

# **Board Recruitment Service Case Study**

## **Getting On Board**

### **Introduction**

Getting on Board is a charity that encourages employers to help their staff volunteer as charity trustees, school governors or board members of public bodies. It does this by informing employers of the benefits to their business of employee board-level volunteering. The charity then delivers seminars to employees about voluntary board membership and how it can benefit their careers (focusing especially on its potential to develop strategic, financial and leadership skills). Getting on Board can signpost people who are interested to opportunities that might capture their interest. These opportunities include charities and voluntary groups working in the third sector that are in need of board members and trustees.

### **The Organisation**

Getting on Board was launched 2004 and has already run employee seminars for Ford, Marsh, Government Office East, the Welsh Assembly and Shell, amongst others. Its seminars take place at convenient times for employees, for example, during their lunch breaks. As well as the Chief Executive of Getting On Board, representatives of the voluntary sector, school governors and other public appointments also often attend, offering interested employees a link into all these fields of activity.

Getting on Board has exhibited at high profile venues such as the Public Services Leadership Conference and the Home Office, and raised awareness of board-level volunteering among many employers, senior representatives of government departments, and employers' bodies (for example, the Cambridge Business Community Action Network).

### **The Getting on Board Programme**

Getting On Board believes that board-level volunteering benefits employers, employees and the community alike.

For employers it can raise the company's corporate responsibility profile, provide a cost efficient means of professional development and help them to become employers of choice. For employees it can offer opportunity to increase and improve their skills – especially their *soft* skills – as well as improve their CV, work/life balance and bring personal satisfaction. For charities, and through them the wider community, the benefit is clear: help in securing the sort of board they need to help deal with the new and formidable challenges they face.

Volunteering on boards also increases mutual understanding between the voluntary, private and public sectors. As one employee of Shell International who went on to take up a position on a voluntary sector board notes, sometimes this comes as a bit of a culture shock:

In regards to the experience - it is great fun. *[But]* I think I needed some time to understand how the organisation works and how the different activities link together. I also need some time to switch from a commercially driven world to a non profit world where different logics and drivers apply. However, being a treasurer, I was able to add value to the organisation and to transfer some of the risk management know-how into an arts outfit, so I enjoy very much what I am doing.

## **Good Practice**

### Shell International

Sharon Lewis, Community Relations Manager for Shell International Limited has welcomed Getting On Board into the workplace. A breakfast seminar took place in 2006 at the Shell Centre in London, involving, amongst others, representatives of the third sector Governance Hub, the School Governors One Stop Shop and the Commissioner for Public Appointments. The seminar was mainly targeted at middle and senior managers with UK or European wide positions, regardless of discipline.

Sharon wanted to promote the concept of voluntary board membership as an opportunity for learning in action and for improving leadership skills; “this is how I have positioned and promoted it internally with staff.” A strong believer in the learning potential of external voluntary opportunities, Sharon aims to integrate them with Shell’s own learning programmes and competency frameworks. For example, she sees that joining a board can contribute to Shell’s internal programme of individual development plans, comprising areas such as Motivating, Spotting Business Opportunities, Building a Shared Vision, Valuing Difference, Coaching, and so on. Shell employees each have a budget allocated to training and development, and Sharon thinks it is important to levy a small cost for attending volunteering opportunities such as this. This ensures that line managers straightaway identify them as a serious skills and development opportunity for their staff.

Furthermore, Sharon sees voluntary board membership as adding great value in helping employees get to grips with cultural diversity. As she puts it,

Shell is a big organisation, containing many different businesses. It operates in 130 countries around the globe. In the borough of Lambeth, which Shell Centre staff work closely with, there are over 130 languages spoken, and there is great cultural diversity locally. So by volunteering within the voluntary sector, Shell employees can learn about different cultures and diversity on their doorstep. This understanding contributes to company performance as a whole; there is a great deal to be gained by working outside the company.

