

An executive recruiter's perspective

A one-on-one with J. Veronica Biggins

You work with a lot of board clients who are interested in recruiting new directors. How has this evolved over the past few years?

There have been a number of changes over the years, and the advancements that women have made in the corporate environment speak volumes. Unfortunately, there still aren't many female CEOs. This change still needs to occur. For CEOs that I speak to, this is still an ongoing discussion. Europe is further ahead than the US, which has always pushed back on mandatory measures. Organizations turn to my firm to help them think through the nuances of not only adding someone to their boards, but adding someone who belongs at the table.

What about for diversity beyond gender—have recent events in the US, like the murder of George Floyd, had an impact on racial and ethnic diversity on boards?

The murder of George Floyd led to the bigger conversation of how people are treated every day in a corporation, and outside of it. What some employees experience, and what others do not. For example, some employees have to worry about driving to work and getting there safely, while others do not. That's a big conversation in boardrooms right now, as organizations think about their own cultures and how people are treated, and the issues some employees face. Boards are now looking at diversity in terms of the whole organization. Interestingly, in some companies, the board is more diverse than the company itself.

For those interested in serving on boards, but may have questions related to those issues of culture, what do you tell them?

We encourage people to read the proxy. Find out about the company, their culture, and how it operates. Take a look at websites that provide reviews to see how employees feel about the culture. Ask the CEO and the nomination and governance committee chair to describe the culture to you.

We have a term—the stretch factor—for the average number of board seats a particular individual holds. For women, we're finding that number decrease. Does this resonate with you in your work?

It resonates with both women and men, I don't think it's one versus the other. If you think about it, in today's world, companies don't want a professional board-sitter. You can't make board service a job and be independent in your thinking. A person who sits on too many boards calls into question their ability to devote the attention that is required to be a good board member. People are starting to think about the time and energy it takes to be a good board member.

What might you tell a company looking to increase diversity on its board?

CEOs want to increase the number of women on their boards. They should also consider looking at their own companies. Some of the women in their companies are in roles where they will never reach senior management positions, let alone a boardroom. So the question that should be asked is, "what are you doing to help move people up in your own company who will be board qualified?"

How do you reconcile the idea of inclusiveness and the idea of "fit"—that boards seem to want someone who fits the company and board culture?

We interview the CEO and members of the board and ask them to define "fit." If they tell me that they just don't see someone fitting, I ask them to tell me why.

You often hear that companies want people with CEO experience. Many think they want a CEO on the board until they actually bring one on, and that person acts like...a CEO. Perhaps it's not title you want, but the experience of understanding certain challenges. If so, it opens the door for others to be considered for board roles. When you peel it back, you can really understand what a person has done and how it can help a board. That is important.

Any other advice you would give to women looking to serve on boards?

I say this to women all the time: Don't think you're going to sit around and someone will say, "I think we should call her to sit on our board." It's not going to happen. I get more men calling me by far than women. I say to women, you need to be aggressive, you need to tell people you're interested in serving on boards. No one will tap you on the shoulder.

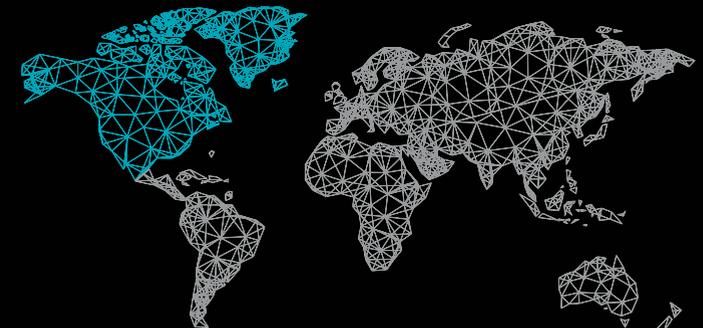
J. Veronica Biggins leads Diversified Search Group's board practice and is the managing partner of the firm's Atlanta office. Biggins has over 15 years of experience as a senior partner in executive search, serving in leadership roles at both Hodge Partners and Heidrick & Struggles before joining DSG.

Biggins' background includes 20 years of experience with NationsBank (now Bank of America), serving as Executive Vice President for Human Resources, making her one of the highest-ranking women in the banking industry. Biggins previously served as Assistant to the President of the United States and Director of Presidential Personnel under President William J. Clinton.

Biggins has also served as vice chairman of the U.S. Delegation to the United National Fourth World Conference on Women. When Biggins retired as chair of the Czech Slovak American Enterprise Fund, she received a "Points of Light Award" from President George W. Bush for her leadership of the Fund.

Biggins serves on the Southwest Airlines board of directors and recently retired from the board of directors of Avnet, Inc. Biggins has been recognized by the Board of Directors Network (BDN) for her advocacy of women on corporate boards; and is a member of the National Association of Corporate Directors as one of the Top 100 Directors in the U.S.

Biggins holds a bachelor's degree from Spelman College and a master's degree from Georgia State University.



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