



## Recruitment of non-execs - a special case?

This case study explores good practice in non-executive recruitment from both organisation and appointee perspectives. What should organisations bear in mind when recruiting non-execs? What can we learn from the experience of high-level candidates?

In winter 2020/21 the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) engaged FJWilson to search for two independent members to join the RIBA's Audit & Risk Committee on an unremunerated basis. FJWilson Associate Karen Haynes spoke with Carl Straw, Human Resources Director and independent committee members Mark Jarvis and Noeline Sanders. The conversations with our three interviewees draw on their experiences across a range of organisations - as recruiters, candidates and appointees.

### About the interviewees



**Carl Straw** joined the RIBA with responsibility for leading the HR function in 2019. Previous positions include Head of HR, The Law Society of England and Wales and Interim HR Business Partner at BBC News. Carl is experienced at leading HR teams and developing HR capability through a business partner approach that adds genuine value to the business.

**Mark Jarvis** is a former Group Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of a \$5bn group within EY's global business. Since retirement in 2019 he has taken on multiple non-exec and advisory roles in the education, charity, technology and finance sectors. He is also Visiting Professor in Accounting, Finance and Banking at MMU Business School, Manchester, UK.



**Noeline Sanders** combines her position of CFO of Digital Catapult - the UK's leading advanced digital technology innovation centre - with a number of non-exec positions. Noeline has board governor, audit chair, trustee board, advisory board and investor experience. Her career spans the technology, logistics, retail, education, finance and charity sectors.



## Identifying needs

*Karen:* What was the RIBA seeking in appointees to this Committee? What should organisations consider at this stage?

*Carl:* In general terms, candidates with experience and a high-level track record were very important to us. We wanted people who could clearly add value, and to strike the right balance across the Committee.

*Noeline:* A good board chair is clear about their skills gaps, whether that's deep technology, cyber security, EDI, or a range of other things. It's really important to seek specialist skills.

## Whether to use a search agency

*Karen:* Why does the RIBA use a search agency for non-exec recruitment campaigns?

*Carl:* We use a trusted search agency for their ability to find a greater number and potentially wider range of high-quality candidates than the organisation would otherwise attract.

A good agency does a lot of the leg work for the organisation - not just in finding candidates and gaining their initial interest but also in screening and briefing them on behalf of the organisation and keeping them engaged throughout the selection process.

*Mark:* From a candidate's point of view, I've found interviews where I've been briefed by a recruitment agency more successful than one where the organisation used direct recruitment. If you've been well briefed by an agency you're better prepared for interview than if you've only got your own 'due diligence' on the organisation to go on. You go into the interview with more insight into the organisation's needs and this improves the dialogue.

## Choice of agency

*Karen:* Some agencies specialise in non-executive recruitment in particular, but across different sectors. In contrast, FJWilson specialises in the membership organisation sector in particular, across senior vacancies in general. What guided your choice of agency in this instance?



*Carl:* These are very senior roles, so it's vital to engage an agency in which you have confidence. I've worked with Fiona at FJWilson for a number of years and very much like her approach - it reflects and complements our own.

Fiona combines a deep knowledge of the market with a progressive approach to diversity and inclusion - that's very much in line with how the RIBA wants to operate.

We select agencies based on their strengths in different areas. On another occasion, for a different committee, we found independent members through a specialist non-executive agency. That also worked very well. Both FJWilson and the other agency did a great job. It's good to use different agencies for different committees for a balanced approach.

### **Terms of engagement**

*Karen:* The timeframe for the recent campaign using FJWilson, including screening and briefing candidates was 18 working days. It's interesting that the charging model you chose was time-based rather than the more common fixed-fee arrangement.

*Carl:* When selecting an agency we look for flexibility - that they're not rigid about their charging model. It's important that agencies are able to adapt to the circumstances of different recruitment campaigns.

### **Candidate search**

*Carl:* The search stage went very well. It really helped that Fiona had worked with the RIBA before. She knows the organisation very well: how it is structured and governed; how it operates as a membership organisation. We had a lot more confidence in her going out to present the organisation to prospective candidates than we would someone new who'd only had a half-hour briefing call with us.

Fiona's knowledge of our organisation meant she understood immediately the kind of candidates the RIBA was looking for in terms of their career stage and the kinds of roles they would be interested in, as well as the types of added value the RIBA wanted audit committee candidates to offer.



Another thing I particularly like about working with Fiona is how she builds in various check points, so you get a great sense of how things are progressing - through personal, continued contact.

Fiona took the weight off our shoulders in finding an interesting range of excellent candidates. This wasn't a totally predictable list: she gave us a bit of a mix, with some stand-out candidates and other candidates that could bring something slightly different.

### **Candidate matching for non-exec positions**

*Noeline:* Sometimes people looking at non-exec positions fail to think about their broader skills. Candidates don't always realise that recruitment for a non-exec post is not the same as for an executive post. For a non-exec position it's really important for a candidate to think about their broader skills, because what the board is looking for is the added value candidates bring, and how that fits with existing skill sets and skill gaps.

The search agencies I've worked with have all had helpful conversations with me about identifying the broader skills that the organisation is looking for in the non-exec appointee. My conversation with Fiona was a real meeting of minds. She really homed in on the detail of what the RIBA was looking for in order to add value and close skills gaps.

