

LEADERSHIP

Building a Personal Board of Directors in an Era of Nomadic Careers

by Noah Askin and Cor Dubois



Image Credit | wiesel

A PBOD offers a strategic, structured approach to professional queries and networking challenges.

✔ **INSIGHT** | NOTE 06 May 2024

Critical professional decisions are often kept close to the vest, particularly once people are further along in their career. A book on career transitions, a webinar offered by someone who has discovered her purpose, and a brief bit of self-reflection seems to suffice for many as a means of making what is nearly always a significant life decision. Others' perspectives and feedback are rarely sought, and if they are, it is not often done in a systematic way.

RELATED CMR ARTICLES

“A Stitch in Time Saves Nine: Leveraging Networks to Reduce the Costs of Turnover” by Gary Ballinger, Elizabeth Craig, Rob Cross, & Peter Gray

“Coach McKeever: Unorthodox Leadership Lessons from the Pool” by Holly A. Schroth

With **nearly half the workforce** in many industries looking for new jobs—often due to lack of **advancement opportunities**—the isolated decision making seems short-sighted. Layer on newly developed preferences around remote work, considerations for dualcareer couples, and **concerns** about preparedness for the role of AI in the workplace, and it is clear that people are in more need of career advice and support than ever.

While individual mentors are great, a Personal Board of Directors (PBOD) offers a broader, more balanced, strategic, and structured approach to help respond to major professional questions and the different network-related concerns that arise across a career.

With increasing physical and psychological disconnections between people and their work, our experience—**following the lead of others**—suggests tremendous benefit from the creation of a diverse group of 4-7 “board members.” These are invested but largely disinterested mentors, advisors, and other sounding boards who will remain relatively constant across the twists and turns of your career. A PBOD should be comprised of people

who are familiar with you from different life stages and career circumstances, including former or current colleagues, bosses, mentors, coaches, peers, advisors, classmates, and professors. But at which career stage should you build one, and whom to choose?

When To Build Your Personal Board

In surveys and workshops, we have observed that even when people are generally happy with their careers, many remain eager to move on professionally. Regardless of where you are along your career path, there is likely a steady stream of serious questions and complex situations that can be well-served by engaging with a PBOD.

Each phase of your career presents different challenges and considerations. In the figure below, we have broken them down into rough age ranges based on the kinds of questions people are typically pondering during each phase. Note the box covering late-20s through mid-50s, which is the range in which a PBOD can be most beneficial, though its utility extends through your whole career.

