

EXECUTIVE AND BOARD CANDIDATE BIOS: EXECUTIVE PRESENCE ON DISPLAY

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Good executive bios are hard to find. Bad ones are everywhere. Bios are found on websites, in marketing brochures, in sales presentations, in public profiles, and in promotional press releases—and sometimes are used for job searches. Bios are often requested by professional and philanthropic organizations considering an executive for membership or leadership roles.

Given the plethora of personal information easily available to the global community, often in the form of a bio, it is essential that executives attend to managing the presentation and content of this information. For those executives who have shied away from a public presence, it is more important than ever to establish themselves visibly. For a career to be vibrant and successful, especially in today's "Free Agent Nation" (Pink, 2002), the executive needs to be easily found and professionally presented. And a bio gives the reader their first impression of the executive. As Susan Bixler, a pioneering coach in the field of professional image, points out, although people should be judged by their innate worth, it is often a first impression that determines whether someone will stick around long enough to let them reveal it. (Bixler, 2001)

As career professionals, wise and competent counsel on the use of professional bios is no longer just a "nice to have" skill, but rather it is an essential competency for working with executives on an upward career trajectory. Bios are an important tool for enhancing executive visibility in numerous ways. More than ever before, strong positive visibility is a key component of successful lifetime career management.

Characteristics of Effective Bios

Most bios are dull and boring, providing little insight into the person behind the words. Bios often say "held this job, did this, held that job, did that, went to school there, grew up somewhere, married the high school sweetheart, and has 1.8 children." Change the names and locations and those bios could be about 80% of executives. While they can be impressive in the display of credentials, essentially a mini-resume, they are not likely to engage the reader with the person.

One reason for the overwhelmingly blandness is that bios are frequently written by third parties who do not necessarily understand the executive's story or the targeted audience. These bios are simply comprised of data that has been dropped into a more or less predetermined format. In addition, many are too long with too much information. With the rise of LinkedIn, even recruiters are now turning there first, and interest in this type of bio for recruiting purposes has radically diminished.

While a "mini-resume" bio may be useful in certain circumstances, as a professional marketing tool, it is not enough. The best bios tell a story that entices the reader to want to get to know the executive

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personally and understand his or her unique talents and value. It is the executive's "personal press release" designed to wow the reader.

Whether used for business purposes, for advancing an executive's visibility through professional or community activities, or for job search, executives these days must reach beyond being a commodity in an overcrowded market of similarly accomplished peers. Executives must visibly position themselves and be recognized as thought leaders in focused areas and truly stand apart from the competition (Armon, 2008). In addition, the concept of "personal branding" that was taken mainstream by Tom Peters in 1997 (Peters, 1997) has spawned an entire industry. The notion is now so pervasive that it took its place in the "Dummies" series in 2012 (Chritton, 2012). A well done executive bio is a key document for articulating an executive's personal brand.

Bios and Executive Presence

The development of a personal-branding-focused bio, especially when the executive participates in the development process, often moves it from a piece of marketing communications to a vehicle that helps strengthen "executive presence". As described in "She's Gotta Have 'It," a BusinessWeek article (Conlin, 2002), "It" is executive presence, and the lack of "It" can prevent even the most qualified executives, especially women, from achieving promotions for which they are otherwise strong contenders. As BusinessWeek describes it, "Executive presence refers to... making a polished entrance... taking hold of a room, forging quick personal connections... inspiring that I'll-follow-you-anywhere-loyalty... conveying an aura of warmth and authenticity...." Notably, the article points out that self-confidence and self-promotion are critical.

A well written executive bio frames a personal brand that is presented with conviction and panache. And, furthermore, the process of developing one with the executive fully engaged strengthens his or her ability to deliver it in person with style and confidence. Career coaches can be instrumental in assisting their clients in developing and internalizing their professional personas.

David D'Alessandro, the former Chairman and CEO of John Hancock Financial Services, makes the point explicitly: "Everyone in organizational life is constantly being watched and evaluated by bosses, clients, vendors, peers, and subordinates. Every day, with every bit of human interaction you engage in, some member of this crowd forms an opinion about you." (D'Alessandro, 2008)

So whether it is the bio itself, the process of creating it, the influence on how the executive presents him or herself in person, or all of these, there is no doubt that this document properly designed, developed, and used addresses essential aspects of career management.

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Executive Bio Sample

So, what does this type of executive bio look like? Below is a classic example, which would be appropriate for a variety of executive uses as well as for Board of Directors candidacy.



