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## DirectWomen: Opening the Door to the Board Room for Women Lawyers

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*By Tina Vasquez (Los Angeles)*

[DirectWomen](#), a three-year-old organization based in New York City, believes it has discovered an untapped resource capable of greatly benefiting the boards of U.S. companies: accomplished female attorneys. After all, for the first time in the country's history more women are graduating from law school than men, and not only that, but 2008 findings from [Catalyst](#) found that companies with the highest representation of women board directors and women corporate officers actually experience more financial success than boards with little to no female representation. Obviously, DirectWomen and organizations like it are on to something.



According to the [2009 Catalyst Census](#), the percentage of women board directors has hovered at around 15 percent for the past five years. Getting women into these positions has proven to be difficult, but Dominique Schulte, Executive Director of DirectWomen, believes that female lawyers are more than capable of not only serving in these positions, but succeeding in them. "Despite all the awareness of the positive attributes of diversity, there has still not been a major breakthrough in the number of women directors," Schulte said. "We feel that women lawyers are uniquely qualified and an experienced source of board diversity that has gone unnoticed." Until now...

In early 2006 a group of women who met through their participation in Bar activities began to discuss their concern over the small number of women serving on boards, even though the first generation of women to attend law school in meaningful numbers was reaching the age where they might consider board service. In response to this problem, these women decided to form DirectWomen in order to promote women lawyers with business experience for board service.

## **Selecting the Best Women for the Job**

Each year, the organization brings together a “class” of 20 highly accomplished and talented women lawyers from around the country to participate in a two-day program called the DirectWomen Board Institute, intended to prepare them for whatever they may face as potential board directors. The women who participate must have law degrees and currently have- or will soon have – the independence requirements necessary for directorship and be available for board service. In order to be considered, women must submit an application detailing their relevant experience and include letters of reference. Even then, it’s not guaranteed they will be able to participate. Ultimately, the DirectWomen selection committee chooses the women they feel are most qualified and show the most promise.

Over the course of their two days together, the women attending the Institute are taught by experts in corporate governance and experienced corporate directors, who discuss audit and governance issues, board service realities, and placement challenges. At the end of those two days, women are considered “graduates,” capable of returning for the DirectWomen Alumnae Program, which focuses on leveraging skills already learned at the Institute, broadening access to the corporate board search community, and building a broader professional network.

Schulte believes the Institute was successfully designed to cover all the bases of what women may encounter on their first boards. “The Institute positions its graduates to bring honed business judgment to the boardroom of major corporations,” Schulte said. “It also provides insight into current board issues, as well as strategic career development and networking opportunities through a series of discussions with Institute faculty.”

## **Pre-Screening for Prestigious Positions**

Fifteen percent of the organization’s 61 alumnae now serve on public company boards or have a similar standing, and though it’s difficult to tell exactly how much the Institute assisted them in obtaining these positions, the organization’s graduates give the Institute a great deal of credit.

Christine Spadafor, a 2008 DirectWomen graduate, President of SpadaforClay Group, and Contract Chief Executive Officer to [St. Jude’s Ranch for Children](#), was selected to join the Board of Directors for Boyd Gaming Corporation in May 2009. “In its very thorough, competitive, and extensive candidate selection process, I told the nominating committee that I had already been pre-screened by virtue of being a member of the second class of DirectWomen,” Spadafor said. “I explained that the DirectWomen process involves a screening of hundreds of women from across the country and that the top 20 women who exhibit exceptional business experience are selected. Obviously, I do not know how the company factored this into their selection process, but I do believe it helped distinguish me from other candidates in that no one else could claim the same.”

Mary Cranston is Firm Senior Partner at [Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP](#) and originally heard about DirectWomen through Catalyst, which supported the organization from the very beginning. Though she has attended leadership programs at some of the most prestigious universities in the world and was already serving on a board when she graduated from DirectWomen's first class in 2007, Cranston was still incredibly impressed by the Institute and what it was doing for its participants. "For some reason many boards think they can't hire lawyers; there seems to be a prejudice or unjustified resistance, but that's changing," she said. "I couldn't believe the depth, breadth, scale, and scope of the women I encountered at the Institute and how experienced, qualified, and prepared they were to serve on boards if they were given the opportunity."

Since its founding, DirectWomen has become known as an group for impressive, highly qualified women. In fact, in 2007, retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor agreed to lend her name to the Institute to create the Sandra Day O'Connor Board Excellence Award. The award is given to women lawyers who have served with distinction as directors of public companies and have worked to advance the value of diversity in board positions. Just as O'Connor was an innovator and pioneer, award recipients are breaking new boundaries of their own and contributing to the advancement of women.

The women who attend the Institutes can take away a number of different things from the organization: new skills and knowledge, new leadership qualities, or a vast network of capable, driven, and successful female associates, among other things. The one thing they all strive for; however, is promoting the value that accomplished women attorneys can bring to the boards of U.S. companies. Let's hope that because of organizations like DirectWomen, the percentage of women board directors will stop hovering at 15 percent and, instead, skyrocket upwards – where it belongs.