



## Take on Board

# Transcript – Clare McCartin

### Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'll be speaking with Claire McCartin, who is the group General Manager of executive and boards at Davidson recruitment. And I'm speaking to clear because it's a great way of getting some insight from the other side of the table around what's needed in recruitment. And I know lots of people listening to this program interested in recruitment. So welcome to the take on board podcast, Claire.

### Claire McCartin 0:25

Thank you. Hello. Thanks for having me.

### Helga Svendsen 0:27

Oh such a pleasure. And I know, I know, you've spoken at one of my breakfasts previously. So I know people are going to get an enormous amount of value from our conversation today.

### Claire McCartin 0:36

So could you just tell us a bit about yourself? Yeah. So Helga, I am the mum of two young boys and I work in executive search. So we I run a team of about 27 across Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. And I basically recruit CEOs, directors and non executive directors. So one of the campaigns we're doing at the moment is A lot of Commonwealth element non executive director appointment. So we're doing 27 roles for them right now. So just to give you a sense of the sort of board work that we do,

### Helga Svendsen 1:10

Wow, well, I am even more appreciative of you taking the time to speak with us today about this, hopefully will actually make your job easier, in some ways, because people are well prepared in their applications.

### Claire McCartin 1:23

Absolutely. And I love the work that you do, particularly in supporting women into this space Helga.

**Helga Svendsen 1:28**

It's really important work. Oh, it is so important that we get greater equality and diversity on boards, I think, yes, we'd have a few less problems in the world if that were the case, quite frankly,

**Claire McCartin 1:38**

Absolutely.

**Helga Svendsen 1:38**

So clearly just before we get into all of your amazing tips and tricks, I'm wondering if you can tell us about your earliest experience around governance.

**Claire McCartin 1:47**

I first became interested in governance when there was a lot of governance failure in America actually, in early 2000s. And I was doing a masters of commerce at the time and I thought, well, best way to look at the issues is to focus on that issue of governance. And so I looked at how many Australian boards are actually assessing the performance of the non executive directors, and it was 17%. Only back then I think we'd probably find almost the reverse now where you might have maybe 17% to adopt assess their performance yearly. So it's amazing how far we've transitioned in terms of the focus on our most important level, I think of an organization and that everything flows from the top culture, strategy, everything so we can't underestimate the importance of getting the right people on boards, getting diversity on boards, but also regularly assessing the performance. We wouldn't let a CEO's performance go unchecked. So nor should we, not executive directors,

**Helga Svendsen 2:50**

How interesting and being able to reflect on how far we've come in.

**Claire McCartin 2:54**

Yes, and I mean, we've had some spectacular examples of where I think if we had a had closer assessment, we might have had better outcomes for community.

**Helga Svendsen 3:06**

So financial services Royal Commission, anyone?

**Claire McCartin 3:09**

Yes. Yeah. So it is it's great to look at how far we've come, we've still got, I think, a fair way to go in other areas of board performance. And the diversity piece is certainly one of those.

**Helga Svendsen 3:20**

Well, the more we know about recruitment, and the more prepared we are for that, hopefully that will be part of making a difference. It's not all of it, but it's certainly part of it. Play you have set on the recruiter side of the table for actually do you know how many?

**Claire McCartin 3:35**

Yes, I think it's 17 years. So yeah, I started as a grad. It was one of those roles. I thought I'll do two years and executive search and I'll spin out into a general role, but I just love what we do in connecting talent with organizations at the pointy end. So really privileged role to support people and organizations in achieving greater success.

And so you must have been on the other side of the table of probably thousands, it would be it would be thousands of appointments. And so luckily rolling that you can actually see the impact organization sometimes come to you when things are going swimmingly, and other times they come to you when things are literally at, we're going to hand the keys back in to the land for, turn the lights off, and to be able to appoint the right talent to transition them through to viability or greater success is lots of fun.

**Helga Svendsen 4:30**

Is there a board role that you can think of that you've been involved in that you're particularly proud of? Can you tell us about one of those,

**Claire McCartin 4:37**

it's probably not one, but I do have a bit of a passion for sectors and I think the public sector and the breadth of communities public sector supports is always fun. And so you know, I look at Community Health and the impact Community Health has in communities and supporting disadvantage. I always

get a bit excited when you can link that direct impact. more tightly to outcomes for people who might come from disadvantage. So it's probably sector as opposed to a client. Yeah.