RHONDA LEVENE

COO & CFO

Daymon Worldwide

Consumer Products

Transformation through Brand Strategy

BOARD EXPERIENCE

GS-1, Global Industry Standards Association

Supply and Demand Chains

Daymon Worldwide

Audit Committee • ESOP Investment Committee

University of North Texas, Board of Governors

School of Hospitality & Merchandising

RHONDA LEVENE takes a vision and makes it reality through sound strategy development. She intuitively sees the threads of opportunity that wind through an organization, brings them together into a coherent whole, helps others extend their thinking, and drives material business advantage. She is an inspirational leader who tells stories that inspire action while at the same time is grounded in financial information that levers the business. Respected as a credible voice in decision making, finding strategic financing partners, and establishing governance boundaries, Rhonda earns a seat at the table wherever she serves.

Currently, as COO and CFO at Daymon Worldwide, a privately-held, global retail branding and sourcing company, Rhonda oversees the operations of a billion dollar plus organization. She led the successful buyout of the founder and transitioned the company to a 100% employee-owned company. She is now spearheading major strategic shifts for transforming IT from a functional focus to an enabler of innovation for the business and integrating the finance organization so that it supports a truly global company.

Previously, as Senior Vice President and General Manager, Rhonda led business development for the foodservice division of PepsiCo after heading their \$1.5 billion U.S.-based multi-channel business. During this time, she drove the acquisition of market share from Pepsi's largest competitor, repositioning Pepsi as a recognized and credible player in the foodservice industry. Earlier she rose through the ranks of The Coca-Cola Company transitioning from finance to sales and marketing. She began her career in public accounting with Ernst & Whinney.

Rhonda holds an MBA from the University of Dallas, BBA from Southern Methodist University, and a CPA. She serves on several Boards of Directors including GS-1, a Global Industry Standards Association, the Audit and ESOP Investment Committees of Daymon Worldwide, and the University of North Texas Board of Governors for the School of Hospitality & Merchandising.

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Bio included with the permission of Rhonda Levene, 2013

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Here's another example that is always a favorite. It was created from information gathered from Internet sources that researched and compiled data on the Potter character in the acclaimed television show *M*A*S*H*.



Colonel Sherman T. Potter, MD

**Associate Medical Center Director
Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital**

General Surgeon – Hospital Administrator – Decorated Wartime Field Officer

Colonel Sherman T. Potter is both an excellent surgeon and leader, who is frequently called upon for his knowledge of wartime surgery. He leads mainly by example, always doing his best and encouraging others to do the same. While easygoing by nature, no one doubts his authority – he is direct and decisive when he needs to be. He is respected not only by his troops but by his peers and those up the ranks. He is recognized for his ability to balance the spirit of army regulations with the difficulties of life in a war zone. Potter is a man of integrity and able to make the tough calls when necessary.

Recently appointed Associate Medical Center Director, Colonel Potter leads the organization, direction, and coordination of all administrative functions of the hospital, including acting as liaison with the Veterans' Benefits Regional Office. Prior to his appointment, he headed the MASH 4077th deployed to Korea. Under his command, this unit consistently ranked among the top performing units during the Korean War. Edward R. Murrow, one of broadcasting's most illustrious journalists, covered the 4077th after returning from touring the Korean battlefields.

Previously, Potter completed medical school and served in various Army administrative roles after returning from active duty in France during World War I. He began his military career at a young age in the cavalry and his love of horses continued throughout his life.

Potter was decorated numerous times during his career and proudly wears the Army Commendation Medal, Purple Heart, Army Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Korean Service Medal, and the United Nations Service Medal. He served his medical residency in St. Louis and established his surgical practice in 1932.

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Previously developed by Paula Asinof and published in *BE SHARP: "Tell Me About Yourself" in Great Introductions and Professional Bios* by Paula Asinof and Mina Brown

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Bio Structure

The basic structure of an executive bio is a document of about 350 words that fits onto a single page using an appropriate font and point size. Currently, a good choice is Calibri (a hybrid font that reads well both in a printed document and on an electronic screen) using a point size of 10.5 or 11.

Bios are written in the third person, consistent with the literary genre of biographies.

Bios may or may not include headshots. Generally a professional headshot is recommended. It serves to reinforce the executive's professional stature and helps to engage the reader. The well-known adage, "a picture is worth a thousand words" is especially relevant.



NAME

Title
Company

Keywords
Keywords

Paragraph #1: Positioning

Paragraph #2: Current or Most Recent Position

Paragraph #3: Rest of Career

Paragraph #4: Credentials

Contact information

The core of the personal brand appears in the descriptors that align with the headshot. There are as many variations as there are people and situations—with or without Board experience, currently employed, retired, or in transition, title, company, functional area, areas of expertise, or "tag line". The goal of this section is to describe the executive with laser focus such that his or her value is grasped immediately by the reader. This information is then supported in the body of the bio.

