

The Power of Being T-Shaped: A Guide to Becoming an Exceptional Non-Executive Director



In the realm of corporate governance, non-executive directors (NEDs) play a crucial role in providing independent oversight, strategic guidance, and diverse perspectives to organizations. As the demands on boards become greater, chairs and nomination committees are looking for NEDs with deep expertise that fill specific gaps coupled with an ability to contribute broadly, with an enterprise mindset. They're looking for T-shaped NEDs.

Understanding the T-shaped skill set

"T-shaped" NEDs have deep expertise in at least one domain (the vertical stroke of the T) while also having the ability to effectively engage across the board agenda (the horizontal stroke of the T).

The vertical expertise can come from a wide array of areas, such as deep functional experience, managing a major line of business, certain geographic experience, or from specific business challenges like managing turnarounds or M&A. However, what sets them apart is their clear examples of working with an enterprise mindset, understanding the interconnections and interdependencies across the organization.

Three advantages of T-shaped non-executive directors

Feed into the breadth of the board agenda

Boards have a lot of strategic and governance responsibilities but a limited number of members to cover all the required areas of expertise. NEDs who fill a specific skills gap but also bring a broad understanding of the board agenda can feed into multiple committees and contribute to a wide range of discussions, leading to better decision-making.

Strategic decision-making

T-shaped individuals understand the trade-offs that boards need to grapple with in all their agenda items. Rather than having a narrow focus on their own area of expertise, they can identify connections and patterns between different areas. This broader perspective enables non-executive directors to make strategic decisions that consider the implications across the organization.

Adaptability and innovation

As industries undergo rapid transformations, organizations must adapt to remain competitive. T-shaped non-executive directors can better understand emerging trends, embrace innovation, and guide organizations through change as they have more diverse knowledge and experiences.

How to prove your T-shaped credentials

When it comes to showing a board that you have what it takes to be an effective NED, your executive career should provide plenty of concrete examples.

Think of when you've worked on enterprise-wide projects that span your organization and how that experience helped you develop a holistic view of the business. How did you work with others with diverse backgrounds and actively understand their challenges, perspectives, and priorities?

Working on enterprise-wide projects also gives you a broader understanding of how different decisions impact various parts of the organization and the overall performance of the business. This knowledge enhances your ability to contribute strategically as a non-executive director.

And, as enterprise-wide projects often require strong leadership skills to drive alignment and collaboration among different teams, you can use them to prove your communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution skills.

This is all about showing your enterprise mindset—your understanding of organizational structure, processes, and culture.

Tips for developing T-shaped skills

No one is going to be perfectly T-shaped—especially when taking their first NED role. So, it's important to continue developing T-shaped skills while on the job:

Learn continuously - Cultivate a mindset of lifelong learning and actively seek opportunities to expand your knowledge beyond your area of expertise. There are specific courses for first-time NEDs that provide a valuable starting point. Seek feedback from directors to hone your contributions to the board. And request mentoring, either from within your board or externally.

Embrace diversity - Seek diverse perspectives and experiences to broaden your understanding of different industries, cultures, and disciplines. Collaborate with professionals from diverse backgrounds, participate in cross-functional projects, and join professional networks to expand your horizons and foster a broader skill set.

Network - Build a strong network from diverse fields. Engaging in conversations with experts and thought leaders from various industries can help you gain insights and perspectives outside your domain. Attend networking events, join industry associations, and leverage digital platforms to connect with like-minded professionals.

Gain boardroom experience - Build experience serving on boards of different organizations to broaden your understanding of governance practices across various sectors. Joining non-profit boards or advisory boards, or serving as a mentor, can provide valuable exposure to different industries and enhance your T-shaped skills.

Always reflect - Regularly reflect on your strengths, weaknesses, and areas for development. Identify gaps in your knowledge and actively seek opportunities to fill them. Embrace feedback from peers, mentors, and board colleagues to refine and enhance your T-shaped skill set.

T-shaped non-executive directors are key to board success

In a rapidly changing business landscape, the role of non-executive directors is vital in ensuring effective governance and driving organizational success. By investing in your T-shaped skills, you can make significant contributions to a board, navigate complex challenges, and drive innovation in today's dynamic business environment.





Authors

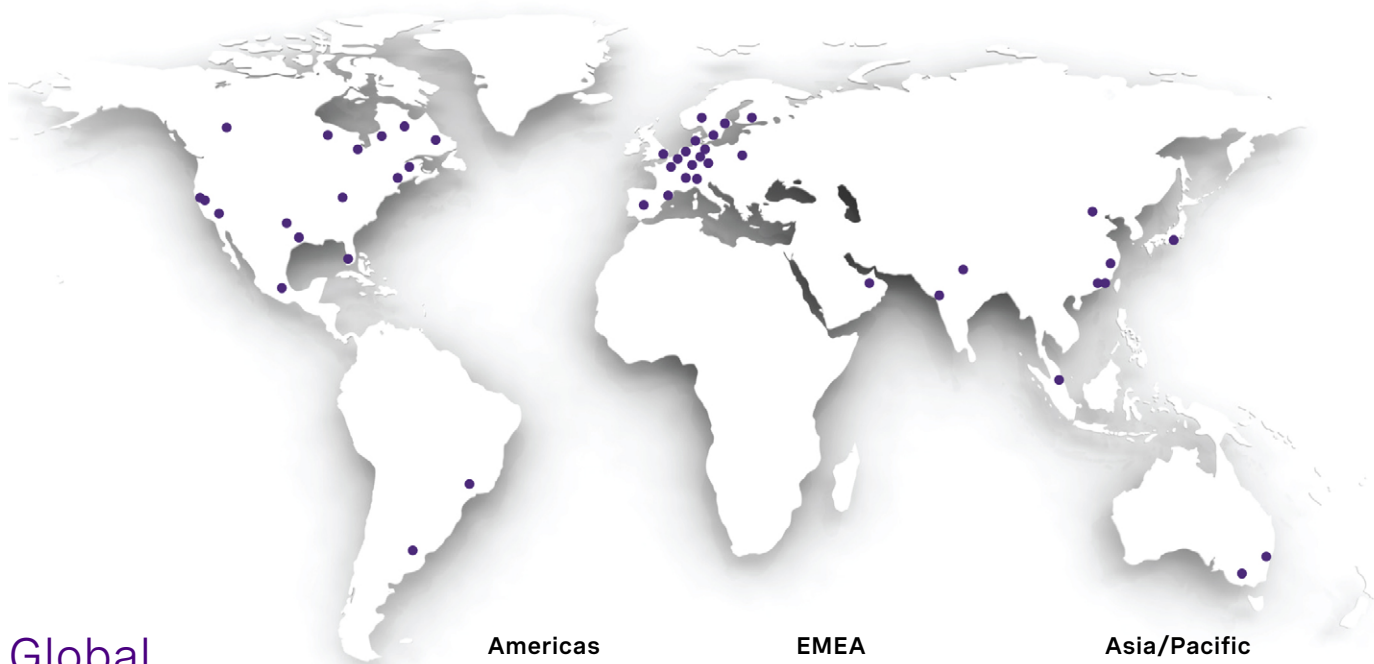
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