As a CFO I used to consider my financial skills as my strongest suit, but actually a lot of people have these. I've come to realise that my real 'USP' as a non-exec is my long career in the digital technology sector, which has given me a deep understanding of new business models and how these influence strategic directions. All organisations are going through digital transformation, so this background adds a layer of added value.

Of course, candidate matching is about motivation as well as skills. Candidates need to be clear about their motivation for a particular non-exec position. I have a personal interest in organisations that create impact for societal good and was very interested when I heard about the RIBA opportunity. I'm especially interested in urban planning for community wellbeing, with more environmentally friendly building.



## Shortlisting

*Karen:* Carl, how did the shortlisting stage go?

*Carl:* Really well. Fiona met with panel members before the final shortlist was agreed. Members had different views on some candidates and Fiona's input was very helpful to bring some CVs to life and explain why she'd put forward certain candidates.

We decided to interview eight - all found by FJWilson and all very strong.

## Optimising the interview

*Carl:* Interviews were held online due to Covid restrictions. We had a large interview panel - five members: the outgoing and incoming Chairs of the Audit Committee, another independent member of the Committee, a representative from our Board of Trustees, and me.

*Karen:* What's your view of virtual interviews?

*Carl:* In many ways they are easier to organise. Plus the candidate experience is often better. When you are putting an interview panel together to recruit high-level candidates it's much easier to find diary space for an hour at a time for a virtual interview than calling everyone up to the RIBA offices in London and having to give up half a day or more. Then there's no need to find an interview room - which itself might turn out to be a somewhat intimidating venue. An online interview can be more relaxed for the candidate.

*Karen:* As candidate, Mark, how have you found virtual interviews?

*Mark:* Having had a global role at EY, I'm very used to video calls. I've also had several online interviews for non-Executive Directorships and Trustee positions since retirement, so the RIBA interview felt like an extension of what is normal. Apart from being much easier to schedule, I also find that virtual interviews can be more 'human' than in-person ones.

*Karen:* That's an interesting and perhaps counterintuitive thought...

*Mark:* Yes, I'm a people person, so I might be expected to prefer 'face-to-face'. But I think virtual interviews create more common ground for interviewers and interviewees, and this helps dispel the nervousness that everyone gets to some extent. A virtual



interview begins with a sense of ‘Let’s embrace this technology and see where it takes us’. Whereas typically for a face-to-face interview you go into a big office facing three interviewers across the room, and you may be sat against the light so you have the sun in your eyes...

*Karen:* So the power dynamic in a virtual interview is a bit different - and this can help the candidate perform better from the start?

*Mark:* Exactly.

*Noeline:* I’d add that, as in a face-to-face interview, it’s important to explain to candidates at the outset of a virtual interview who all the interviewers are and their roles in the interview. If that isn’t made clear the interview can feel awkward.

*Karen:* Do virtual interviews require different preparation? Any tips for candidates?

*Mark:* In general, there’s no difference: whatever the medium, the more prepared, the more relaxed you are. But there are specific things to think about. The most basic thing is, always check your settings before a meeting - camera, sound, speaker, microphone. Because when you flip from Zoom to Teams to BlueJeans to something else, for example, quite often the microphone - if you have a standalone one - will switch back to the computer one; or the camera, it might not be so good, so always do a check 10 minutes before an interview or indeed any important call.

I think too there’s a difference in preparedness for what could go wrong. Do prepare interviewers (if they don’t introduce the topic themselves) for possible interruptions. Whereas in a live interview you might say: ‘Excuse me, I’ve got a bit of a cough’; in a virtual one you might say, ‘I’ve got a dog - he barks a lot if someone comes to the door’.

*Karen:* Are there any differences, do you think, in interviewing candidates for non-exec positions?

*Noeline:* It is important for organisations to be mindful of the choice that the candidate is making in serving on the board, especially when it is unremunerated. For example, I think it’s important to find ways to give non-exec candidates a sense of all the important issues facing their board or committee. There shouldn’t be any big surprises after the event that could call into question a candidate’s decision to give time to the organisation. While it can be difficult to decide how much information to share with candidates the interviewers



could, for example, seek an open dialogue to get candidate views on a central issue facing the organisation and ask ‘is this an area where you feel you can add value?’

### **Post interview**

*Carl:* To maintain candidate engagement during the approval and appointment an agency must keep in touch regularly and effectively. And effective communication depends on knowledge and understanding of the organisation.

It wasn't ideal that our governance process at the RIBA can be quite protracted. Our recommendations had to be approved in turn by our Nominations Committee, Board and Council - this all takes time and there is a danger of excellent candidates falling away.

*Karen:* What was your experience, Mark, of that period of waiting?

*Mark:* Fiona's management of that situation was a particularly helpful one. I found her very good at managing expectations and timescales. She would always keep me informed and explain how things were moving forward.

### **Onboarding**

*Noeline:* Don't forget the importance of a personal welcome communication from the Chair or other board member. I also think it's important to have a one-to-one briefing with the Chair to enable you to contribute best from the start. Onboarding shouldn't be simply an administrative process - remember again the time that your new non-exec is giving to your organisation.

### **Final thoughts**

*Carl:* Working with Fiona, I had the confidence of knowing that her passion to do a really good job for our organisation and do the right thing for us and candidates shines through.

Throughout the process Fiona was fantastic at keeping candidates engaged. All maintained interest throughout. I hope that even those not appointed had a good experience of the RIBA.