro bono briefs.

> *"You don't get in the room with the chair to have a conversation unless you've already been vetted. They're not trying to work out if you can do the role. They've largely established that. What they're really interested in is how you might go about doing it."*
>
> Cathy Turner, NED, Lloyds Banking Group; Rentokil; Spectris
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 61

The most common functional backgrounds among those successfully placed in their first paid NED role are: finance and accounting professionals (CFOs, finance directors, audit partners), senior commercial leaders and general managers (CEOs, COOs, MDs), risk and regulatory specialists, senior marketing and product executives, and public sector or purpose-led leaders. What these backgrounds share is recency, depth, and direct relevance to the specific gap a paid board is trying to fill.

50–60% of private company and SME paid NED briefs are explicitly open to candidates with limited prior paid board experience, provided functional expertise or sector knowledge is strong. This is the most accessible entry point for those making the pro bono to paid transition.

Source: Nurole search brief analysis. Figures are directional.

SECTION 06

The proposition shift

The pro bono to paid transition is not primarily a question of experience. It is a question of proposition. The most common mistake is presenting a prior board portfolio as if it were equivalent to paid board experience. It is not, and experienced chairs know it. The more effective approach is to present it as evidence of board-readiness, and to lead instead with the specific functional or sectoral expertise the paid board actually needs.

1. Define your value in board terms

Most executive CVs describe what you did. A board CV for a paid role needs to describe the impact you had and what it demonstrates about your capability to add immediate value. 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, and can I demonstrate it from day one?"
Paid boards want members who combine broad commercial literacy with genuine depth in a specific area.

> *"Before you say I want to be on a board, ask yourself who from the management team is going to call me. If you come from a marketing background, the chief marketing officer should call you occasionally. That is a very good lens to think about your value to an organisation."*
>
> Baroness Dambisa Moyo, NED, Chevron, Conde Nast; Author, How Boards Work
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 64

> *"Work out the bits of your experience that would make you really useful and then find organisations which want what you've got to offer. Demonstrate that you are in the top echelon of people with your particular skill set."*
>
> Sara Weller CBE, Chair, Money and Pensions Service; NED, BT
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 99

2. Build a narrative, not a list

Paid board appointments are frequently driven by advocacy: someone in the room saying "she is exactly the person for this because..." You must make that translation yourself and make it easy for others to repeat it. A clear 30-second articulation of what you bring, evidenced by specific things you have done, is more powerful than a comprehensive CV.

> *"When I got the call about Aurora I'd already had a few years of pro bono experiences. But my husband always says: you got the call and then you interviewed and you got the job as a result of that. The key was thinking about what I was going to bring that might not be on the board already."*
>
> Lucy Walker, Chair, Aurora Investment Trust; SID, Henderson International Income Trust
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 83

3. Make a virtue of freshness

Those looking for their first paid role have one genuine structural advantage over established portfolio holders: recency. You have been in the executive seat the management team currently occupies, probably more recently than most of your competitors. Paid boards value that if it is framed correctly.

> *"Dial up in your narrative that what you bring is very recent experience of what the executives you're trying to oversee have actually been facing. Somebody who's been in an established plural career will be that bit further away. Make a virtue out of freshness, recent experience, and enthusiasm."*
>
> Cathy Turner, NED, Lloyds Banking Group; Rentokil; Spectris
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 61

4. Pick a major

Shellye Archambeau, who built a portfolio of Fortune 500 board roles, calls this "picking a major." Be known for something specific. "Share what you know, not what you think," she says. "The companies want to know what you know." Staying in your lane and contributing from your specific expertise rather than having opinions on everything is one of the most powerful signals of board maturity. Pair that depth with the ability to engage broadly across the agenda, and you have the combination paid boards are looking for.

> *"Focus on the unique skill that you have rather than the board experience you don't yet have. That is what will get you to your first board seat, not trying to compete on governance credentials you haven't built yet, but being the clearest and most compelling candidate for the specific thing this board needs."*
>
> Anne de Kerckhove, Chair, Eagle Eye Solutions; SID, 888 Holdings
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 73

SECTION 07

Making the case

Once the proposition is clear, the question is how to get it in front of the right people. The mechanics of the paid board market are different from those of the pro bono market, and candidates who do not understand those differences waste significant time and energy.

The headhunter relationship

The headhunter relationship matters more at the paid level than at the pro bono level. At the pro bono level, direct applications and platform searches can be effective. At the paid level, headhunters control a significant proportion of the market, particularly for investment trusts, listed companies, and larger private businesses. Being on their radar, with a clear and current articulation of your value, is not optional.

