

## Getting into charity through its board

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Geoffroy van Raemdonck wanted to give back to his community by doing more than just writing cheques. "I was looking for a dynamic organisation where I could use the skills I'd acquired at work and business school," he says. So he contacted BoardAssist, a Manhattan-based board matching service, to find a non-profit organisation that fitted his criteria.

Last year, van Raemdonck joined the board of Sweat Equity Enterprises (SEE), a foundation that brings promising teenagers to global corporations to encourage innovation and development. SEE's kids might design a watch for Timex or a jacket for Target, projects both familiar and relevant to van Raemdonck who, in his role as a senior executive at The Limited, the clothing retailer, is charged with incubating new businesses.

"I come from a culture where we give a lot and I never thought I'd be able to do that in the US," says the 35-year-old of his Belgian roots.

Perhaps, like van Raemdonck, you have volunteered sporadically or donated money to charity but have longed to serve a single cause in a targeted, meaningful way. If you have hesitated because you believed non-profit boards were inaccessible, think again.

Non-profit boards may have been cliquey in the past, as members were often tapped by personal friends. But now anecdotal evidence suggests demand for board members far exceeds supply, and organisations are increasingly seeking an infusion of "new blood" at affordable prices.

Whether you are an empty nester eager to contribute, a retiree looking for a second act, or a Wall Street upstart who wants to use her bonus to serve her city and score a career boost in the process, there are strategies to navigating the non-profit world.

**Understand how the organisation's mission fits with your motivation:** With 1.48m non-profit organisations in the US, there is a wide range of foundations from which to choose. So find a cause you can really get behind. The most committed board members are people who feel strongly about an issue, then seek out an agency that aligns with their passions.

"If you're excited about the mission, you can be a true ambassador," van Raemdonck says.

**Volunteer and engage in the cultivation process:** Many non-profit board members volunteer at an organisation as a way to meet members and decide if it is a place they envisage themselves being in the long term. "It's best to build a relationship first and get a feel for the role you might like to play if asked to be on the board," says David Renz, the Beth K. Smith/Missouri chair in Nonprofit Studies at the Bloch School at University of Missouri, Kansas City and director of the Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership. "It's also a good way, on more selective boards, to raise your visibility."

However, if you have not first volunteered, you are likely to receive phone calls from the organisation's executive director and board members, who will make themselves available to answer your questions. "I asked a lot and the board wanted to make sure I could contribute, so they really grilled me. It was closer to an interview than a date," van Raemdonck says of his initial meeting with SEE.

The board may invite you to tour its facility (for example, a charter school) or, in the case of arts-related ventures, to attend events that lend insight into the group's strengths and capabilities. Members will court you, and you should take advantage of these overtures to learn as much as possible.

**Acquaint yourself with the organisation and board culture:** Meet as many board members and employees at the non-profit as you can. Are these people you enjoy working with? Think about how you will fit in terms of the members' average age, as well as their backgrounds and professions. What is the executive director's relationship with the board? What is the board's turnover rate? As with any business, you are looking for a staunch group of supporters, as long as they are open to original ideas.

**Quantify the financial commitment:** More than 50 per cent of the country's non-profits have annual budgets of less than \$25,000. Many are small, community-based agencies. Regardless of the organisation's size or budget, the board needs to ensure it has adequate resources to carry out its mission.

Most non-profit organisations ask that board members make a donation that is "personally significant", although few specify an exact amount. However, many boards set a goal that every member should generate from \$1,000 to \$10,000 annually in philanthropic support for the foundation. This amount can be split between what a member gives personally and what he or she raises from friends and associates, hence the term "give/get".

"There's a misconception about an organisation's prestige versus the amount necessary to join the board," says Cynthia Remec, executive director of BoardAssist. "Some of the most prestigious organisations require only \$1,000, while a lot of the smaller boards have larger commitments."

Still, you will need to determine whether there are "extras". Some boards consider the purchase of gala tickets and capital campaign donations to be part of the give/get, while others mark them as additional contributions. "People can get seduced without knowing the basic obligations and expectations," says Renz. Regardless of the official, published rules, you should know the average amount board members give, to understand what will be expected of you.

**Identify opportunities to contribute:** Many boards have project-oriented sub-committees and provide members with significant prospects for leadership. At a small non-profit set-up, board members may even assume staff positions. "You can jump in where you feel like you have expertise and when you have the time," Remec says. "It allows you to act as a business owner in a way you might not in your day job."

That said, when considering board membership, Remec advises candidates to ask for five things board members have done in the past year, other than generate money.

In general, if a board has more than 25 members and its financial commitment is at the high end, it is usually an indication that board members' wallets are prized above their intellectual capital. These boards tend to do less hands-on work and more fundraising.

**Define the time commitment:** Most non-profit board members have two- to three-year terms and meet quarterly, but it is helpful to know when and where the board convenes, the length of an average meeting, and whether it is possible to phone in. Some boards expect additional effort in terms of committee meetings.

**Don't underestimate the benefits to your career:** Larger corporations will sometimes supply the entire give/get to secure board positions for executives, whom they later reward with larger bonuses for volunteer service. Some firms consider board service part of "people development", a way to cultivate management skills employees may not be able to develop at work. Additionally, if you would like to be considered for membership on a for-profit corporate board, service in the non-profit community is perceived as germane and valuable.

Renz warns against joining a board to get business from the organisation or from other board members. In some cases this is illegal, and it is always frowned on. However, board membership can be a way to make contacts and build relationships that could advance your social life and career.

As van Raemdonck says: "I set out wanting to give, but SEE has given me more than I ever expected."

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