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# FUTURE- PROOFING THE BOARD

Skills development, Succession & Strategic Fit

## Rethinking Composition & Succession

NORMAN BROADBENT

# Board composition is critical to effectiveness, but how should organisations evaluate composition and capabilities to set themselves up for success?

In our last article, we explored the latest trends in boardroom appointments, particularly the rise of 'SME NEDs' like the popular 'Technology INED'. Whilst such specialist appointments might seem appealing, they might not be the best, or even viable, option for every organisation due to cost, recruitment hurdles, and challenges in finding the right mix of skills. It is crucial for boards/Nomination Committees to pinpoint exactly what their board needs and why, considering organisational strategy, operational context, the external environment, and the overall board composition. Without this clarity, organisations risk making appointments they might regret or missing out on changes that could optimise collective performance and unlock new opportunities.

**Evaluating board composition is not a simple or straightforward task.** Even the most introspective boards can struggle to critically assess their own makeup and make tough decisions, such as deciding they don't have the right composition anymore, or taking tough decisions to stand down long serving board members when fresh perspectives are needed.

This is where externally facilitated board effectiveness reviews, when done well, can be invaluable. They can provide a thorough evaluation of current board composition, and weigh it against a set of parameters, typically strategic direction and challenges, key risks, and the broader macro [economic or geopolitical] environment to identify any gaps.

**A key part of board composition is the skills and experience of its members. However, board skills assessments (and how they're used) is one of the most common areas we identify weaknesses in when we conduct board effectiveness reviews.**

## Common issues include:

- Using generic skills assessments that aren't tailored to the organisation.
- Relying on outdated assessments that don't reflect current strategic objectives.
- Failing to capture 'softer skills' like communication, negotiation, and emotional intelligence.
- Combining skills and experience in a one-dimensional way (e.g., grouping together understanding and experience, which can be two very different things, particularly in a crisis).
- Taking a tick-box approach that misses nuance and detail.
- Skills matrices lacking an empirical basis for assessment, leading to subjectivity.
- No comments or conclusions for individual directors or the board as a whole.
- No links to training plans and succession plans.
- Overlooking the macro-environment the organisation operates in.

These deficiencies often mean that the board does not have a sufficiently clear view of its strengths and limitations from a skills and experience perspective. This can impact the quality and effectiveness of succession plans, director and board training plans, and can ultimately lead to the board not having the right composition to enable it to achieve its strategic objectives and identify, manage and mitigate risks and opportunities.

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**Board composition is also more extensive than just skills and experience.** As we mentioned in our previous article, a board is more than a collection of individuals and needs to be considered holistically.

When we evaluate board composition, some of the areas that we consider include:

- **Size:** Too small can mean a lack of diverse perspectives, too large can impact pace and dynamics.
- **Independence:** Balancing INEDs, NEDs, and Executives to get the balance right.
- **Diversity:** Particularly cognitive diversity - having a range of expertise, experiences, information, perspectives, preferences, and ways of thinking to mitigate groupthink, generate new ideas, challenge perspectives, and notice blind spots.
- **Skills and Experience:** Having a wide enough range of skills and experience to support the organisation in pursuing its strategic objectives and to understand the risks that it faces.
- **Culture and Dynamics:** Perhaps the most important aspect of how a board operates, an effective culture and dynamic can be a significant enabler of board effectiveness or, if sub-optimal, can be a significant blocker. Just because a board has the 'right' balance of skills and experience on paper, doesn't mean that the board will work constructively and effectively as a collective.
- **Balance of technical and 'softer skills':** the latter (including emotional intelligence, which can be particularly useful attribute in a Chairing role) often being overlooked during recruitment processes.
- **Roles:** The clarity and level of understanding of roles on the board and the suitability of appointees (e.g., Chair) – as above, the most 'qualified' candidate may not always be the best candidate.
- **Time served and tenure:** Balancing the benefit of longevity and deep organisational knowledge with the benefit of fresh perspectives.
- **Collective effectiveness:** Although difficult to define in absolute terms, the certain "X – Factor" that enables a board to function beyond the sum of its parts.

Evaluating board composition is no easy task and loses its value if it is too backward-looking. Assessments should be forward-looking where possible, taking into account strategy, changes and trends in the external environment, and the risk landscape to add the most value – helping organisations to shape the board they need for the future.

Skills assessments are a critical component of evaluating composition – and are particularly important in the interim years between externally facilitated board effectiveness reviews. A few tweaks to approach can add tremendous value to the exercise and can also enhance the quality and outcomes of interlinked processes of performance evaluation, succession planning and director/board training plan development.

In our next article, we will focus on board training, exploring how training plans should be formulated, and how 'training' may be moving away from the traditional classroom/virtual classroom approach and towards more dynamic and innovative ways of learning and developing. Stay tuned via LinkedIn for more insights on shaping a board that drives success.

If you want to optimise your board's performance, our team can help. Contact [Jennifer Cafferky](#) or visit our [webpage](#) for more information.