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Here are a few additional examples of headers:

JOHN M. SMITH

Partner and Managing Director

Consulting Solutions LLC

Business Development Executive

Strategy—Business Capture—Major Accounts

KEISHA C. JACKSON

Chief Learning Officer

Big Church of Los Angeles

Learning Organizations

Enterprise Strategy—Adult Learning—Leadership Development

GEORGE MARTINEZ

President/CEO

Small to Medium Business

Manufacturing & Distribution

Business Performance

Shareholder Value—Operational Excellence—Customer Experience

CHARLES LEE

Healthcare Management Executive

Hospital Systems

Cooperative Business Strategies

Alliances—Joint Ventures—Partnership Execution

DIVYA KATDARE

Senior Partner & Program Director

TDGC

Large Scale Program Management

Engaging Diverse Constituencies in the Dynamics of Change

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Structuring the paragraphs is straightforward, keeping in mind that the goal of the document is to create “WOW” in the mind of the reader. For example, “WOW”, you did that? “WOW”, I’m impressed! “WOW”, I need to talk with you right away. The bio should immediately and accurately create a picture of the person being described, portray a person with distinguishing capabilities and qualities, and communicate the subject’s level of authority, responsibility, and expertise. Taken as a whole, it showcases an accomplished, polished, authentic, and personally powerful executive.

In creating the first paragraph, Positioning, it is important to keep in mind that this where the executive comes to life. It is easy to slip into a rehash of competencies or experience overviews, so it is necessary to be vigilant to stay focused on the person. Here are some questions for brainstorming that are effective for surfacing the right information. The best results come from drilling down into the specifics beyond the initial, often general, responses. Simply ask, “Specifically what do you mean by that?”

1. **What do you love about what you do?** What is your mission, your passion? What about your work gets you up in the morning and keeps you motivated?
2. **What makes you good at what you do?** What innate abilities, unique talents, or special gifts do you have that others don’t have? How specifically do you think about things that contribute to your success?
3. **Why do people like to work with you?** Not just subordinates but also peers, bosses, customers/clients, vendors, regulators, politicians, etc.
4. **What do people say about you?** What would a reference say? What positive things get documented in performance appraisals and letters of recommendation? How does the press characterize you?

Essentially, an executive’s brand includes the following three factors (Asinof, 2008):

1. **Essence Factor**—who they are
2. **Guru Factor**—what they know
3. **Star Factor**—what they do and how they do it

Specificity is the key. Words like “leadership skills” or “communication ability” are too broad to be descriptive. It is essential to highlight exactly what makes the executive a great leader or outstanding communicator. It is the specifics that set the executive apart from other great leaders and outstanding communicators. In the best bios, the reader will come to the conclusion that the executive is excep-

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tional based on the information presented rather than being told by the executive that he or she is great. After all, one's personal opinion of one's own greatness is surely suspect.

The second and third paragraphs cherry pick the executive's accomplishments for the couple of contributions that had real impact—the more impact, the better. These should be earthshaking, company-saving, award winning events supported by quantitative results where possible and be related to the interests of the targeted audience. Sensitive corporate information, especially financial numbers, strategic programs, or company statistics that are not a matter of public record and that could influence the market or stock price of the company should not be included in the bio or should be stated in generalities such as “multi-million dollar”. This also applies to client company names that would provide competitive intelligence or which the company or client views as confidential. The bio is not the place for Wall Street analysts to find out what the executive's company is doing or planning to do.

Usually, the second paragraph deals with the executive's current or most recent position while the third paragraph sums up all the rest, with attention to providing a concise career progression and one or two truly significant and relevant achievements. The fourth and final paragraph should include education, certifications, languages, professional affiliations—whatever credentials are important. In almost all situations, faith-based affiliations and family information are not relevant to a professional bio.

Board Bios

For Board candidate bios, the credential section is critical and as a result usually longer than in a standard executive bio. For a Board candidate, the career portion may be shortened to achieve the targeted length and focus. In particular, Boards like candidates who have already been discovered by other organizations, so including corporate or not-for-profit Boards on which the executive currently or previous has served is beneficial. In addition, leadership roles in industry, civic, or charitable institutions that demonstrate ability to guide an organization strengthen the bio. Additionally, Boards like executives who have been recognized for their accomplishments, especially with awards or honors from outside their own companies. Personal media coverage, publications, and speaking engagements should also be considered.

With notable Board experience, the bio might include a paragraph like the one below. Its placement in the bio will depend on its importance and relationship to the purpose of the bio and how it fits into the overall career progression.