WHEN TO CREATE A PERSONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

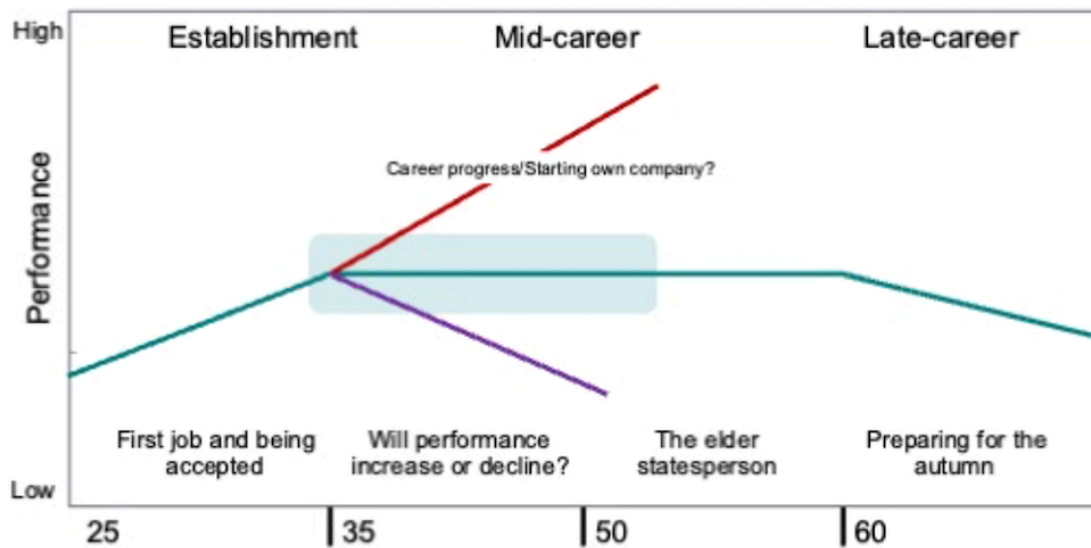


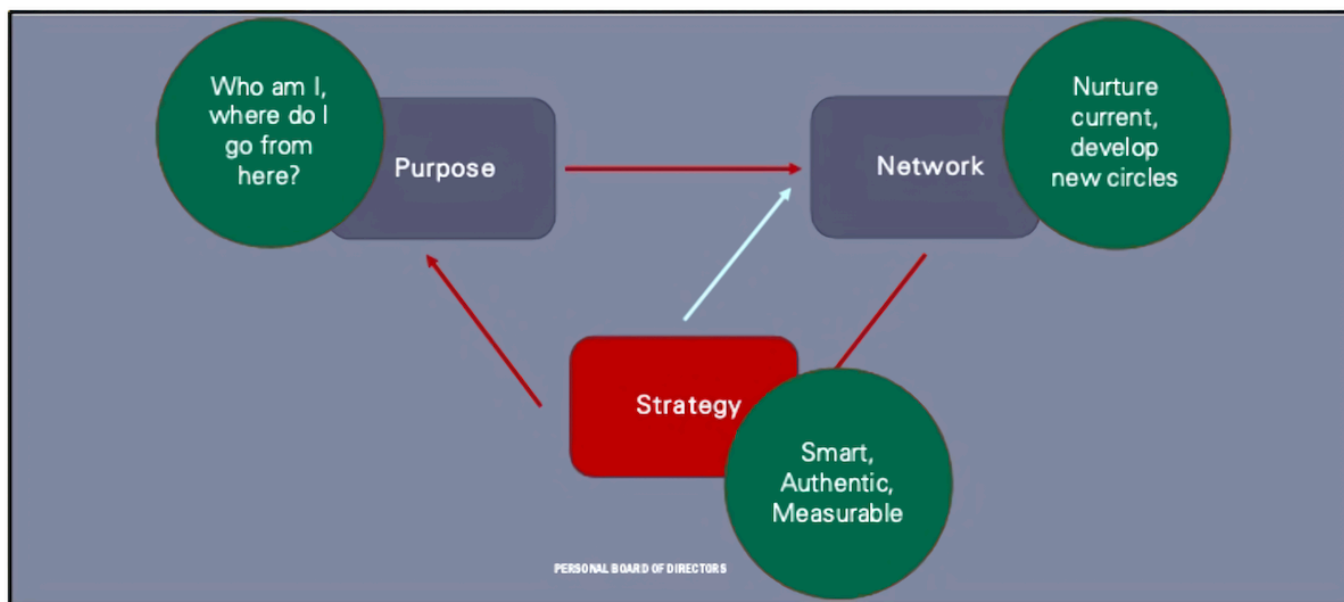
Chart is an interpretation of the SKOOLgraphic

In the exploratory/establishment stage, the the most common theme of career questions is “help me navigate.” The average 28-year old does this alone or with friends. In the mid-career stage, the burning need is to “help me to perform.” Here, when people don’t try to solve this on their own, we typically see informal guidance sought from peers, company leaders, or some kind of management training. Finally, in the mid-to-late career stage, the main concern is a desire “help me transition.” Here support is mainly given by experts, singular mentors, and thought leaders.

In each phase, we have seen people benefit greatly from a more structured approach to figuring out what they want to do, or who they want to be (next). The key is understanding what kinds of questions to ask given the career stage, and what kind of feedback will be most beneficial. A more structured and thoughtful approach is likely to generate better options and yield better decisions.

