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Becoming Board Ready – Actions you can take today

Gillian Wilmot, winner of the UK's 2014 NED Award for an Unquoted/Private Equity Backed Company, gives Woman-On-Top.com her top 10 strategic and tactical tips for women aspiring to become board directors.

Currently she is non executive director and chair of the remuneration committees of Nisa Retail and wholesale electricity company ELEXON. Gillian is also founder and CEO of Board Mentoring, where she and her fellow mentors work with senior executives. She sits on the UK Government's Industrial Development Advisory Board, and serves as vice chair of the International Women's Forum UK.

In 2013, Gillian was personally responsible for seeing 10 women introduced to FTSE boards. Cranfield University's School of Management recently named Gillian as one of its 100 Women to Watch in the Female FTSE Board Report 2014.

1. Get a sponsor

“A sponsor is usually your current boss, someone more senior or your previous boss. Someone who will commit to pushing your name forward and speaking actively on your behalf. You need a sponsor to get progression towards your objective. You need a sponsor to be as engaged as possible, biased in your favour, and in the game – to get you on that succession planning agenda.”

2. Get a mentor

“People confuse sponsors and mentors. A mentor is really just a brilliant advisor, who needs to be as independent as possible. They don't need to be in the same industry or company.”

3. Know your hit list

“Draw up a list of target boards. Discuss the list with your mentor. Consider getting more than one sponsor to market you to different boards.”

4. Look at women who are where you want to be

“Review their career paths. What did they do? What did they achieve, to get where they are now, that you should be doing? Take control, take some considered risks, but remember to consider the practicalities of location and family life. It is often easier to move, especially to gain valuable international experience, when the children are young before they are in the exam system.”

5. Network more

“It’s all about networking. You’ve got to network internally, you know, it’s the ‘water cooler’ thing . And externally. That’s particularly challenging for women with families. A woman has to do her job, shoot home and do 500 things, while men do the networking, make the alliances and the deals are done.

“There is no way around it – you have to network. Put some time aside each week. My observation is that women are very diligent and tend not to take any time out of the working week as ‘me time’ to dedicate to ‘my own personal development’.

“It is a perfectly legitimate part of your job as an employee, and as a manager, to take a couple of hours a week to do this. There are always various groups and industry meet-ups after work, such as the CBI. If you do have to rush home, go and arrange to see your equivalent in another company to learn something useful to benefit your company. Like benchmarking. It can be formal or informal, but don’t make it massively formal. Just get out there. Make things happen, be a rainmaker.”

6. Man up

“Network like a man. Men are much better at transactional networking than women. They will say, ‘I’ll do this for you, if you do this for me’. I’ve heard some very high-powered men actually say, ‘Why would I do that, what’s in it for me?’. Women will do something as a favour and not ask for something back. You’ve got to learn how to play the game and offer something in return.

“Men shamelessly go after people they want to get hold of. I was recently contacted by a man who wasn’t selected by a board I am on. He got hold of me and didn’t view the fact we’d said ‘no’ as a problem. He viewed me as someone who might be talking to lots of people and useful. He explained he’d worked overseas, he’d done ‘xyz’ for a company, he was back in the UK, and, exactly what he was looking for. I wouldn’t have had the nerve to send the e-mail he sent me, but good on him, because it did take some brass neck. A woman who was not appointed probably wouldn’t have made contact again. But really, what’s the harm?”

7. Create your own board-like committee

“Any commercially-related board level experience you can get is valuable. Set up a women’s development network in your company, chair it, set yourself targets. And, make stuff happen.”

8. Consider an MBA, maybe

“Doing an MBA is very useful if you want to switch careers and do something entirely different and especially in your 20’s or 30’s. After that it’s debatable how useful it will be in getting you where you want to go. If you do go down that route, the business school you go to really matters – not all MBAs are created equal.”

9. Get not-for-profit board experience – but be careful

“There are a lot of people working in the public or charity sectors, beavering away earnestly for no money. And sometimes it can get heated-It’s always well to remember people die for their beliefs.

“To get on an AIM or FTSE board you need hard-nosed commercial experience that will qualify you and evidence your skills. With NFP, it really depends on the sub-sector as to whether you will be able to use your commercial skills. I would advise you to choose something that uses your business skills and evidences board-level competencies. The arts and sports can be good. But in all cases, be very careful, as the smaller the organisation, the more it will need of your time for voluntary work. They will be wanting your practical help outside the boardroom. For a mother of young children, with a full time day job, that time commitment may not be realistic.”

10. A you really prepared?

“There is pretty tough criteria to get on boards. You hear that there are places available, and there’s talk of wanting more women, but it’s bordering on being misleading. There are more good people wanting to be non-execs than there are roles available. You need a demonstrable track record of delivering. You will need to show you’ve done some serious stuff. You must have a good reputation. You need to position yourself as a person that board really wants to have in that room.

“Do you have a supportive partner who will back you? That is essential. You know, many successful women I know are much higher achievers than their partners and their partner is hugely supportive. Some even have the luxury of a house husband or partner.”