Since 20xx, [name] has been a member of the Board of Directors of ABC International, where he currently chairs the Nominating & Governance Committee, serves on the Compensation and

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Executive Committees, and previously served on the Audit Committee. In the decade he has served, ABC has made a well-managed CEO transition, grown organically and through acquisition, diversified its portfolio, and expanded its geographic footprint.

Finally, in evaluating a Board candidate bio, it is useful to consider the key qualities that Boards are looking for and judge how the executive, as presented in the bio, compares to those criteria.

1. **Cachet:** Boards want their members to be well recognized so that they bring an element of stardom and credibility to the company.
2. **Functional Expertise:** On a Board, it is important to have many business functions represented so that decisions are made with a balanced perspective.
3. **Valuable Relationships:** Board members are expected to be able to open the right doors for their company. They are often selected because they know who to call and can get things done through their networks.
4. **Skilled Governance:** A company's strategic policy decisions are made by its Board, with each board member contributing to the overall governance of the organization. The Board is responsible for bringing thoughtful sophistication to the process of leadership.

For not-for-profit Boards, two additional criteria are applicable.

1. **Passion for the Mission:** Not-for-profit Boards want Board members who believe in the organization and serve as its voice, both formally and informally, internally and externally.
2. **Monetary Contributions:** Not-for-profit Boards generally expect their Board members to make material personal monetary contributions in addition to helping the organization raise money from other sources.

Finally, the bio for a Board candidate needs to be assessed from the perspective of a Board selection committee and possibly shareholders. Why would a Board want this executive to join them anyway? What is the most important and differentiating contribution the executive would be making to the group? If the Board bio is targeted to a specific company or organization, the assessment should be even more specific. What are the needs of this particular Board and how would this particular executive contribute to that? It is crucial that Board candidates not simply assume that executive expertise in a functional area makes them attractive to a Board. A useful question is "If a Board member does "that", then what does the CEO (or CFO, CMO, CIO, CPO) do? Board contributions must always be viewed from a strategic governance perspective, not from an organizational or functional leadership point of view.

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One organization that has embraced the Board bio is The Board Connection (TBC) (www.TheBoardConnection.org) in Dallas, Texas. The Board Connection is a not-for-profit founded to increase the number of women serving on corporate boards through programs designed to develop, influence, and connect qualified credentialed women with board governance opportunities. Membership is by application only, and acceptance is based on an assessment of Board readiness. Since its founding five years ago, this organization has provided opportunities for its members to attend workshops, participate in working sessions, and obtain additional personal guidance in creating their Board candidate bios in a standard TBC format. TBC maintains both a library of member bios for distribution for specific opportunities as well as publishing a comprehensive Board Bio Book that is shared with executive recruiters and Board search committees. Recently, the Board candidate bio has been integrated into TBC's proprietary Board Readiness Assessment program.

Conclusion

Business today moves fast. And it is unforgiving. First impressions, good or bad, are difficult and perhaps impossible to change. In a competitive market for talent and the glut created by the increasing ease of disseminating information, personal branding and marketing has moved "front and center" for executives in managing careers. The executive bio as a "personal press release" provides a vehicle for displaying executive presence and standing out from the crowd with polish and pizzazz.

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Paula Asinof is the founder of Yellow Brick Path, a career coaching, leadership consulting, and resume services firm. Clients appreciate her straight talk, often unconventional perspectives, and the depth of her “real world” executive experience.

Paula is distinguished by her ability to identify, leverage, and develop talent. Throughout her career, she has helped clients, peers, and subordinates recognize their unique capabilities and position themselves as “A” players by addressing career strategy, leadership development, professional positioning, and visibility. She has a contagious enthusiasm and passionate belief in people that inspires them to become prouder, stronger, and more valuable contributors to their organizations. She has also led innovative initiatives to build top-performing organizations with management “bench strength” and staying power.

Her background includes co-founding Coach Academy International, a cutting-edge accredited coach training program, ten years of Executive Search Recruiting, and serving as Director of a college career services department. Earlier, she held leadership positions in IT and Finance with GTE (now Verizon), Rand McNally, and the Midwest Stock Exchange after beginning her career in public accounting. Paula holds an MBA from The Wharton School, an MA from Columbia University, and a BA from Washington University in St. Louis. She received the prestigious designations of Credentialed Career Manager (CCM) and Master Career Director (MCD) and is an Associate of Career Thought Leaders (CTL). She is also an NLP Practitioner, a Certified NLP Coach (NLPC), and a member of the International Coach Federation (ICF).

Paula is also the co-author of the practical and popular books *Be Smart: Sail Past the Hazards of Conventional Career Advice* (editions in English and Spanish), *Be Sharp: Tell me About Yourself in Great Introductions and Professional Bios*, and *Quick Start Coaching Kit: The Fast Track to Coaching Success*, all available on Amazon.com.