> *"What can you do that you can control that gets your probability up? 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. You do have to work to make sure you're on people's radars."*
>
> Cathy Turner, NED, Lloyds Banking Group; Rentokil; Spectris
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 61

How to network effectively

The majority of paid board roles still go through word of mouth. Not all networking is equal, and the most effective approaches for those at this stage of their board career are different from general professional networking.

> *"A lot of us assume that our closest friends and colleagues are most important for career help. But research shows it's the more casual acquaintances, the weak ties, that can be super valuable. They bring in fresh information and opportunities your immediate circle might miss."*
>
> Professor Isabel Fernandez-Mateo, Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship, London Business School
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 87

> *"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

Dormant connections matter too. Research shows that reconnecting with people you used to know closely but have lost touch with can be particularly valuable: there is already trust and shared history, and they have had time to gather new experiences and insights. A deliberate practice of reaching out to former colleagues every few months generates a disproportionate return. Taking a structured approach helps: booking a block of days dedicated to meetings and calls, and treating the search for your first paid role with the same discipline you would bring to a major business initiative.

The referral flywheel

The most powerful networking of all is simply performing well in every role you hold. Cindy Rampersaud's first paid role came through a recommendation to a headhunter she had never met. Sarah Flannigan found that her breakthrough came not from any single role but from landing three simultaneously, at which point the referral flywheel took over. Most of her subsequent roles came through recommendation from fellow board members who had seen her at work.

> *"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

Handling rejection

Rejection is a structural feature of the paid board market, not a signal of inadequacy. Expect 20 to 30 conversations before one converts. When rejected, identify the successful candidate if possible and assess whether it was a skills mismatch, a fit issue, or simply stronger competition. Use that to refine targeting rather than your proposition.

> *"A rejection is no indicator of your skillset or whether you're a good board member. It's about whether you're the right person at that moment for that board: the culture, the skills they need, the next three years of strategy."*
>
> Anne de Kerckhove, Chair, Eagle Eye Solutions
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 73

> *"You can only be thoroughly cheesed off about it for 24 hours. If you gave the best possible account of yourself, you can't kick yourself. Boards can change their minds about what they're looking for during the process. That is not your failure."*
>
> Jane Routledge, NED, M&G Credit Income Investment Trust
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 40

SECTION 08

Your first paid year

Getting the role is not the end of the transition. The dynamic inside a paid board is different from a pro bono one in ways that catch many new members off guard, and how you perform in the first six months will determine whether the transition becomes self-reinforcing or stalls.

Invest time outside the boardroom

Dorothy Burwell describes spending one-on-one time with management before board meetings, not to interfere but to understand where they are coming from and how to frame questions constructively. Sara Weller estimates that two-thirds of her value as a non-executive comes from engagement outside the boardroom. The candidates who establish themselves quickly in paid roles are almost always those who invest in informal management relationships from the first month.

> *"I am a lot less anxious now about having all the right answers. I understand that it is really about surfacing the right discussion to help get there. When you first join a paid board that mental shift, from having the answers to asking the right questions, is the thing that takes the most adjustment."*
>
> Dorothy Burwell, NED, Post Holdings; Pennon Group
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 122

Contribute in depth, not in breadth

The temptation for a new board member is to demonstrate breadth. The more effective approach is to demonstrate depth in the two or three areas where your specific expertise genuinely adds something, while showing you can engage with the rest of the agenda constructively. Sir Ian Cheshire frames this as understanding "how to add the most value in the limited period of time I've got" and ensuring that time is not wasted on box-ticking governance at the expense of the questions that actually matter.

> *"As a CEO you are 24/7 thinking about everything. As a non-exec you have to learn to leave the boardroom, drop the mic, and move on. That felt uncomfortable. But then you realise: that limited time is the lens through which you add value."*
>
> Sir Ian Cheshire, Chair, Land Securities; Spire Healthcare
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 159

> *"Brand and reputation is everything once you're in the community. Everyone talks about everyone. If you get in for an interview, they've already worked out you can do the job, because they've spoken to people who've worked with you."*
>
> Cathy Turner, NED, Lloyds Banking Group; Rentokil; Spectris
> Enter the Boardroom, Episode 61

Paid boards are not looking for you to prove yourself quickly. They are looking to confirm that the capability they saw in the appointment process holds up under the pressure of a real board dynamic. Patience, focused contribution, and relationship investment in the early months are the most powerful signals you can send, and the foundation for the referral flywheel that delivers the second paid role.

SECTION 09

Practical checklist

These are the questions that separate those genuinely ready to make the transition from those who simply believe they are.

