



Take on Board Podcast – Episode 315

Transcript – AI in the boardroom mini series – Candice DeVille explains what boards should be asking about AI

Helga Svendsen: Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Candice Deville about AI and the missing AI conversation. In the boardroom note, as you are listening to this, my punt is you're going to come up with lots of questions. Good person who is listening to this Take on Board, community people, so. In anticipation of all your AI questions, we are having an event with Candice on Tuesday the 19th of August.

I would love to see you there, as would Candice so link in the show notes and come along. Before we start recording today, as always, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record for me. I am on the unseated lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

I also pay my respects to any First Nations people who may be listening today. I acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters, skies, culture, and country. I support voice treaty and truth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Now let me tell you about Candice. Candice was formally on the board of Charity Bay and she's the founder of AI co-pilot and a leading AI strategist with 20 plus years experience in digital transformation, enterprise marketing and emerging tech, she advises boards, government and growth stage companies on responsible AI adoption, blending commercial insight with a sharp human centered lens on the future of work.

Welcome to the Take on Board podcast, Candice.

Candice DeVille: Thank you so much for having me Helga.

Helga Svendsen: It is awesome to have you here. And whilst I am very keen to dig into ai, as always, I want to dig a little bit deeper about you. First. Can you tell me what was young Candice like and when did you get your first inkling that you might end up in the boardroom or playing with AI?

Tell us about young Candice.

Candice DeVille: Yeah, well, she didn't have an inkling about this, I can tell you that much, but I was very much an outgoing, curious, wanted to know how everything works, kind of child. And I was really fortunate that my parents came from sort of both sides of the discipline aisle. My father's an electrical engineer and an inventor, and my mother is an artist and a language teacher, so I had a very.

Diverse upbringing of being able to see what they did, and they really included me in a lot of their work so that I could understand what they did for a living. Combine that with being someone who's probably a little precocious as a child. But I loved solving problems and I remember like. Even at the youngest point, I would go and try and, you know, set up an office in house so that I could run my dog walking empire and all these sorts of things.

I used to record my own radio shows on cassette tapes with my brothers and all these sorts of things. I was so interested in not just fixing things and, and, and solving problems, but also being able to help other people do that same thing. So I had no idea what I wanted to study throughout school. I just did.

Anything that interested me, whether that was, you know, languages, history, English wasn't much of a sport person, I must admit. So my path was that, uh, when I left school and went to university, I went to study archaeology because I thought, Hey, that sounds really cool. And when I look back on the path I've taken, I realize that all the choices that I made were really about understanding more about people, the world we live in, and the puzzle of all of that and how that goes together.

Helga Svendsen: Oh my God, archaeology. Well, I mean, I guess being in the boardroom, maybe even ai, it's digging around, trying to find out more, trying to piece things together. I guess, I don't know. I'm not an archaeologist.

Candice DeVille: Is that what they do? Yeah. Yeah. I, I didn't do any of that. I ended up, I was studying and I thought, you know what?

I don't get to talk to enough people doing this. So I made a sharp right turn and eventually ended up in marketing back in the late nineties. And what that meant is that, that time. Many businesses were going through digital transformations and so I was one of those lucky few who kind of straddled the analogue in the digital world.

And most of the people I worked with were much, much older than me at the time, sort of, you know, 30, 40 years older than me. Who had absolutely no experience with technology, and I came in as, you know, the, the fresh face, who knew how to use computers, who knew how to use email, and even though my boss would get me to print out the emails for him every morning so that he could dictate his response, and then I'd have to type the response back to the email.

I realized that there was actually even more opportunity for me to take what I knew and layer that on top of the other job skills I had in this marketing space and really be able to bring people along on that journey. And so that's where I started to see this sort of duality between, okay, maybe I work in marketing or PR.

But I can actually work on this technology side and really stay to make a difference in the adoption by being the facilitator and the translator between the old, old, and the new

Helga Svendsen: Well facilitator and translator. That is your role here today to facilitate and well probably the event in a couple of weeks.

Time is more the facilitation today is more the translation role because everyone is talking AI and. I was going to say, not many people are understanding it, but let's be honest, maybe that's just me. Maybe everybody else understands how it all works, how it is going to transform business and the boardroom. As I said, off air, I am very much feeling like the old person in some of the AI stuff.

So the missing AI conversation in the boardroom. Well, maybe what is the AI conversation in the boardroom and what's missing? Where should we start this conversation? Candice?

Candice DeVille: Yeah, it's a tricky one because like you said, people feel completely out of their depth and I would say the majority are in that space.

They've heard about ai. In fact, someone asked me the other day, what's this? A one stuff, so, okay, I feel better already. Right? They're not, they don't know, the average person does not know about this. And even those who are in leadership roles, most of what they know is coming from headline news and that's. Not actually the story.

So the biggest missing piece that we have right now is just fundamental literacy. Understanding. You don't have to know how to build it or all the intricacies of how it works. It's just that fundamental understanding of something that is a different animal to what we've dealt with before.

