

Intro

Welcome to another episode of CIPR Engage.

At the CIPR we believe that PR and comms practitioners add value to organisations, bringing a range of skills and experience that no other profession can command. We are actively encouraging our members to consider taking up Director or Non-Executive Director roles to bring their perspective and expertise to the most senior levels of leadership.

In this episode of Engage, our guests discuss their paths to the Board-level positions they hold, the unique skills PR professionals bring to the table, and the impact having senior-level communications experience has on decision-making.

Ann-Marie Blake

Hello, and welcome to this Engage podcast. Where we're going to be talking about the opportunities for communication professionals to join boards. My name is Ann-Marie Blake, co-founder of True, which is a boutique employee engagement agency, but I'm also a serial volunteer. I've recently completed a four-year term on the International Executive Board of the International Association for Business Communicators, a bit of a mouthful there, where I was Secretary and Treasurer, and I'm currently a trustee of Hyde Housing Association.

Ann-Marie Blake

My own experience and that of comms peers is that comms professionals are needed now more than ever on board, and I'm really pleased to have here with me today to discuss those opportunities, two fantastic guests, Noha Al Afifi and Stephen Waddington. Noha, I'm going to ask you to introduce yourself. Who are you, and what experience do you have at boards?

Noha Al Afifi

Thanks, Ann-Marie. It's really delightful to be with you. I am the Deputy Chief Executive of the Charity Arthritis Action. I also sit on two boards, so CIPR, and I also sit on their EDI committee. I'm also on the board of ARMA, which is the Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance. I've been in PR for over 15 years, then spanning across various industries until I found myself in the charity sector, where I've transitioned to hybrid comms and fundraising roles.

Ann-Marie Blake

Fantastic. Thank you for that. Maybe we'll have a bit of a discussion about where people start. Stephen, can I ask you just to say a few words about your background and your involvement in boards?

Stephen Waddington

Yeah, sure. Thank you, Ann-Marie. Great to be here. My name is Stephen Waddington. I run a professional advisory firm called Wadds Inc. We do a range of professional advisory, management and research activities across management and communication supporting agencies and in-house teams with issues related to performance and effectiveness.

Stephen Waddington

I've worked in the industry for 25 years or so, mainly from an agency perspective, and that's where my non-exec and board experience comes from, so I'm mainly helping a range of agencies through various stages of growth and development.

Ann-Marie Blake

Excellent. Thank you very much, both. Interestingly, I think I was reflecting the other day, every journey to the boardroom is a unique one. Certainly, being on a board wasn't in my plan. It was only after a conversation with a good friend of mine that was talking to me about women in boards. She said, "There aren't enough women on boards," and I should consider it.

Ann-Marie Blake

I totally had forgotten about that conversation until a few weeks later, when I was asked to become a member of one of our industry body boards. Normally, I would have said, "No, it's not really something for me." But I took a deep breath and I said, "Yes." That was my introduction to boards. I'm curious to know how. Maybe I can start with you. What led you to start your journey on boards?

Noha Al Afifi

Sure. At Arthritis Action, we're members of a couple of umbrella bodies. One of them is National Voices. They're a charity that convened 200 different health and social care charities looking at different health conditions. At the time, I received one of their newsletters, and they said, "We're looking for a trustee with comms expertise." I thought, "This is interesting, maybe I can put myself forward." I spoke to the chief exec at the time, and she said, "Absolutely, we're a member of the

organisation, it's perfectly aligned with our objectives," and it's really good for my own experience and professional development.

Noha Al Afifi

I put myself forward. They ran an election and I was successful. There were two places on their board, so I secured one. I think there were about 10 or 12 candidates. That was how I started. I completed two terms with them, so three years each, which was the maximum duration that you could stay on that board. I finished with them in October last year.

Noha Al Afifi

As for CIPR, it started with a co-option, actually. It was Steve Shepperson-Smith who co-opted me two years ago for a year. Again, they were looking for someone from a PR background, but also because of my third sector expertise, he thought it would be interesting for me to join the board and add that diversity of perspectives. When I finished with the year, I also wanted to continue because I really enjoyed the experience. I was part of the board election, and I was successful again.

Ann-Marie Blake

Congratulations. Co-opted for one year and are currently on year three and counting. I think that's how it begins, isn't it? Thank you for that. Steve, what about you? What was your path?

