

WE TALK BOARD

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How to Find Your First Board Role: The Ultimate Guide



[Frank Desiere - PhD MBA](#)

CEO CorTec Neuro | Board Director & Chairman | Transforming Healthcare through Neurotech, MedTech, Digital Health Innovation & AI | Strategy & Growth Architect

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This is one of the most-requested topics I've received since starting this newsletter. Barely a week goes by without someone reaching out to ask: "Frank, how do I actually get onto a board?" So here it is—the straight answer, based on what I've seen work (and fail) across Switzerland and Europe.

If this resonates, share it with someone who needs it. And drop a comment below—I'd love to hear about your own board journey.

Let's Start With the Uncomfortable Truth

Getting your first board seat is hard. Harder than most people expect.

[Oliver Cummings](#) at [Nurole](#), Europe's leading board placement platform, reports that successful applicants make roughly three applications for every win—and some have submitted over fifty before landing their first role. That's not a typo. Fifty. [1]

But here's the good news: over 30% of successful placements on Nurole are first-timers, and 17% are under forty-five. The doors are opening. You just need to know where they are—and which key fits. [1]

First Things First: Why Do You Actually Want This?

Before you update your [LinkedIn](#) headline, sit with this question for a moment. Really sit with it. "I want to give back" is nice. "I want the prestige" is honest but insufficient. "I want intellectual challenge and the chance to shape an organisation's future" is getting warmer.

[Dr. Fabienne E. Meier](#) of [Knight Gianella & Partner AG](#) a Swiss board advisory firm, puts it bluntly: motivation should be "intrinsic and not monetary". The pay at most SME boards won't change your life (CHF 20,000–70,000 per year). The liability and time commitment (15–25 days a year per mandate) will change your calendar. If you haven't distilled your "why," Nurole warns, "it usually shows up in your application or at the interview stage". [2] [1]

Quick gut check: Would you still want this role if it paid nothing? If yes, keep reading.

What Actually Qualifies You?

Here's where most aspiring directors get it wrong. They think broad "leadership experience" is enough. It's not. Not anymore.

Boards recruit against skills matrices. They know exactly which puzzle piece is missing—and they're looking for someone who fits that shape precisely. [BoardClic](#)'s analysis of nearly 2,000 board reviews across 500 European companies found the six most sought-after skills are: [3]

1. **Industry expertise** (23.8%—an all-time high)
2. **Digital competence and AI** (13.8%—surging)
3. **International experience** (6.3%)
4. **ESG and sustainability**
5. **Sales and marketing**

6. People and talent management

The [Corporate Governance Institute](#)'s 2025 report adds **crisis management** and **stakeholder engagement** as rising priorities. [Egon Zehnder](#) emphasises the softer side too: the ability to listen, challenge constructively, and remain genuinely independent. [4] [5]

One thing is non-negotiable everywhere: **financial literacy**. If you can't read a balance sheet, you aren't board-ready. Full stop.

The real question isn't "Am I qualified?" It's "What specific gap can I fill?" The Process: How Board Seats Actually Get Filled

Let me demystify this. There are essentially four channels:

Executive search firms run the show at large-cap companies. In Switzerland, [Egon Zehnder](#), [Spencer Stuart](#), and [Knight Gianella & Partner AG](#) dominate. These are structured, three-to-four-month processes. You don't apply—you get found. [5] [2]
Digital platforms have democratised mid-market access. [Nurole](#) has made over 4,000 placements—roughly 1,000 per year. In Switzerland, [Boardmatching.ch](#) and [VRMandat](#) serve startups and SMEs. These are where first-timers have the best odds. [6] [7]

Personal networks still account for the majority. And here's a fascinating detail: research shows that 53% of board mandates come through "weak ties"—professional acquaintances you see rarely, not your close friends. That person you met once at a conference? They might matter more than your best mate. [8]

Self-nomination works more often than you'd think. Some aspiring directors proactively approach founders or companies lacking formal boards and offer to help create one. Gutsy? Yes. Effective? Often. [9]

In Switzerland, remember: board members must be natural persons, and the company needs at least one signatory who is a Swiss resident. [10]

Here's the kicker: [Spencer Stuart](#)'s 2025 Switzerland Board Index shows that first-time directors on Swiss-listed boards dropped from 63% to just 31%. Boards are de-risking by appointing experienced directors. Which means your first role will almost certainly be at an SME, startup, or nonprofit—not [Nestlé](#). And that's fine. Everyone starts somewhere. [11]

Where to Get Board-Ready: The Best Programs

Certification won't guarantee you a seat. But it signals something important: that you understand the fiduciary weight of the role and have invested in preparing for it. Here are the programs worth knowing:

1. [IMD Board Governance Certificate \(CAS\)](#), Lausanne / Zurich: Gold standard in DACH region. 5 modules, 10 ECTS. [12]
2. [IMD High Performance Boards](#), Lausanne: Intensive 3-day deep dive. CHF 12,500. [13] [Didier Cossin](#)
3. [Swiss Board School \(International Board Certificate\)](#), Switzerland: Comprehensive, practitioner-focused. [14]
4. [Deloitte Board Readiness Programme](#), Switzerland: Cohort-based, strong peer network. [15,16] [Britta Classen](#) [Cornelia Bade](#)
5. [ecoDa European Board Diploma](#), Brussels + online: Designed by European directors, for directors. [17]
6. [FT Non-Executive Director Diploma](#), UK (Level 7): Rigorous. Respected across Europe. [18]
7. [IoD Chartered Director](#), UK: The only Royal Charter director qualification in the world. [19]

Pick one that fits your geography and career stage. Don't collect certificates like stamps—one solid credential is enough.

