

Why More Data Leaders Should Become Non-Executive Directors

Introduction

Over the past decade, data has become central to how organizations operate and compete. As a result, the Chief Data Officer (CDO) role has risen in prominence, rightly so. CDOs have been instrumental in driving digital transformation, building data governance frameworks, and unlocking value from information.

But as someone who has served both as a CDO and now as a Non-Executive Director (NED), I've come to realize something that isn't talked about enough: many data professionals are missing a powerful and equally senior path to the boardroom which is focusing on becoming a NED.

The truth is, being a Non-Executive Director from a data background can offer **more strategic influence** than many CDO roles allow, without being embedded in the operational hierarchy. It's time the data community recognized **NED positions as a legitimate, high-impact route for data leaders**.

CDO vs. NED: A Comparison of Influence and Scope

Dimension	Chief Data Officer	Non-Executive Director (Data Background)
Decision-making power	Operational; advisory to CEO and business units	Strategic; oversight of CEO and organizational direction
Influence on data strategy	High, but often limited to implementation	Can set expectations for data as a board priority
Scope	Enterprise-wide, but typically siloed within functions like IT or risk	Cross-functional, across the full business portfolio
Access to the board	Often reports into CIO or COO; limited direct access to board	Part of the board; influence on CEO performance, risk, innovation
Independence	Executive role with KPIs and delivery pressure	Independent; can challenge assumptions and drive long-term thinking
Career path visibility	Common aspiration for data professionals	Rarely seen as a path, but should be encouraged

The Hidden Power of Being a NED with a Data Lens

As a Non-Executive Director, I've found that my background in data and digital gives me a unique edge in conversations that shape **strategy, risk oversight, and transformation**. While I'm no longer "hands on" with the tech stack or data pipeline, I'm helping to decide:

- How the organization should think about AI readiness
- What risks are emerging from poor data governance

- Where digital investments will yield long-term value
- How performance should be measured using data — not just financials

These are **not just operational decisions**, they're existential ones. And they're happening at the board level.

Why This Matters for the Data Community

There's been a strong and understandable push for data professionals to aim for the CDO title. But the industry often stops the conversation there. There's little visibility or encouragement toward board-level roles as a natural next step.

This is a gap we must close. We need:

- **Mentorship:** Senior data professionals need to be coached not just in storytelling and dashboards, but in commercial governance, ESG, and boardroom dynamics.
- **Awareness:** Boards must understand the strategic value of having data-first thinkers at the table — not just tech or finance professionals.
- **Aspirations:** Data leaders themselves must think beyond operations. The boardroom is not out of reach — it's a natural extension of what you already know and do.

My Journey: From CDO to NED

I've sat in the CDO seat. I've delivered transformation programs, built data teams, and navigated the tension between governance and innovation. But as a Non-Executive Director, I've been able to drive change more fundamentally:

- I can **ask different questions** without the constraints of delivery pressure.
- I can **advocate for ethical AI and data governance** from a position of oversight.
- I can **support executives and challenge them** when data strategy is misaligned with business goals.

This perspective, from *outside* the day-to-day, has real value. And I want more data professionals to recognize that.

Conclusion: A Parallel, Powerful Path

Becoming a CDO is an important milestone. But it doesn't need to be the final destination.

We must encourage more data leaders to pursue Non-Executive Director roles, where they can influence policy, corporate governance, innovation, and long-term strategy. If you're a Head of Data, CDO, or digital leader — don't just ask how to get a bigger operational remit. **Ask how to get a seat at the board table.**

This isn't just about career progression. It's about **changing how organizations think** about value, risk, and growth in the data age. Let's build a new generation of board-ready, data-powered leaders.