How to Approach Building Your Personal Board

A structured approach can help identify the right people and roles to include on your board. That is why we developed a PBOD framework anchored in three pillars: Purpose, Network, and Strategy.



First, like most relationships, building your PBOD begins with you—but it does not stop there. A rough understanding of who you are, your strengths, and your purpose, will make building and engaging with your Board more beneficial. This is the Purpose pillar, and while many conduct this mental exercise, the difficulty is bringing it to others for stress testing and feedback. In particular, it helps identify whom you should include on your board, in addition to providing a starting place for your discussions with them.

Second, it is well established that your network is your most important asset. However, many often struggle to identify the key players in their network, and how they might engage them in mutually beneficial ways. Moreover, research has long shown that weak ties—our acquaintances and friends of friends—are much more likely to be helpful in providing information about job opportunities. They also view us differently from close friends and family members, enabling us to more easily reinvent ourselves. So, while

optimizing your network is essential, expanding it is even more so. Giving careful thought to both your current network and its shortcomings is the second pillar for considering the composition of a PBOD.

Lastly, a structured, strategic approach—rather than simply latching onto the individuals who are most willing to give you some of their time—will generate better outcomes for the CEO (that’s you). By strategic, we mean thinking through the different pieces of yourself, your career, and your aspirations to collect a group of people who will help with your development across all facets of your identity.

Below, we describe some of the profiles of the kinds of people to include on a PBOD. By considering your Purpose, your Network needs, and the Strategic approach you want to take, then weighing that against the profiles, your Board becomes an assembly of individuals chosen based on thoughtful reflection about your current situation and where you would like to go next.

The composition of your PBOD

Your Board should provide you with candid, open, and honest feedback as you navigate your personal and professional journey. Each of the 4-7 members play a specific role that, when combined with the other roles, creates a well-balanced team. We have found the most helpful Boards possess some combination of the following profiles:

- **Challengers:** Critical observers, insiders who can break your bias, and those who have no problem asking the difficult questions. Challengers see possibilities to push harder.
- **Supporters:** Confidants who have experienced you in action over at least 3-5 years, like your attitude and approach, and understand your strengths. Supporters intuitively know when you need a confidence boost.
- **Experts:** The gurus. People with deep, recognized expertise in an industry, a country, or even a profession. Experts understand cultural considerations and are able to provide you with critical do’s and don’ts. They are particularly relevant if you aim to make a career switch.

- **Marketing & Communications:** Your personal PR experts, they support you in differentiating, condensing your experience into a strong value proposition, and guiding you to articulate your personal brand through compelling storytelling.
- **Connectors:** Often senior executives, Connectors have a solid network, are known in various circles, and possess strong reputations. They provide access outside of your core social network, can help to identify target prospects, share insights, and can provide introductions.

While your needs will change depending on current challenges and aspirations, there is no substitute for genuine trust and deep personal knowledge. Limiting turnover, while acknowledging that membership is not set in stone, is beneficial for the Board members and for you. If you maintain regular pacing—regardless of whether you are formally convening your PBOD quarterly or connecting individually when the need arises—it will surely reap rewards.

As one aspiring executive we spoke with noted, “people are much more willing to help and give advice than I anticipated.”



Noah Askin [Follow](#)

Noah Askin teaches courses on management and leadership topics to undergraduate, MBA, and executive audiences at The Paul Merage School of Business at the University of California—Irvine. His research and teaching focus on creativity, social networks, and the critical role of relationship building in professional life.



Cor Dubois [Follow](#)

Cor Dubois is the President and Founder of Board Companions, a social enterprise in the Netherlands. He was formerly a Senior Executive at Nokia-Alcatel-Lucent, the President of BMG Classics, the President of Rothschild Inc Americas, and the Head of Europe for Market Bridge. He lectures at INSEAD and HEC Paris.