Networking: The Part Nobody Wants to Hear

I'll be direct: networking is the single most important activity for landing a board role. More important than your CV. More important than your certification. More important than your track record.

[Egon Zehnder](#) advises treating the pursuit of a board seat like "starting a new career"—systematically building contacts with PE firms, search firms, lawyers, accountants, and other NEDs. [McKinsey & Company](#) says the same: "Building your profile and broadening your network are particularly important for those wishing to be considered for a board seat". [20] [5]

Here's what works in 2026:

- **LinkedIn is your boardroom shop window.** Your headline should signal board ambition, not just your current title. Publish governance-related content. Connect with Chairs, Nomination Committee members, and search consultants. If a headhunter Googles you and finds nothing—that's a problem. [21] [22]
- **Associations matter.** [swissVR](#), the [Institute of Directors \(IoD\)](#) (UK), and [EcoDataCenter](#) all host events where unadvertised roles circulate. Join them. Show up. Repeatedly.
- **Headhunter relationships take time.** Build them before you need them. Know your value proposition in one sentence. And be warned: if you make a

bad first impression with a search firm, "you are unlikely to hear from them again". [1]

- **Speak, write, be visible.** Every article you publish, every panel you sit on, every podcast you appear on is a signal to someone who might be looking for exactly your profile.

The Honest Pros and Cons

What You Gain:

1. Shape strategy at the highest level
2. Intellectual challenge without the operational grind
3. Access to elite networks
4. Compensation (depending on company) [23]
5. Continuous learning and personal growth [5]

What You Risk:

1. Personal legal liability—real and significant in Switzerland
2. Time: McKinsey says best-in-class directors invest 41 days/year [1]
3. Reputational damage if the company fails on your watch
4. Intense competition, especially at listed companies
5. Governance and compliance burden can be heavy

Your 12-Month Board Campaign

Think of this as a structured campaign, not a job search.

Months 1–3: Audit your value. Write a Board Bio—not a CV. Highlight governance, oversight, and strategic contribution. Identify which gap in a board's skills matrix you fill.

Months 4–6: Get certified. Enrol in one recognised programme. The badge matters because it signals you understand the weight of the role. [12] [19]

Months 7–9: Build visibility. Publish on LinkedIn. Speak at events. Register on [Nurole](#), [Boardmatching.ch](#) and others. Tell five headhunters you're actively looking.

Months 10–12: Start small. A nonprofit, startup advisory board, or local SME board

will build your governance track record. Nurole data shows nonprofit roles attract roughly 10 applications versus 40 for commercial roles—a much easier entry. [1]

Throughout: Be patient. Egon Zehnder warns it "often takes several years of persistent campaigning to obtain a first NED role". Treat every rejection as data, not defeat. [5]

What's Coming Next

A few trends that will shape board composition over the next two to three years:

1. **The Swiss gender quota bites.** The five-year transition for the 30% board gender target under Art. 734f CO expires in 2026. Listed companies must now explain non-compliance in their remuneration reports. Female board candidates are more sought-after than ever. [24] [25]
2. **AI governance becomes table stakes.** Boards need directors who can oversee algorithmic risk and data ethics—not code, but govern. [3] [4]
3. **Experienced directors preferred.** Both the UK and Swiss Spencer Stuart Board Indexes show boards are favouring proven directors, likely a response to geopolitical and economic uncertainty. This makes early-stage board experience—even at a small nonprofit—even more valuable as a stepping stone. [26] [11]
4. **Board assessments under scrutiny.** The [SWIPRA Services](#) Governance Survey 2025 reveals a trust gap: boards find internal assessments useful, but investors want more transparency and rigour. [27]

The Bottom Line

Finding a board role is a campaign, not an application. It requires honest self-reflection, a specific and defensible competence, a recognised governance credential, and relentless networking. Start small. Be patient. Build visibility. And remember: the goal isn't just to get a seat—it's to earn one where you can make a real difference.

5 Things You Can Do This Week

1. **Rewrite your LinkedIn headline** to include "Board Advisor" or "Aspiring NED." Make yourself findable.
2. **Identify your niche.** Are you the digital governance person? The audit expert? The MedTech sector specialist? Pick a lane. [3]
3. **Register on [Nurole](#) or [Boardmatching.ch](#).** It takes thirty minutes. Do it today.
4. **Email one headhunter.** Introduce yourself. Attach your Board Bio. Keep it short.

5. **Say yes to the next nonprofit board opportunity** that comes your way. It's the fastest path to "board experience" on your profile.

Your Questions, Answered

Do I need to be a CEO to get on a board? No. Functional experts—CFOs, CTOs, CHROs—are in high demand for Audit, Remuneration, and Technology committees. [28]

How long does it realistically take? 12–36 months of active campaigning. Sometimes longer. Persistence wins. [5]

Can I sit on a Swiss board if I live abroad? Yes, but the company needs at least one Swiss-resident signatory. You may also face tax implications in your home country.

Is the "Old Boys' Network" dead? Wounded, not dead. "Weak ties" and search firms are now more effective than golf buddies—because boards need specific, defensible skills to satisfy shareholders. [8]

How many boards is too many? Swiss data shows experienced directors hold three to four mandates on average. But boards increasingly reject candidates with more than three existing seats. Quality beats quantity. [2]

What's your experience been? Are you pursuing a board role right now? Already sitting on one and wish you'd known something earlier? Drop a comment—I read every one. And if you found this useful, hit share so it reaches someone who needs it.

Until next time, Frank

#BoardLeadership #NonExecutiveDirector #CorporateGovernance #SwissBoards
#BoardDiversity #FirstBoardRole

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