

# Recruiting the younger director: 5 practices to increase your odds of success

By Kim Van Der Zon

Boardrooms have long been the domain of executives in their 50s, 60s — and even 70s, now that more boards are loosening mandatory retirement limits. But many boards are also electing directors in their early 30s — very often younger entrepreneurs who are the leading lights of digital transformation. Competition for these younger directors is fierce because of the experience and perspective they bring regarding the forces shaping the economy. But recruiting them also brings risks because of differences in generational perspectives and expectations.

In our role working with nominating committees to recruit younger directors to their boards, we have identified five practices that help ensure that the right candidates are pursued, nominations are accepted, and that the new director goes on to fulfill his or her boardroom potential.

• **Start the recruiting process early:** Don't wait for a young executive to rise to

prominence before building the connections that will lead to the acceptance of a board seat. Informal interactions with individual members of the board and periodic intimate events for potential candidates should be part of the board calendar. But to do this well, the nominating committee needs to be able to call upon a search firm that is expert in board composition and succession planning to help identify likely future board candidates early in their careers.

• **Set realistic expectations:** Because virtually every sector is undergoing some sort of disruption, it is easy for boards to hope that Generation Y directors will be able to provide digital-native insight into everything from technology trends to the consumption patterns of their peers. While undoubtedly they will offer important perspective on a range of issues, they can't be expected to have every answer to the range of transformation issues the company is facing — or to make up for critical capability gaps on the management team. Like every other board member, the contribution of younger directors will be a combination of specific domain expertise and broader judgment, both of which have their limits. Don't attribute superhuman powers to them.

• **Be prepared to sell the opportunity:** Because these candidates are so in demand, nominating committees can expect that they will be entertaining offers from multiple boards. But the nominating committee isn't just competing against other companies — it's also competing against itself. The young executive you are pursuing doesn't need a board seat to establish their stature. Will they want to be intimately associated with your company? See the company through the candidate's eyes, anticipate objections, and articulate why the opportunity is compelling.

• **Screen carefully for cultural fit:** Because a well-run board relies on col-

legality and trust, it is essential that new directors are able to fit with the culture of the board. Don't let the allure of recruiting a young digital star lead to a less-rigorous evaluation of intangibles — particularly of those issues that might arise due to generational differences. For example, the younger director will surely encounter a number of board processes he or she thinks need to be changed. Does the candidate have the savvy and maturity to spend time getting to understand the board and forge bonds with its members before lobbying for change?

**Kim Van Der Zon: Be realistic — younger directors can't be expected to have every answer to the range of transformation issues the company is facing.**

• **Have a solid onboarding process:** The odds of a younger director smoothly transitioning onto the board is greatly increased with a thorough onboarding process. Assign two experienced board members to anticipate areas where guidance would be most beneficial and charge them with providing it. Mentors should help ensure that younger directors are also included in the informal social interactions of the board and are exposed to the board's network, both within and outside of the company.

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