Stephen Waddington

It's a really interesting observation that there are no two journeys to the board are the same because they're not. No two boards are the same either. Every board needs a range of skills related to the nature of the organisation. My first experience on the board was a governor of a primary school where my kids were in London. Then similar to how I did it and yourself a period of time through industry associations, notably the CIPR, worked on its council and then its board through 3-5 years or so. That's been my experience and my journey.

Stephen Waddington

Notable, though, that there is a board almost for everybody because the skills you have as a practitioner or as a manager will be in need, well, required and benefits some board of some form, depending on the organisational context.

Ann-Marie Blake

Yeah, that's interesting. I really like the school governor because that is sometimes a route for many people, isn't it? Let's just pursue that a little bit in terms of the particular skills that PR people can bring. I remember my interview for Hyde Housing when I was asked as part of the panel what I knew about social housing. My response to them was quite an unusual one, which was, well, I know a little bit, not very much, but you've got 10 experts that could tell you about social housing. I'm going to bring to you a different perspective around PR communications, and obviously, I'm aware of governance.

Ann-Marie Blake

In terms of your own observations, either of you can come to this one, what skills do you think that PR pros can bring to different boards?

Noha Al Afifi

I will start with National Voices. They were after someone with the comms, but also the digital comms side of things. They were very keen because they don't have anyone on the team who's got that area of expertise. But I will say now, having been on boards for a couple of years now, is that we have lots of transferable skills. In terms of strategy development, just being able to communicate with stakeholders internally, externally, is really important. The crisis communication side, every organisation has a crisis committee, and typically you'd have a comms person being part of that effort.

Noha Al Afifi

Then I think fundamentally, it's about reputation management. That is the core of any responsibility related to a board member. Again, PR professionals would have experience in managing reputation of an organisation.

Ann-Marie Blake

Brilliant. Thank you. Do you want to add to that, Stephen?

Stephen Waddington

Yeah, I do. Generally, public relations, corporate communication practitioners bring knowledge of the relationship perspective of an organisation. As Noha suggested, we understand broad stakeholder perspectives. If we don't understand them, we know how to engage and bring them into the boardroom. Reflecting both the internal perspective and the external perspective of an

organisation within the organisation. That's unique to public relations practitioners, and that is incredibly valuable in any organisation.

Stephen Waddington

Typically, most organisations have a limited view of the external perspective. That's the most obvious place to slot in and make a contribution. I have to say, though, in my experience on boards, each board has been different and the contribution I've made is very different. In the school context, as a governor, you're bringing the context of the parent into the boardroom and knowledge of having children and being part of the community in that school environment, supportive of the teachers and what they want to achieve.

Stephen Waddington

The agencies I work with, the boards I sit on there, I'm providing insight into the market context and, again, the relationship perspective, but also the experience of having been there and done it, I walked the journey that the founders of agencies are on of.

Ann-Marie Blake

Yeah, absolutely. I spend quite a lot of time with students because part of my multi-hatted career is I do some teaching as well. I talk to the students about PR and communications, one of the only professions where even at a relatively either young age or junior level, you're going toe to toe with some very senior people that other functions maybe don't have that opportunity to do.

Ann-Marie Blake

Therefore, even though you might not be part of the board and the governance within the organisation that you're working with, you are picking up quite a lot of how boards should function by osmosis in some cases. You'd be surprised, actually, when you get your own opportunity to sit at a board, it's not just comms that we can advise on, it's lots of different things as well. I'm sure we've all seen examples of boards and organisations where there have been reputational issues, and we thought to ourselves, "Well, do they have a comms expert on the board, maybe?"

Stephen Waddington

I was involved in some work during COVID where I saw the public relations function elevated to the highest level of organisations. It was in daily stand-up meetings in NHS Trust. It was part of the response effort in any public health authority or council setting. It was right there as part of resilience teams. I wanted to understand why in that moment that happened and what the

opportunity was to develop that through management. I've ended up four years into a PhD trying to figure out that operating parameter, and now we can frankly develop that.

Stephen Waddington

The thing I come back to constantly, we get obsessed within public relations about the media perspective of organisations, often the communication perspective as well. Actually, the value we bring is the relationship perspective, and you've both cited here, examples of where you have brought the perspective of other stakeholders into an organisation, and that's where our value absolutely lies, I think.

Ann-Marie Blake

Absolutely. Thank you for that, Stephen. Interestingly, you just dropped in there that you're four years into a PhD. You're four years into a PhD, you have a full-time role. I think that's going to bring me on to my next topic, which is always about time. How does one find the time to do this? Certainly, the adage is, if you want something done, ask a busy person. But what would you say about the time commitment that's involved? Maybe I'll start with you, Noha, and I'll come back to Stephen on time commitment. But how are you juggling it all?