**Helga Svendsen 5:09**

So I'm wondering, you know, in your amazing book of tips and tricks, where's the best place for us to start in terms of advice for people that are applying for board roles?

**Claire McCartin 5:18**

It's a great question. Because I think often we think, well, that's where we need to transition to, we need to transition ourselves from management, to executive to non executive. And that's, that's a great trajectory to aim for. But I think often we do need to step back and really reflect on why do we want to become a non executive director, and reasons that I often hear are just that natural extension of the career. Others will tell me you know, it's time to give something back to an organization or industry, that they feel that they have expertise that would be valued, or potentially it might open up new networks for that individual and Very rarely, sometimes it's about topping up the super, you know,

**Helga Svendsen 6:06**

It's not for profit or government. Honestly, in that regard,

**Claire McCartin 6:10**

Absolutely. No, I think that's right. It's a bit more vocational in that regard. So I think that's a really good place to start is to look at why you're why your personal why, and then to look at what are the types of organizations that might interest you. So, obviously, you could, you know, look at not for profits, family, businesses, SMEs government, and then you need to look at listed or unlisted private equity companies trust there's a whole spectrum of organizations and spaces that you might consider. I think it's good to focus on what sector of the economy does the organization operate in and what sector Do you feel that you can add the most value to? So one approach for aspiring directors maybe to start with a not for profit, sometimes they are easier to try Transition just for your first non executive director geek or a small business as they might be a bit more accommodating of people with less experience at that level. So, sometimes it's hard to crack your first one, once you've got your first one on the resume, then it's much easier to transition to a bit more of a portfolio

**Helga Svendsen 7:20**

For that breadth of different organizations. Is there in particular sectors? Do you see people looking for a particular skill set? Or are there some things that are common across the board?

**Claire McCartin 7:31**

It's a really good question. So I think with you know, we always start with the skills metrics, when we get invited to support a board on a vacancy or number of vacancies, so we look at who's on the board, what are their skills and experiences? How did they apply those when they were in the boardroom? So sometimes you might be a finance person who actually just has a flair for marketing. So it's not just about the qualifications. It's actually about how those skills and experience lived out. And then in order to look at the sector side, you would then benchmark. Okay, well, how many represent knowledge and depth within a sector? And I think the sector side shouldn't be underplayed that sector experience. I think some of the earliest we have seen is when organizations have gone too far removed from knowledge of sector because I think it's that ability to ask not just the first question about you know, okay, well, why is that the reason you're giving me that feedback, Mr. or Mrs. CEO? It's then about the follow up question that perhaps only comes with actual sector experience. So it's about I think building out a bench of direct non executive directors who actually can articulate that second question, so not all would need to bring the sector experience but I think it shouldn't be. You shouldn't have sort of 80% who don't have any sector experiencing in my mind, I just think it's a little bit risky.

**Helga Svendsen 9:00**

I think it's a balance of both sometimes having people from within the sector and having everyone within the sector

**Claire McCartin 9:05**

100%. Yet, you don't want to do that. Because if you're not bringing in knowledge, it's a bit like executive teams, I think, Gone are the days where we will be briefed, the person needs to have sector experience. In fact, more and more briefs, I'd say at least 60%. They're wanting to bring in new talent, new ideas, new ways of thinking. So it's absolutely a balance. But I think sometimes organizations can go too far,

**Helga Svendsen 9:30**

One way or the other. So having that balance of sector experience and the different skills that are being looked for.

**Claire McCartin 9:38**

Absolutely. And I think it's important when we're looking at ourselves, when we put ourselves up for these roles that we really do. Do that SWOT analysis or the balance sheet of, of our own perceived strengths and weaknesses as a potential energy. So and sometimes we might underestimate those. So sometimes it's good to reflect those to a colleague or a mentor and say What do you see as my personal strengths or potential limitations? And then what is the hat that I might be able to wear on any board? Because you will see in most board ads, we're particularly interested in people from technology, marketing, or governance or whatever it might be a particular area that they're lacking or feel they're lacking from that SWOT analysis. And it might also then be, you know, from doing the SWOT of where your strengths are and where some of the gaps are, and opportunity to fill those gaps before you go out to market potentially, as well. Absolutely, exactly. And sometimes, you know, we can scale ourselves up pretty quickly with access to online training, or you know, organizationally, if you're still in executive roles, I think you can quickly have a conversation with the CEO or whoever it might be about the fact that you really like some exposure to whatever that gap is. And often, there's ways around that.