Sharon feels that the third sector is losing out by not having better brokerage, and has some advice for the Governance Hub:

I am happy to do some promotion and to be an ambassador for Getting On Board, but we need a brokerage arm in this charity. There is a real need once people have been engaged to get them linked into opportunities for board membership. There is a need for a one stop shop to do this, if there's to be a good outcome from their initial engagement.

### Go-East

Suzanne Lowe, Team Leader for Communities, Neighbourhoods and Culture at Go-East, the regional office for the East of England, also recommends inviting Getting On Board in to help develop employees' skills.

Like other Government Offices in the regions, Go-East joins up eleven central departments, and feeds back the region's views and unique needs to Whitehall. Over the last few years Go-East has steadily moved away from directly managing large programmes towards a more strategic and co-ordinating role. Among these was the development of the Voluntary Sector Compact, an initiative designed to promote standards of good practice in the relationship between public agencies and third sector organisations. It was in light of this work that the Getting On Board programme was strongly recommended to Go-East by Essex County Council. Sue identified it as potentially a very useful staff development opportunity:

It was part of a programme of activity that we were doing in relation to Compact (with the voluntary sector). Go-East offers employees two days a year in leave to undertake voluntary work. We had already done a quick survey of Go-East staff to find out who was volunteering and where they were doing this. The Getting On Board workshop was another part of the jigsaw. It opened people's eyes to the fact that you could volunteer on a board, as well as to do the more hands-on stuff. One member of staff was already on a board, offering financial advice, but they still found it useful to get more of an overview.

A two hour workshop for staff at Go-East was arranged. The workshop was open to all staff, and speakers included West Norfolk CVS, who were able to give an overview of what voluntary groups and charities are looking for in terms of trustees. Also speaking was a serving trustee, something Sue felt was particularly beneficial, as he was able to give real life feedback on what being a trustee involved.

Like Sharon, though from the public rather than the private sector, Sue saw the workshop as an opportunity for staff, in particular junior staff, to develop skills they might need to progress in the workplace:

So much of what we do now as a GO is strategic and involves partnership working through Local Area Agreements and so on. Staffs in junior grades do need to learn the skills to operate at partnership meetings and to interface with a whole range of new, external partners. So many of these skills come from 'doing it' rather than sitting at a desk. People have different learning styles too, and some learn best through experience, which is exactly what being on a board offers. We sell board membership to staff as being good for their personal development, as well as being altruistic.

We explained to junior managers especially that they would gain strategic knowledge and understanding by being on trustee boards. They did begin to see how collaborative work works in practice: 'Ah, that's the mystery of strategic partnerships,' they think. We explained that this is an extra string to their bow and that they could put it on their CVs.

## **Recommendations**

Sue recommends Getting On Board to local authorities, health trusts and other public bodies but emphasises that the way to 'sell it' is by stressing the benefit to employer and employee, rather than just focusing on the neediness of the voluntary and community sector:

Use a hard-edged management perspective – it's about developing employees' financial, influencing and partnership skills.

Like Sharon she also emphasises that employees are likely to network with a whole range of people as board members that they might not otherwise meet. She also feels that Getting On Board offers significant potential for trustee volunteering outside of London:

Smarter working on governance is needed in rural areas. It's no good locating all expertise in London where understanding of rural issues may be limited. People look for local solutions to local problems, and context is incredibly important. Matching employers with the need for trustees and providing resources and training locally would move things forward greatly.

## **Conclusion**

Getting On Board opens employers' and employees' eyes to the potential benefits of voluntary board membership. At present it lacks the resources to actually broker and place trustees. Nevertheless, this is an innovative

approach that has come from outside the voluntary sector. Suzanne Lowe of Go-East sums up its success:

I really like the approach. Getting On Board has turned trustee recruitment on its head. With enormous energy and few resources, Getting On Board has taken a business-like approach, not sitting and waiting for people to come to them to volunteer, but instead asking the question – ‘where are the people who would make good board members?’, for example – and seeking them out through employers. This is not a voluntary sector perspective, yet it works. They talk the language that employers understand.

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