Noha Al Afifi

That's an excellent question because I was this close to being part of three boards on top of a very busy full-time role, and I just realised I can't, so I had to be selective, which is why I decided to step down from National Voices, and I'm now on the other two boards on top of the day job. I think time management is crucial, but also determining when board meetings happen. Is it during the day? Is it at the end of the day? Because, for example, at the very section, all our board meetings are in the evenings. But I don't have that luxury with the two boards I'm on at the moment. They're all during working hours.

Noha Al Afifi

I think in terms of preparing I read the board papers in the evenings, I have to do that, or weekends. Usually, you do get them a week before, so you've got plenty of time to schedule and fit that in. But it's also about getting some flexibility from your employer is really important because if I need to dedicate three or four hours for a board meeting during the day, then it means that I need some flexibility.

Noha Al Afifi

But also, if you're sitting on subcommittee meetings like I do, that adds another layer of complexity because that's another two or three hour long meetings every two or three months. I think it's just being very organised and also prioritising what are those organisations that you really want to serve because you need that motivation as well. You have to be passionate about what you do, and then you'll make the time.

Ann-Marie Blake

You said you mentioned it to your employer. Did you have to ask permission?

Noha Al Afifi

Yes, I did. With National Voices, that was an easy sell and similar to the Arthritis Musculoskeletal Alliance because we are an arthritis charity, so this serves us really well. But also, I do have colleagues who sit on boards or do other volunteer activities. So long as it's a nonprofit organisation or a charity, you could use volunteering days. We offer staff two days of volunteering time every calendar year, so that's one way of doing it.

Noha Al Afifi

But I guess if it's a paid for a role like a non-exec director, that's when you need to probably look at flexitime or taking annual leave.

Ann-Marie Blake

Brilliant. I'm going to come back to the NEDs in the second non-exec directors. Stephen, what about you? How are you juggling it with a full-time job, family, PhD?

Stephen Waddington

I'm in the privileged position of being able to be this stage of the career when I can choose what I want to do and fit it around parenting, caring, responsibilities, and so forth. I very much designed or created the business as a lifestyle business, and that's really important to me, actually. I can balance study and caring responsibilities and so forth.

Stephen Waddington

The second point, though, is I think I get asked this occasionally, why don't you stand again for this CIPR? Noha makes a really good point about focus, so focusing your energy where you best think you can deliver and support an organisation. But I also think there's a time and a place. I

think whenever I've worked with the industry associations in particular, it's been focused around a particular agenda or a piece of work and getting that and delivering that.

Stephen Waddington

2014, when there was president of the CIPR, we were very focused around the impact of social media on the industry. I led a number of work streams around that, and we delivered a couple of books. Then that was it. I was out and realised it was time to step aside and make way for other people. I think that's really important.

Stephen Waddington

Throwing your energy in to a board and being completely committed, but then also knowing everything has a life cycle and moving on when you're ready to to make way for other people. I think that's really important.

Ann-Marie Blake

Yeah, I think that's a fantastic point, actually. My board was based in the US, so I would be doing a full day's work and then joining calls at 10:00, 11:00 PM UK time, as well as reading the papers. Even though it's fine, at some point you think, actually, I'm really exhausted now because there's a lot of stuff that we're doing, and you have to know when to step down.

Ann-Marie Blake

Unfortunately, the board cycle says actually three years, and then you have to stand again, and I didn't stand again. My colleague said to me, "You will be back." I'm like, "No, I'm taking a rest. I'm going to do something else." September, I'm not back in the same guise, but they did ask me to do something that's not necessarily board-related, but I can keep my volunteer and my commitment to my industry. That's a nice balance, I think.

Ann-Marie Blake

Noha, you mentioned NED, non-executive director roles, and I think I've mentioned trustee roles. Are you able to maybe just give a couple of minutes on the difference?

Noha Al Afifi

I believe NED and trustee roles are actually very similar in nature. They're both concerned with strategic oversight, high-level decision-making, looking at legal governance matters or financial

affairs of the organisation. You're basically responsible for running the entire organisation, but you're not meant to be looking at the day-to-day operations because that really is reserved for the senior management teams.

