

CONTACT

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This open-source guidance stems from a February 2020 discussion with Leaders Plus 7 (aka “The Magnificent 7”). A couple of candidates were interested in joining boards; others already had various experience. Here’s a summary of key considerations from them and others; please feel free to use.

Why join a board?

- **Give back** to your / the wider community.
- **Learn** – or learn about – other skills, e.g. finance, governance, marketing, legal, HR, or skills tied to the nature of the specific organisation.
- **Participate** in an endeavour you care about; most boards ask you to join working groups or take part in activities.
- **Make connections**, either within your sector or to stretch into a new area.
- **Build profile** (as above).
- **Earn** modest income, if you become a Non-Executive Director.

How do you choose / find the right board?

- 1) Figure out what you’re really after. Consider:
 - a) **TIME**: How much time can you really devote per week/month/quarter? How long do you want to be involved? What’s going on in your life now – promotions or work changes, babies/small children, house moves etc are not great times, but parental leave can be a good time to get involved.
 - b) **INVOLVEMENT**: Do you want a lot of involvement or just to show up and contribute ideas/contacts?
 - c) **PROXIMITY**: Does it need to be near your home or work, so you can realistically take part?
 - d) **INTENSITY**: Do you want a start-up or small charity, which are likely to be freer and more creative but also less organised and perhaps in need of more work from you? Or do you want something established where you can drop into a structure and contribute?
 - e) **PERSONALITY**: Are you someone who prefers to start things up, help in sunny times, or come to the rescue?
 - f) **SCALE**: Does it matter how big the organisation is, or how much impact it has?
 - g) **SECTOR**: Is building sector – or public – profile important to you?
 - h) **CAREER**: Will it support your own career/workplace development plan? Could it?
 - i) **COLLEAGUES**: Is who else is on the board important (the answer is always “yes”, but that can be about profile, expertise, personality, enthusiasm...).
 - j) **LEARNING**: What will you learn, from fellow trustees, the organisation, sector etc?
 - k) **LIABILITY**: be clear with yourself and prospective organisations about how much risk you will accept. In most cases Director’s Liability will cover you for all but £1 of personal liability, but CHECK. Ask to see all incorporation and Memorandum & Articles papers before signing on. If unsure, ask an experienced board member to check (you will know one – if not, talk to FoL).
 - l) **DIVERSITY**: Are the board and organisation inclusive & supportive of fresh voices? As Future of London, we recommend not joining ‘monoculture’ boards – these are rarely representative, can succumb to groupthink, and are not great for your own profile.

- m) WILL IT BE ENJOYABLE?? A board that is just a lot of paperwork, long meetings and bickering is an energy suck. Talk to current and recent trustees about board culture and workload.
- 2) To find organisations and boards:
- Check websites like those below; ask friends and colleagues; talk to organisers at events/charities you rate; check LinkedIn and organisations like Women on Boards; google it!
 - Consider the points above when you're searching. Does the organisation you're interested in match your goals for being on a board?
 - Don't get discouraged if there's an organisation you like that isn't advertising for trustees. Many boards, especially with younger organisations, have 1-3 unallocated spaces before reaching max.

How do you get onto a board?

- Talk to the CEO/Chair, trustees (esp. if a role is not advertised) and/or recruiter to check on the above
- Get the JD – if there isn't one, request something clear, in writing. Ask for charitable objects if applicable.
- Prepare a board CV – often less detail on your job responsibility and more on civic contributions. This should be tailored to the organisation, as you would for a job.
- Take it seriously, from CV through interview. This may be a fraction of your time and less serious than the day-job, but to the entity you want to join, an effective board can be a make-or-break proposition.

Once you're on

- Your organisation should provide a director's pack with corporate and charity documents, board terms, financials, objectives, activities, membership, meeting frequency and expectations, committee roles if applicable etc.
- Do:** Read all materials, go to all meetings, be on time, and be prepared to ask about anything unclear and act on what's asked of you. Be as respectful of difference in board meetings as in any other aspect of your life/work – it's easy to make assumptions in these contexts.
- Watch for:** Clarity on finances, activities and expectations; meeting and materials organisation; consistency in what was offered/asked v. what is actually happening; effective staff leadership; honesty; signs of panic...
- Agree to part ways if:** they're asking too much; you have life/work clashes; you're concerned about ethics, viability or other considerations; you've lost the taste or could make way for someone with fresh perspective. When you go, suggest replacements if appropriate; leave good work and clear records behind. Exiting well is as important as joining!

Other types of role to consider:

Ambassador – less paperwork, more championing.

Non-Executive Director – usually requires longer and/or more specialist experience; some of these roles pay a modest stipend. LinkedIn usually has a few on offer, some through paid sites.

School governor – Several alumni & FoL board members do this.

Volunteer – can be a good way to get to know an organisation before committing to board service.

A few useful pages/organisations:

- Charity Commission search function, with 'homelessness' as a sample:
<https://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/?searchText=homelessness&pageNumber=1>
- <https://trustees-unlimited.co.uk/becoming-a-trustee/>
- <https://www.gettingonboard.org/how-do-i-become-a-trustee>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-appointments-diversity-action-plan>