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# Beyond the Matrix: How to approach Board succession strategically

As Jennifer Cafferky at BDO rightly highlights in her companion piece, evaluating board composition is complex: but from a Search perspective, the challenge often begins with planning. Too often NED appointments are reactive, driven by immediate gaps rather than long-term vision. Succession planning becomes a rushed exercise, with briefs written in isolation and skills matrices used as blunt instruments.

## The Skills Matrix: useful, but not enough

Skills matrices have become a staple of board composition reviews. But they are frequently:

**Generic** – not tailored to the organisation's strategy or context

**Retrospective** – focused on current gaps, not future needs

**One-dimensional** – failing to distinguish between knowledge, experience, and strategic application

**Detached** – rarely linked to succession plans, training or diversity goals

Boards don't just need skills: they need chemistry, challenge, cognitive diversity and commitment: the most effective evaluations are holistic. They consider not just what's on paper, but how the board functions as a collective in terms of its culture, dynamics, and ability to challenge constructively.

## Succession Planning: The Missed Opportunity

Our joint report with BDO last year, 'Navigating a New Era for the Non-Executive Director', found that 65% of boards admit succession planning needs improvement, and 96% struggle to attract the right NED talent<sup>1</sup>. Why? We often see Boards making these mistakes:

- Beginning succession planning too late
- Writing briefs based on past composition, not future ambition
- Failing to embed insights from board evaluations into recruitment
- Focusing on skills gaps now, rather than mapping to the organisation's evolving strategy

Succession planning should be a strategic conversation, not a scheduling exercise or handover.

## What Good Looks Like

Boards that get this right treat composition as a living strategy. They:

- Use future-facing evaluations to align board makeup with strategic direction
- Consider risk appetite, decision-making styles, and cultural fit – not just CVs
- Embed learnings from evaluations into recruitment briefs and succession plans
- Balance technical expertise with softer skills like emotional intelligence and relational dexterity.

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### Mature succession planning

Recent research from the University of Exeter and the Chartered Governance Institute outlines a mature model for NED succession planning<sup>2</sup>. At its most advanced, boards proactively plan across three horizons (emergency, near-term, and long-term) and integrate succession with diversity, behavioural fit, and strategic timing.

The best boards ask: what kind of thinking do we need around the table? What kind of challenge? What kind of risk lens?

### Rediscovering the meaning of Board Diversity and Groupthink

The terms “diversity” and “groupthink” have become boardroom buzzwords. But their overuse risks diluting their meaning. True diversity is not just about gender and ethnicity: it’s cognitive. It’s about having a range of perspectives, risk appetites, strategic lenses etc. Interestingly, in the US, there appears to be a trend towards appointing more demographically diverse board members: according to The Conference Board’s 2024 Board Practices and Composition, US listed boards are increasingly appointing directors from below the C-suite to bring broader organisational insight<sup>3</sup>.

A board composed of similar thinkers - however diverse their backgrounds - is vulnerable to blind spots. Evaluating composition must go beyond surface-level metrics. It must ask:

How do we think as a board?  
How do we challenge?  
How do we evolve?  
Are we equipped for our disruptive environment?

Even a well-constructed board can drift into comfortable patterns if directors are not continually exposed to fresh perspectives or external stimuli. This willingness to stretch thinking is often the difference between boards that merely oversee and boards that genuinely lead.

### Timing matters

The timing of board renewal matters. Appointments made only when vacancies arise tend to preserve the status quo; intentional, phased refreshment enables boards to anticipate the capabilities they will need two or three strategic cycles ahead.

This approach avoids the disruption of abrupt change while still ensuring that the board evolves in step with the organisation’s ambition. It also strengthens the board’s culture: when new directors join as part of a deliberate long-term plan, rather than an emergency solution, they integrate more effectively and contribute more quickly. “What’s on the company’s strategic agenda?” is a common candidate question.

### Closing Thought: Composition as a Strategic Lever

Evaluating board composition isn’t about filling seats. It’s about shaping the boardroom to meet the future. That means looking beyond crude skills matrices. Every NED appointment is an opportunity to re-energise, rebalance and refocus.

In our final article in this series, we’ll explore how boards can create the right conditions for success through well-planned training, development and a culture of continuous learning.

*If you are looking to add to your board, our Board Practice can help. To talk about this further, please get in touch with the Norman Broadbent Board Practice at [BoardPractice@NormanBroadbent.com](mailto:BoardPractice@NormanBroadbent.com)*

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Tanya is a Partner in the Board Practice. She assists companies of all types and across all sectors with their chair and non-executive director recruitment needs, frequently partnering with sector specialists in the Norman Broadbent team. She also undertakes Board Effectiveness Reviews and is known for her insightful yet practical approach.

Prior to joining Norman Broadbent, Tanya was the NED Recruitment Lead at Women on Boards UK. Tanya comes from a legal and corporate governance background: she qualified as a corporate and equity capital markets solicitor at a magic circle law firm, before spending nearly two decades providing training and consultancy services around corporate law, good governance, board effectiveness, stakeholder voice and equity capital markets.

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