Noha Al Afifi

I think what sets them apart, trustees and NEDs, are primarily in the sectors where you work. In the charity sector, those are typically trusteeships, and they are voluntary positions. Charities are not meant to be paying trustees to represent them. Instead, you could be reimbursed for travel or attending board meetings or representing the organisation externally.

Noha Al Afifi

With NEDs, it's slightly different in that it depends on the sector that you join. If it's corporate, more likely than not, it is a paid for role. In public sectors, it really varies. I am aware of [inaudible 00:17:30] trusts that do pay for the expertise of NEDs because they look at all sorts of skills, and some public sector bodies don't, so they're voluntary positions.

Ann-Marie Blake

That's brilliant. The time is a really important one. It's not just rocking up to a meeting four times a year, is it? And then having a good chat. There are things that you're expected to do outside of those meetings. Maybe, Stephen, what are some of the things that you do as part of your involvement on boards just to give people a flavour of it's not just sitting at meetings three or four times a year.

Stephen Waddington

There's a build on the point that Noha just made there that I'd like to make as well. I think you mentioned the governance requirements. One of the things that communication public relations practitioners do, need to do, and focus on, if they're going to take a role on the board is being aware of the governance related to that role. In the case of a charity or trustee role, that's going to be the charity commission. In the case of a commercial organisation, that's going to be company law.

Stephen Waddington

Perhaps we could talk a little bit about that because getting the necessary education and training around that is important. It isn't trivial in any way because if you get it wrong, you can end up going to court and being disqualified as a trustee or as a director, it's quite punitive. That's really

important. Day-to-day, the role, and as I say, no two boards are the same, no two organisations are the same, so the role differs.

Stephen Waddington

I tend to work with smaller organisations, so socially mobile, the Community Interest Group that I founded, I'm part of the steering group, looking mainly focused on how we keep that organisation sustainable and meet fundraising targets, deliver on the operational objectives. The non-exec roles that I have on agencies, it's mainly about how we meet their objectives in being sustainable organisations and growing in the operating and market context that we're in. In public relations at the moment than the agency context, the market is really challenging.

Ann-Marie Blake

Absolutely. My background is financial services, so very comfortable with risk registers and making sure meetings are properly documented and things like that, so that's good. I think the training point that you made is a fantastic one. It can be a bit hit-and-miss. I was quite fortunate that I had a mentor and a buddy when I started, but not necessarily that much formal training in terms of what that's involved. I know the IOD and others do some training because for anyone thinking about undertaking it, it's a very serious undertaking that should be entered into quite seriously.

Ann-Marie Blake

I'm going to maybe ask about people listening now in terms of if you've listened to this podcast and thought about yourself, actually, I quite fancy some of that. I think I've got a little bit of time that I could give to being on a board. What tips would you give people in terms of maybe getting started out, reaching out, and trying to find those opportunities. Maybe Noha, if you could cover that.

Noha Al Afifi

Sure. I guess fundamentally, it's about understanding the obligations of a director, non-exec, or a trustee, understanding the legal side because that's quite complex, and it's new territory if someone still is starting or trying to head in that direction. Being equipped and understanding what skills you can bring, but also what skills can be needed to help you thrive in a board position.

Noha Al Afifi

Also looking at the training and development opportunities that you've both alluded to. For example, in the charity sector, I would highly recommend the NCBO. They have lots of different programs about starting out as a trustee and what the obligations are.

Ann-Marie Blake

The NCBO, that's the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, is that right?

Noha Al Afifi

Yes, correct. They have lots of different resources that could help people who want to start as a trustee. There will be similar programs that you've both suggested as well for NEDs. The other thing I was thinking of, maybe what would be helpful is, especially as a PR professional, you want to look for opportunities that are primarily focused on those with a comms background or those transferable skills we talked about earlier.

Noha Al Afifi

I think it will be a good opportunity to mention the NHS. I do get approached on various opportunities at all the different trusts have their own governance frameworks, and they look for NEDs. It's a good opportunity to look at the NHS website. There's a dedicated site that posts frequently different opportunities of the NED positions, and they would specify what areas or skills that they're looking at. Then similarly, the NCVO or Reach Volunteering for trustee positions. Again, you can filter by the skills or background areas that they're looking for.

Ann-Marie Blake

Very helpful. I wasn't aware of the NHS one, so that's what I'll be off to do once we finish this podcast. Thank you very much for that. What about you, Stephen?

Stephen Waddington

Noha nailed it. Get qualified, so understand, get some basic training, first of all. Secondly, there's a board for everyone, right? Whether it's working with local volunteering association through a charity context, as Noha has suggested, through every school has its own board in the form of a governor's, there is an opportunity for everyone to get even a basic level of experience and make a really important contribution.