**Helga Svendsen 10:58**

Speaking about skill development. I have to ask because I'm asked a lot the ascd course and having the ascd course, is it a must have? Or is it a nice to have? What's your view?

**Claire McCartin 11:08**

I'm asked it a lot to, I'd say previously, it was seen as a bit of a nice to have more and more people are expecting to see it. There are a couple of competitors more sort of one man band type operations, but some have actually been delivering the course. It was spun off and doing their own thing, which content was very good, but it has the prestige factor, doesn't it? So I think it's a nice to have, if you've got the time. It's awake, isn't it?

**Helga Svendsen 11:40**

I think it's a five days of sessions. But then there's exams and assignments.

**Claire McCartin 11:44**

I think if you can do it, it's just another thing. Another reason to push you into the yes category rather than the no category, particularly if you don't have experience on a board yet.

**Helga Svendsen 11:55**

And do you think some of the other programs like the governance Institute or committee Directors all over that run some of the similar programs, and they just as useful in terms of getting across that,

**Claire McCartin 12:07**

I think they probably are just as useful in all honesty, and, you know, the content that I've seen you push out for breakfast of the things helliya I think that's all really valuable. And it's great to be able to list on a CV. So, I think any learning is good learning and whether it's, you know, formalized through the Accreditation of ICD or, you know, less formal, well structured, more independent program and fantastic.

**Helga Svendsen 12:37**

Alright, so somebody's done their kind of analysis of where they're at, they've done their strengths and what their real gift to an organization is and where their gaps might be. And they've had to think about the types of organizations what's next for them.

**Claire McCartin 12:50**

So the resume development so really, I always get asked, What does the rest of my nature look like and it's important to know this is not the same Impressive executive resume that you might be putting together, it needs to be much more succinct, short, sharp, concise and easy to read. So, I think it will obviously include the key personal data contact details, which you'd be surprised how often they're missing, and some executive experience. So you put your key achievements in their specific attributes you feel you bring to the board, you obviously put your education and professional memberships, and any previous or existing board work. So that can also include community work. So sporting school, committee memberships, that sort of thing. It's all evidence of commitment to well governed society, isn't that so I think that's, that's really good. And then obviously, a covering letter. So like your resume, again, make it concise, no more than a page and ideally half a page for the cover letter. Really, it's only there to expand on your specific interest on this project. killable so very much targeted to this organization, potentially you might address what you see as I mean need to be well researched in their assessment, what you see is some of the challenges facing the industry that that board operates within. It's an easy way to differentiate the CV. It's not just looking at through, it's actually considered in, let's say, health, or let's say fmccg. Here are the pressures, the external macro pressures that might be impacting on this industry right now. And I've given consideration to what that might mean for your organization.

**Helga Svendsen 14:35**

And I mean, you will have seen more applications than I have, but I know when I've got the pile of applications, if I'm an nominations committee or something, you can tell those people that have really thought about this particular board role and tailoring it and if they're not, in my view, they're very unlikely to get into the yes pile.

**Claire McCartin 14:54**

Absolutely. Even if it's a Stella resume. If you bring them up and say, Well, you've recently applied for the Roll. And the very first question I always ask is, what's your understanding of some of the sector pressures? And it's interesting to see who's actually done some research and who hasn't. And you do then think well has the person got the time to commit themselves to this board, if they haven't taken the time to actually do a little research before submitting? It's a really easy way to differentiate yourself. Information is so accessible these days. So quick google searches quick, you know, look through LinkedIn, who's in the sector that I'm connected to, and the information at our fingertips.

**Helga Svendsen 15:34**

Okay, so a half to one page cover letter that is well targeted around challenges. A resume that's not your executive resume at one that he's also targeted around the governance. one page two page, what's your view on resumes?

