



2023 Green shoots of change

Reviewing the 2022 bold moves in the boardroom report

CASE STUDY 1: Bringing the voice of the customer to the board table

The following case study is part of a series entitled 'Green shoots of change' which builds on insights from the 2022 report, Bold moves in the boardroom: skills and capabilities fit for the future. That report challenged boards to broaden their composition to include more board members with backgrounds in HR, customer/marketing and digital. The purpose of this series is to highlight recent appointments of non-executive directors from diverse backgrounds so as to inspire other boards to act.

Ai-Media, a world leader in AI-powered captioning solutions, is counting on broader director skillsets and “a challenger” culture as it pursues a mission to give everyone access to content, communications and information.

Understand your customers as part of a well-informed board

As Deanne Weir contemplates the most pressing issues for boards of the future to consider, she keeps coming back to one crucial element – truly knowing your business’ customers.

This requires having a diverse director skillset that includes areas such as marketing and sales to ensure that the board is cognisant of changing consumer dynamics and cultural issues. “You must ensure that you’ve got people on your board who are across not just how employees are thinking and working, but what that means for consumers,” says Weir, chair of Ai-Media, an ASX-listed company specialising in captioning, transcription, translation, and audio-description services. “We have to understand our customers and what they’re going through in this changing world. Unless we know what they’re doing and want, and how we’re all actually interacting with them as a team, then I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere.”

Cheryl Hayman is one of the new breed of directors who brings a background in corporate marketing in fast-moving consumer goods to her role as a professional director. A non-executive director at Ai-Media, Hayman

says directors must play their part in creating a future-fit board as companies grapple with economic, geopolitical, climate, technology, and diversity challenges.

However, she believes her marketing skills – and the intrinsic ability they give her to better zero in on the needs of consumers – are a particular strength that she brings to the Ai-Media board. “Our business is built around servicing customers, whether that’s end customers or broadcast media and other clients,” Hayman says. “So, having a really strong outside-in lens, which comes from being a marketer, makes me a really good fit for the board.”

She adds that boards risk failing if their directors “don’t think they have anything else to learn”. “That’s a dangerous position for some boards going forward.”

This imperative to have a broader set of directors on boards underlines a key point to emerge in the Bold Moves in the Boardroom report calling for board composition to align more closely to evolving strategic opportunities and risks.

Avoid 'group think' and embrace directors who challenge the status quo through their experience and personal attributes

Following Ai-Media's successful IPO in 2020, one director retired in November 2021, and Weir felt new board blood was required to complement the four existing directors. "We wanted to make sure that, having been together for so long, we weren't engaging in group think," Weir says.

With the company going through a significant period of transition, she felt that bringing greater consumer knowledge to the board was imperative. "We wanted to ensure that we brought some proper marketing expertise to the table," Weir says. "That wasn't a background for any of our other directors."

Initially thinking of adding two directors, the board members brought Hayman into the fold in 2022 after a

robust search and felt she offered the "freshness and rejuvenation that we needed" in one package, Weir says. In addition to her marketing knowledge, they valued the fact she was "a challenger" who had new ideas and was not afraid to air them.

Now chair of Ai-Media's remuneration and nomination committee, Hayman also credits her strong listening and communication skills and natural curiosity for her appointment to boards. This complements her customer-centric background.

"As much as I love talking, I'm a good listener," she says. "Again, that comes from a background as a marketer where you learn to present and articulate messaging in the right way."

Nurture diversity and look outside the box for new capabilities and skills

Bold Moves in the Boardroom advanced the view that “future fit boards need strong governance foundations, plus a broader set of skills and capabilities” including from digital, customer, and HR backgrounds. This view tends to enliven the conversation about whether boards need generalist or specialist skills, or perhaps both. Stepping into that tension, Hayman says that first and foremost directors need to be good business leaders. “And then, we (collectively) can bring additional skills from a diversity of backgrounds.”

Hayman suggests boards should target having a cohort of directors with a generalist foundation, but who can individually add value by assessing operations through a “specialty lens”. While leveraging specialist skills is essential, she adds that the best directors are “able to have conversations around a boardroom that are much broader than that”.

“Where the generalist piece comes in is that you overlay the general conversation with a view that comes from your specialisation at heart. But if you are all the same, you don’t get any type of challenge or diversity of thinking.”

Final words

For other boards considering appointing new non-executive directors from more diverse backgrounds, Weir advises always factoring in and referencing the business’s “skills matrix”. “(But) it’s not just a question of what are your qualifications, what exact roles have you had – it’s also some of those other more psychological or behavioural attributes that someone brings to the table.”

In this sense, she can report that Hayman has been a “strong cultural fit” who is championing a consumer focus that is taking Ai-Media to new levels of customer satisfaction.

Hayman concludes that bold boards which will truly be ready for dynamic markets must have a diverse board of directors who are happy contemplating compelling

future issues, rather than “spending all their time in the boardroom thinking about the month that’s just passed”.

In this regard, Hayman makes “a plug for my brethren” and encourages chairs and recruitment search firms to give more consideration to consumer-orientated functions such as HR, sales and marketing when selecting directors.

“They don’t necessarily have a super, easily understood specialisation like an accountant that you can easily get your head around. But they certainly bring a broad lens across an entire business, having worked to bring any new product from ideas and insights to commercialisation, driving the entire new development to its market implementation, always with the customer in mind.”

For more insights on boards of the future, click [here](#) to read the **Bold Moves in the Boardroom** report.



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