BEFORE YOU APPLY

- [ ] Can you describe in one sentence the specific expertise you bring that this board does not already have?
- [ ] Have you answered the North Star question: which member of the management team would call you, and why?
- [ ] Have you reviewed your prior board experience through the lens of a paid brief: financial oversight, committee leadership, governance process? **→ Board Pathway**
- [ ] Are you targeting sectors where data shows the highest openness: private companies, SMEs, investment trusts with matching expertise?
- [ ] Do headhunters in your target sectors have your board CV and an explicit articulation of what you are looking for? **→ CV Support**
- [ ] If you do not yet hold a committee chair role, have you sought one? **→ Board roles**

DURING THE PROCESS

- [ ] Have you done a forensic read of the organisation and come with a specific view on where your expertise maps to their actual needs?
- [ ] In interview, are you leading with value proposition rather than CV narration? **→ 1-on-1 Interview support**
- [ ] Are you presenting prior board experience as evidence of governance readiness, not as equivalent to paid board experience? **→ Board Pathway**
- [ ] Have you conducted thorough research beyond the board papers: speaking to customers, competitors, and former employees to understand the organisation's real challenges?
- [ ] When rejected, are you identifying the successful candidate and using it to refine targeting?
- [ ] Have you done proper due diligence to understand where the organisation's vulnerabilities lie?
- [ ] Are you tracking your conversations? Twenty to thirty before one converts is normal.

YOUR FIRST YEAR IN A PAID ROLE

- [ ] Have you ensured your onboarding covered not just formal governance but also the informal rhythms and relationships that make the board effective?
- [ ] Are you building trust with the chair and management team through consistent delivery and constructive challenge?
- [ ] Have you built a peer support group of experienced NEDs you can consult on sensitive matters? **→ Masterminds**
- [ ] Are you contributing in depth in two or three areas rather than broadly across all of them?
- [ ] Have you been explicit with the chair about where you see yourself adding most value?
- [ ] Are you maintaining headhunter relationships even now you have the role?

The data reminder

1 to 3 prior board roles is the typical profile at the point of first paid placement. 2 to 5 years is the typical transition time. Committee chair experience is the single strongest predictor of conversion. Private companies and SMEs are the most accessible entry point. The proposition shift, from governance record to specific functional value, is the variable most within your control.

SECTION 10

Recommended listening

The Enter the Boardroom podcast has published 166 conversations with those who have navigated the pro bono to paid transition and those who make the appointments. These are the episodes most directly relevant to this paper.

EPISODE	
155	From Advertising Executive to FTSE 100 NED: How Amanda Built a Purpose-Led Portfolio Career - Amanda Mackenzie OBE, NED, British Land; Lloyds Banking Group
139	How and why to get board roles: mastering applications, transitioning to paid roles and building a plural career - Fiona Hathorn, CEO, WOB UK Ltd; Corporate Lead, Nurole
122	Communications in the boardroom: exerting non-exec influence and building trust with management - Dorothy Burwell, Partner, FGS Global; NED, Post Holdings; Pennon Group
117	How to excel as a trustee and transition to paid board roles Cindy Rampersaud, NED, Sage Homes; former SID, Hipgnosis Songs Fund
99	Building a plural career across the private and public sectors Sara Weller CBE, Chair, Money and Pensions Service; NED, BT
83	Chairing investment trusts and building a non-exec portfolio Lucy Walker, Chair, Aurora Investment Trust; SID, Henderson International Income Trust
73	Technology boards: growth, nominations, the role of the SID and getting board roles Anne de Kerckhove, Chair, Eagle Eye Solutions; SID, 888 Holdings
64	Boardroom surprises: black swans, dual-track strategising and positioning as an unconventional board member - Baroness Dambisa Moyo, NED, Chevron; Conde Nast; Author, How Boards Work
61	Building a plural board career: how to network effectively, develop expertise spikes and position yourself as a candidate - Cathy Turner, NED, Lloyds Banking Group; Rentokil; Spectris
52	Trustee to NED to Chair: creating a board profile, transitioning to paid roles and building a value-driven portfolio career - Sarah Flannigan, Chair, Bionic; Yeo Valley; Riverford; Sawdays
47	Building a board portfolio: how to get board roles, develop non-exec skills, and manage impostor syndrome - Shellye Archambeau, Fortune 500 Committee Chair; former CEO, Metric3
40	Getting board roles: when to make the non-exec leap, how to position yourself, and your first 90 days - Jane Routledge, NED, M&G Credit Income Investment Trust; Brown Advisory US Smaller Companies Trust

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

All episodes: nurole.com/nurole-podcast-enter-the-boardroom

✦ ENTER THE BOARDROOM COMMUNITY ✦

The destination for serving and aspiring non-executive directors

Building better boards, together.

Find board roles • Strengthen board level credibility •

Expand your Chair & NED network • Stay sharp on governance shifts •

Backed by Nurole's track record of 4,000+ placements from SMEs to the FTSE 100.

Become a member