**Claire McCartin 15:49**

For non executive director, ideally one page but at most two, so my preference is a one pager and a cover night, but if you've got a huge story You think it just couldn't possibly be on one page, then just no more than two is the absolute rule. And then once you've got that, I think it's about looking at how visible you are in the market. So for me, it's in terms just sort of your personal brand. So the resume won't sell you, Holly will then do a google of the individual Google search. And we'll we'll have a look at what do we know of them beyond the resume? And you know, are they seen as a subject matter expert? Are they speaking at conferences? Are they writing about thought leadership or pushing thought leadership issues into the marketplace? Because you do want board members who are looking broadly at what are the contemporary issues facing this space and you do want board members that bring a greater value proposition than just a CV that that might be impressive, but you actually welcome be seen as an impressive individual more broadly, I think. So most boards are looking for people who do contribute more widely than their organization.

**Helga Svendsen 17:11**

Interesting. So a Google search on everyone, presumably a look on LinkedIn as well and who they know and who they don't know. So lining up people's LinkedIn profiles as well against their resume.

**Claire McCartin 17:24**

Yeah, so it's also about are they contributing? So are they speaking at things are they on conference list? It's amazing what we can sort of tap into online because you do want a well networked individual because the more connected someone is generally the more able to generate ideas. They will be an access knowledge that the organization might benefit from. I think it's it's a broader value proposition that the person might bring to the table. Do you look at people's social media living on LinkedIn, which is bit more of the professional profile? Do you look at social media Yes, often they locked down, the smart people are locking down where they can. But it is still amazing what you can find. If it comes up on Google that it's an unlocked account. You just have a little quick wonder for the lower level roles, sometimes the younger kids that are not as savvy on management of privacy issues and things like that. But absolutely, if it comes up on an executive or director, Google search, then we'll have a look. Yeah,

**Helga Svendsen 18:31**

It was interesting. You said people who are more connected and more likely to have kind of more of those ideas. Is there research around that? Or is that recruiters knowing good people is that you know how that works.

**Claire McCartin 18:45**

I guess there probably is research on the topic, but it's not so much about who they're connected to or how many connections that person has, it's, it's more about the thought leadership piece. So it's about are they connected to a breadth of individuals can They bring in knowledge that might not be obvious, immediately because of those connections connected to the world to the world, that's a really good way to describe it. helliya. So, you know, it's the breadth of connectivity. We all often work with CEOs and and they'll say, let me bring such and such and such and such and we'll get the answer. There's a real power in having that access, because you're less likely to sort of stumble or to try and invent if you can rely on someone else who's been there and managed a similar issue.

**Helga Svendsen 19:34**

Right? Okay. So they've built or presented their personal brand, they've got the model of paperwork in order,

**Claire McCartin 19:43**

What next? It's then about where to look and we often get asked, Well, where do I find these amazing board roles and, and it is very true that only a small proportion that are advertised so my best tip on where to start is to tell your personal networks that you're looking. And it sounds somewhat obvious, but it's not let me tell you people don't really think that that's probably the best way to access the next opportunity is through their personal network. So I often say to people, I think you'd be surprised you might be connected to or who your connections are connected to. And by just telling people I'm really interested in looking at contributing at the board level, and here's what I think I can bring. It's amazing the conversations, you know, you might need to have 20 of those for one person to actually then refer you an opportunity. But it is amazing how your network will work for you. That is so true to even executive roles, isn't it? We see that all the time. So don't underestimate the importance of telling people you're interested in using those personal networks. Reach out regularly meetings, coffee catch ups, have a drink, just should let people know that that's where you're heading. And people are always willing to help. That's what always amazes me. And something I tell our new consultants when they're doing business development. People actually just want to help. We actually under estimate the natural human instinct to help others.

