

Not-for-profits a good route into the boardroom

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There are many reasons why women continue to make up only 8 per cent of board directors in ASX top 200 companies, but a shortage of experienced women interested in the role is not one of them.

The Women on Boards conference in Sydney last week attracted about 250 delegates and a range of high-profile speakers, including several directors of large listed companies, academics and headhunters.

The WOB network has 5200 people registered, representing 2000 organisations, says Ruth Medd, chairwoman of the group. And interest is growing steadily, from women who are already on boards and those wishing to join.

Coca-Cola Amatil chairman and chancellor of the University of NSW, David Gonski, told the conference those wanting to make it onto a top 200 board could find a not-for-profit board was a way of gaining experience. But he sounded a warning note.

"Many [people] come to see me and ask could I help them to get on a not-for-profit board," he said.

"I'm always delighted because they want to give back to society or they are just very smart and realise what these boards can do for them.

'What strikes me is very few understand what a not-for-profit structure is all about. They don't understand the risks of being on the boards."

The same liability existed for directors of not-for-profit organisations as for businesses, he added.

Having a real interest in the organisation of which you wish to become a director, whatever the nature of the organisation, was a theme several of the directors at the conference discussed.

Woolworths director Leon L'Huillier talked about his enjoyment of all things retail and his knowledge of liquor retailing from his days as CEO of Lion Nathan.

Emma Stein, a director of Integral Energy and former executive in the building materials and energy industries, feels the same way. Her expertise coincides with her interests and this has proved a platform for her board career.

Get your CV in order and think about the skills you can offer a board, and the kind of board that suits those skills, several of the directors advised.

Directors shoulder a heavy workload, warned Transfield chairman Tony Shepherd. He is always on the look-out for potential directors, even though he noted there were fewer openings as boards become smaller.

Several speakers mentioned the need for women in particular to get on the radar for appointments. While this sounds simple in theory, it is tricky in practice, as women often find it difficult to crack traditional male networks.