Stephen Waddington

We've talked at length about the value that public relations practitioners bring through the relationship perspective of an organisation, and I'd make that the pitch. Then I've always focused on where I can bring expertise from my career in providing support to people who are following in the footsteps of what I've done.

Ann-Marie Blake

One of the things that a friend told me is that my professional CV is very different from my NED or my advisor CV. Definitely getting training around that would definitely be recommended. I'm a chartered PR professional. The CIPR does do training. I think we should put something in the show notes for anyone that's looking to embark on a career on a board. I would maybe just add to it, just do it.

Ann-Marie Blake

If it's something that you think actually I quite fancy some of that. I like the sound of what I'm hearing, but I'm a bit worried about it, just give it a go. Even if it's with our industry bodies, I started there, and it's quite a nice, gentle way to start because people are helpful. They want to hold your hand. Obviously, it's doing something about a profession that you're already knowledgeable about, and then maybe think about taking that step onto something else.

Noha Al Afifi

One thing comes to mind to what you were just saying is actually when you join a board, it's still a very new experience. I think the induction is really important because it's the organization's opportunity to walk you through their finances. I certainly didn't have much of a finance background or knowledge before my first trustee position. Really just taking all in and enjoying the experience and the new skills that you're gaining.

Noha Al Afifi

But I think the best tip I can give as well is, and this is something that I learned from my very first board position, is actually you're not expected to contribute from the first meeting, actually use the first meeting to listen more and understand because it's not just about the content or the board papers that you're reading, it's actually understanding the board dynamics, how they behave with each other, what the board culture is like, their relationships with the executive team, I think that's really important because it's unique to each organisation.

Noha Al Afifi

Spending a meeting or two, just getting to know everyone, getting to know the inner and outer workings, and then you could be very well ready to take it on and contribute more meaningfully, because I think you do get into the habit of, I want to show my worth now. I want to prove myself, but it's not necessary at the start. No one's expecting that at the start.

Ann-Marie Blake

I think that's a brilliant observation, and certainly my own experience. I was probably three months into my executive board experience before it actually landed, so it's a little bit like a disparate bits of jigsaw that I couldn't quite put together in some of those meetings, and after about three months, I thought, "Oh, yes, I get it now." Giving yourself the grace of time is good advice. What about you, Stephen? Anything else you'd like to add?

Stephen Waddington

Remember that you're bringing a critical perspective, so you're not there to rubber stamp or note through. You're there to contribute your knowledge and critically appraise what's put in front of you and work with the board to contribute to decision-making. Sometimes that's plain sailing, sometimes it can be very, very challenging and difficult. But that's part of the process.

Stephen Waddington

Thinking of build on what Noha said, I think the chair of a board is typically... Will want the board to be functional and effective, and they will provide support in inducting new board members. It's typically been my experience. But I also think having a mentor for the first six months within the board to ask the questions that you don't necessarily want to take up the board's time in asking. But it's really, really important that you get under the skin of the organisation as quickly as possible. Often that can be the role of the chair, but typically in some organisations, they'll buddy you up with someone, and that can be really useful.

Ann-Marie Blake

That's brilliant. Thank you. I think you also mentioned it earlier, didn't you know how that you're not expected to get involved in the day-to-day operational running of an organisation. Being on a board is a governance role, and it's quite easy to get dragged into the detail, and then you just have to remember to make sure you're lifting yourself up out of that because actually you're about governance and running the organisation, and then that's what we can bring, that strategic overview and that strategic insight, so thank you very much for that.

Ann-Marie Blake

It's been a fascinating conversation speaking to you about boards. I could evangelise about it for ages. I've got so much out of it. I've met so many wonderful friends. I've learned different tools and techniques as part of my board experience. I do hope that if you're listening today and thinking about it, that you do take that leap and give it a go. Stephen, Noha. Thank you so much for taking the time to come and speak with us today. Really, really enjoyed it, and obviously, thank you for everything that you continue to do for the industry as well as for your respective boards, so thank you very much.

Outro

Remember, if you're a CIPR member, you can log CPD points for listening to this episode. And we've produced a range of topical podcasts digging deep into the challenges and opportunities facing PR and comms practitioners right now. From misinformation to ESG, the value of brand to the war for talent, all designed to bring different perspectives to key issues affecting the industry. Listen back now by searching CIPR Engage