**Helga Svendsen 21:18**

I had coffee just this morning with somebody, I'm like, you should catch up with this person. And you can see she's like, I feel really uncomfortable approaching I said, Okay, so what would happen if, if they came to you and said, I'd love to sit down with you and just talk to you about insert topic? She said, of course, I'd be up for it. And I said, How would you feel? She said, I feel really flattered. I said, see you're doing a community service by asking other people

**Claire McCartin 21:42**

Prime example earlier. I think people do really want to help others and we get a really great satisfaction from doing so. So also media, obviously. So some of the roles will be advertised in the film review, or the age or wherever you might be located. The relevant this publication that on a Friday or a Saturday, less and less, through print media more and more. We are, you know, obviously an online society. So the IRC D does have a website under directorship opportunities to have a look there. There's board directions, women on boards, leadership, Victoria has won as well. There's also federal and state government appointments. I think it's [www.boards.dpc.nsw.gov.au](http://www.boards.dpc.nsw.gov.au). Have a look there. And then really make direct contact with organizations and let them know of your interest. So with the chair or Deputy Chair, if you're particularly interested in an organization and you feel you've got something to offer, very often, they don't get those approaches. So I'm sure they'd be willing to at least have a coffee with you if your CV looks credible to support that organization. And then connects with professional recruiters. So I think talk to you network about who manages these roles. Obviously, you know, we do at Davidson executive boards, there's the Korn ferry, the Russell Reynolds, the Heidrick and struggles of Spencer Stuart to the Egon, senders watermark, the list goes on, there's a few of us have a look at who's managing the roles and just network with those

individuals. recruiters are time for I think the sector has a bit of a bad reputation for getting back to candidates. If you think about a recruiters day, it's often just smashed with interviews, and so you know, returning calls, emails and so forth, it absolutely should be done. It's not always done in our sector. So find a way to connecting whether that's you know, through a mutual connection, rather than just coming cold, if you can.

**Helga Svendsen 23:52**

Another advantage of using that network that you mentioned at the start telling everyone and they may well know people in the recruitment organizations that can do an introduction.

**Claire McCartin 24:01**

Exactly right. So yes, so there's some that angle as well, in terms of the actual recruitment sector, there is still the old, we've got a vacancy, the chair and the deputy chair or some several, how are we going to manage it? Who do we know? So that's again, where, you know, the recruiters may not be involved. But being you know, in that world of, you know, telling your network being seen as a potential candidate, also being on list so women on board lists and things like that they're more and more being tapped into. So yes, so have a look at all of those angles, then you've sort of got to start thinking about when you do get the call. I guess Helga.

**Helga Svendsen 24:41**

And I get the cold. Great. Can you come in for an interview next Tuesday? Yes. And you're the person on the other side of the table. Claire, what is your advice to people because people find interviews quite challenging. And I think in my experience, board interviews are a little bit different to your exec interviews. So what what's your insights and advice

**Claire McCartin 25:00**

Absolutely right board interviews are quite different to an executive interview. I think they're a bit more relaxed. They're not as probing on give me an example of where you've done x y&z it. They're a bit more trying to tap into your knowledge of sector, the breadth of experience and so forth that you do have. So the sort of the general, what have you done in your career to date? So preparation is always key. So be able to sell yourself based on your understanding of your personal balance sheet that we spoke about earlier, your strength and weakness analysis, and your resume. What are those unique value propositions that you're going to use in the interview? So think about why should they select me for the role? Why are you interested in the role and the organization? What are those strategic challenges for the organization and the industry in which it works? What is your approach to being an Non executive director and even if you haven't been one, just think about maybe the role that you generally tend to play on the executive team. Because we all come at that from

different angles. Don't wait. So have a think about that. And be prepared to ask questions. So make sure they're insightful. Do your research on that organization and the sector in which it operates. And that might be behavioral type questions asked? I guess it's more about decision making. So that's what boards do don't know, they set the strategy, and they get fed options of directions from the executive. And they have to make the tough calls. So you might be asked describe a situation where you made a significant decision with material impact. How did you come to that decision? What sort of framework to apply to those tricky decisions and that sort of thing. You might be asked about how you've gotten a diverse group of stakeholders working together because again, that's a really critical tool. A non executive director needs to bring to the table. And you might be asked to tell them about a difficult decision where you've had a different view to appease and how you've been managed that scenario as well, because you don't want groupthink on board. So you do want people to actually put forward their concerns, their suggestions, and strongly but equally know that when the decision is made, that that's the decision that we've all made as an owner. Yeah, so that's, I guess some of the interview sort of questions you might need to describe also something that didn't go well, what you might have learned from that. And sometimes we'll ask people about what are the gaps for them as they see them. So how they might then address those gaps and bring themselves up to speed. Some further things just to bear in mind is it will be probably brief us so don't worry, I've had a lot of clients and candidates Walk out after half an hour. And so all that was really quick, I must have gotten it and it's actually probably just the initial interview will probably be half an hour because it's not a behavioral questions, it's different. And I might be interviewing five for one vacancy. So it's also about the chairs availability and time. So I think they're the key things just remember to have done your research on the organization and the sector have read their strategic plan, have read their annual report and get yourself well and truly prepared with what your value proposition is.

