



Fresh perspective, lasting impact: Erin Atan's path to the boardroom

In the second interview of our board pathway series, Katrina Andrews, Managing Partner at Andrews Partnership, spoke to Erin Atan, Regional Director of Corporate Affairs at Heineken, about how she broke into the boardroom and what she's learned along the way.

Business leader to board member

Erin Atan didn't set out to become a board director, but she always saw herself as more than a functional leader. Based in Singapore, she leads corporate affairs for Heineken across Asia-Pacific, but her mindset is firmly grounded in enterprise leadership. "I don't see myself as a corporate affairs person," she says. "I see myself as part of the regional leadership team helping to run the business. My capabilities happen to be in corporate affairs."

That mindset shift proved instrumental. As she progressed into increasingly strategic roles, she saw the boardroom as a natural next step. "It wasn't linear, but it was intentional," she says. "I began preparing by learning governance, seeking mentors and building cross-functional credibility."

Her first board experience, with a private company, was a crash course in the new skills required. "You have to shift from functional excellence to strategic oversight," she says. "It's about asking the right questions, not giving all the answers." That shift also meant learning to listen deeply and speak with clarity. "At board level, you need to communicate with brevity and train yourself to actively listen for long stretches of time," she says.



Making your experience count

She emphasises that corporate affairs professionals already have many of the attributes boards increasingly seek. “We’re natural diplomats. We sit at the intersection of business, society and regulation. We manage crises and anticipate external risk,” she says. “We also know how to align internal and external narratives. That’s critical for long-term value creation.”

Positioning, however, is key. “You can’t be seen as just the comms person,” Erin warns. “You need to understand the P&L and be ready to challenge assumptions.”

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Education has also played a role. Erin supports formal governance training, particularly for those aiming to serve on listed boards. “Not every module will be relevant, but some are true eye-openers,” she says. “And accreditation can help build your network, too.”

She also advises building a ‘board narrative’ early by presenting to boards where possible. “You start to understand how they think and how to communicate your value,” she says. Advisory roles or external committees can also provide early exposure. “Your first seat doesn’t have to be a board seat,” she says. **“Those experiences help you grow.”**

Staying relevant and selective

Although the average age of board appointments remains relatively high, Erin sees that changing. “I’m on a board where the youngest member is half my age,” she says. “But they bring valuable digital fluency and fresh thinking.”

For aspiring professionals aiming to grow their experience, she suggests focusing on what makes them different and learning how to influence. “Stakeholder savviness matters,” she says. “It’s about how you respect and influence others’ thinking.”



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aspiring board members***

Redefining the path to the boardroom

With five board roles under her belt – including a listed company and a philanthropic foundation – Erin has seen firsthand how boards are evolving and how that shift favours corporate affairs professionals. “Boards are no longer just looking for finance or legal skills,” she says. “They’re looking for ESG, risk, geopolitics, reputation – our space.”

But perhaps most importantly, she challenges the idea that board seats are only about who you know. “That’s the biggest myth,” she says. “Boards are looking for diversity – not just in gender and background but in skills and values. If you bring strategic insight, stakeholder fluency and a clear sense of purpose, you will be invited in.”

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The AP View

We're seeing a rise in executive search mandates for CA leaders where a board seat is part of the role – particularly in complex or high-stakes markets like Myanmar – and we regularly act as a connector for NGOs seeking experienced, values-led board members.

As an industry, we believe CA leaders have never been better positioned to serve on boards. This is *our moment*.

The growing focus on trust, reputation, stakeholder engagement and regulatory risk means the skills CA leaders bring – communication, judgement and diplomacy – are no longer adjacent to board concerns. They're central to them.

We also see the personal benefits of board service extending beyond visibility and networking. Serving on a board builds strategic thinking, strengthens decision-making and enhances your credibility and ability to influence, particularly with the C-suite and CEO.

And the momentum is shifting. Where external board appointments once raised internal policy questions, more organisations now actively support them, recognising the professional value board work brings back into the business.

We'll continue to champion the rise of CA leaders in the boardroom – not just as trusted voices, but as experienced, strategic leaders who help steer and shape the decisions that matter most.

Andrews Partnership are the reputation experts, with offices in Hong Kong, Singapore and Sydney working globally, as the leading specialist corporate affairs, communications, sustainability/ESG and investor relations executive search firm. We excel at understanding each organisation's unique challenges and appointing the right talent, who make meaningful business impact.

Andrews Partnership's advice for aspiring board directors

Build influence beyond your function

Step up in enterprise-wide initiatives to demonstrate commercial fluency and broaden your impact.

Curate your profile intentionally

Your board suitability begins with how you're seen internally and externally – develop a narrative that speaks to strategic leadership, not just technical expertise.

Treat board exposure as development

Presenting to or advising boards sharpens your communication and gives insight into how directors think.

Understand different board types

Public, private, advisory, trustee – each has different expectations. Be clear on what aligns best with your purpose and capacity.

Signal your readiness early

Demonstrate maturity, judgement and an understanding of governance in your day job, well before you start applying.

Think long term, choose selectively

A board appointment can shape your brand for years. Prioritise relevance, alignment and room to add value.

Know your value and voice it

Reputation, risk and stakeholder understanding are increasingly core to boards – make that visible in how you position yourself.