### **Helga Svendsen 28:38**

So many fabulous tips in there, Claire, I can I just know that this is one of those podcasts and is going to be listened to over and over again, as people come up to this process. It is just fantastic. So we have covered a lot of the process that's starting and just thinking about it and where you should place yourself and what are some of the things you should think about. Putting your resume together, putting yourself out there, the interview process itself, what are the main things or the key points you want people to take away from today's conversation?

### **Claire McCartin 29:11**

Yeah, I think it's about developed a plan. So really assess what success looks like for you in a year or two years, and then really review it regularly. Develop a bit of a discipline around that plan as well. So it takes work just like applying for an executive role. It's a bit of a numbers game takes work, it takes self reflection, really do hold yourself a little bit accountable on this plan because it's easy for five years to pass. And I promised myself I was going to get myself on some boards and I haven't really done it. So develop the plan and the discipline. And then I would also advise, do it whilst in executive employment. So I think sometimes people say well, I'll do that at retirement. My tip is

actually just like getting your next degree. can be a job, it's often easier done within an executive job. Same goes for board roles. And then the only thing I'd say is remember your network, maybe enlist a mentor, because mentors are really powerful. And you know someone who can, you can bounce ideas off, you can bounce your interview preparation off. That's really valuable. Also, the other tip, I'd say is know when to say no, we've all been invited to have a look at a board opportunity. I think it's really important to say no, when the wrong one comes your way, and not just be flattered onto a board and then very quickly kind of realized, actually, this is an organization that doesn't have the alignment

**Helga Svendsen 30:42**

Just suspected it did. I can just jump in there, even if that's a bit down the path. I spoke with a client the other day who had been through all of this process, and she was up to the point where she was observing a board meeting, so she was quite a bit down the path. And after observing the board meeting, she politely declined their offer. So if you're, you know, as you say, do the due diligence, find out about it and do not be afraid to say no no matter winning the process that is

**Claire McCartin 31:08**

Such a critical thing. And what a fabulous way to really finalize your testing of whether this is the right way is that board observation piece, and more and more clients actually want that both ways they want the candidate to buy into them by that stage. But if that's not offered, you should absolutely ask for it. So, as well as all of the due diligence, the board packs, committee packs, any disclosures might be made. So yes, so and the board charter, I think all of those things are really important in finalizing the decision, whether you want them have made the decision that they want you or potentially you're getting very much to the point in when you're at that stage.

**Helga Svendsen 31:50**

And indeed thinking about those sorts of due diligence processes should be in any role with the board roles will not but I think they're probably more almost more important in board roles. But absolutely,

**Claire McCartin 31:59**

I agree with you.

Helga Svendsen 32:00

And so is there a resource, it might be a book or a TED talk or something that you'd like to share with the community?

Claire McCartin 32:09

It's a really good question. I think our conversation earlier about tapping into training in this space ICG how he has got some great programs as well, or directions also similar to yourself earlier, I think get yourself trained and knowledgeable in the space is the tip. And then I think it's just about really always using that network and doing your research there. The key resources, I think, at your fingertips.

Helga Svendsen 32:40

Yeah. Oh, thank you, Claire, that, like I say, I just know that this is one of those ones that people will go back to, I did a on a strategy session with somebody recently working through her resume. And likewise, I can say that that's one that people go back to and I think this will be lockwise.

Claire McCartin 32:56

Absolute pleasure, always talking to you. Hello. Yes. So thank you for inviting me. Such a pleasure. And

Helga Svendsen 33:01

Yeah, I know you have a very busy day with all of those interviews and calls coming in. So I appreciate your time greatly. And I know people out there listening to do as well. So thank you, Claire, thanks for being with us on take on board.

Claire McCartin 33:12

A pleasure. Thanks Helga.