Helga Svendsen: Okay. I'm going to say a whole bunch of stupid stuff throughout this interview.

Candice, just so you know, feel free to pull me up on stuff 'cause that's the way I will learn as well. But I, I did this very basic New South Wales TAFE had a free understanding AI module or something like that, which I did a while ago. What I was fascinated with, what. Part of what I learned in that is how much AI has been around forever.

So it's actually building on what's already been around and all these people that are, oh, we don't use ai. It's like, uh, spell check, you know, or, you know. More sophisticated ones, but it's been around for ages. Everyone's using AI already. Recognize where it's already learned and leverage off that. That was part of what I learned.

Candice DeVille: I have a lot more, more to learn. It's so true. Like we're hearing people say, I would never use AI, or I don't use it like, well, do you watch Netflix? Do you use Google Maps? Does your washing machine have fuzzy logic? All of those things come under the AI umbrella. Yes. But that AI umbrella is so, so wide, and there are lots and lots of different types of AI to build on, but because of the media lens on ChatGPT, that's what most people think AI is.

And even then, they still don't understand what that actually is. But that's, they're synonymous in their minds.

Helga Svendsen: So first step literacy. What are some of your suggestions for board directors knowing that boardrooms are not as diverse as they could be, particularly around age diversity and the average?

Like I'm one of the younger people in the boardroom, which is not exactly young. So what should board directors be doing to build their literacy?

Candice DeVille: First look at taking some of the most fundamental simple 101 kind of courses. We have free ones of those on our website as well, because what we find is that much of the offerings that are out there for AI training are either very academic and quite maths science-based, or they tend to be very specific to say, do this thing with chat GPT.

What we need is that level of literacy that can take. Your current understanding of the world and technology and be able to speak about AI in a way that is comparable that you can understand how that actually works. Even things like understanding, you know how a filing system works, right? We are old school, we know what filing cabinets are like and how the hierarchy of folders work.

So we understand that when it comes to our desktop computers. But if you talk to, you know, a teenager. Most of them have never dealt with a filing cabinet. So it's trying to find those connections between things that can help to analogize what these pieces of AI are so that you have those penny drop moments.

Helga Svendsen: What are some of the ones that you've heard maybe from board directors that have been most valuable for them? Those courses that they're looking at?

Candice DeVille: Some of them have been sort of self-studying, some have done, uh, the things coming out from, uh, different, different governments and the TAs and things like that.

Mostly I find that. Because everybody is so different, they really need to start at that absolute fundamentals. Like what is it? What is the history? Where did it come from? You know, did it just spring up a couple years ago? Or, you know, have we actually been working on this since the 1950s and where did that come from?

You know, so it's not that we're, we're too old to do that. It's. It actually has been developing with us, but understanding some of those major leaps and bounds that have happened in the last few years.

Helga Svendsen: Alrighty, so first step folks. Literacy. Building your literacy, building on courses, programs, playing with it yourself, whatever it may be, build your literacy.

Then for boardrooms, as you know, the, uh, are we using AI? Might be the wrong question. Is it the right question or the wrong question? And if it's the wrong question, what's the right question? What are the sorts of conversation boards need to be having around AI

Candice DeVille: Before they should even ask, are we using AI because.

Technically, they probably are in many different ways in the business and they don't already know, but it's, are we even ready for that? Is the business in a position to even consider putting AI in? Because what we're already seeing, when we get requests from boards, there's that fomo of, okay, we don't want to be the last ones.

We don't want to be, you know, bringing up the rear here, losing competitive advantage. We need to move really quickly. What is often missed is that the infrastructure that's required to actually roll this out effectively and with a low risk as well. Because risk is such a big area to make sure that the governance is in place.

All of this before you even start looking at the projects. Most businesses that we come across have at least 12 months worth of work to do on their existing business before they can start layering this in. Otherwise, we're looking at huge risk problems, but we're also looking at big wasted cost.

Helga Svendsen: So before, what do we do next?

It's what are we doing now is kind of what I'm hearing here. What are we currently doing? What can we leverage in where, what we're currently doing? Do we have the capability? Do we have the structures, the governance structures to support it? Are those the sorts of things that boards should be looking at?

Candice DeVille: They are, and in most cases, they won't have those things in place. They generally will not have anything in place for AI governance. And it's generally an extension of things like, okay, what do we have for data privacy? Who actually looks after that? What are those policies? And much of that AI governance will actually build off that, in particular in terms of the risk and the ethics with that as well.

But the very, very big piece is data. Because you cannot have good AI without good data, and how that's been handled in the business is usually the sticking point. Because we have structures around this is how we should keep our data. These are the programs that we use. This is the hierarchy, the system.

Here are all the project managers in charge of this. The reality of how people in the organisation are actually keeping, storing and managing data is a very different story. And so when we go in and we ask the questions and, and we get that sort of boilerplate, well, here's how we are doing it, which is how we should be doing it.

And then I go to the organisation and visit and see, actually what really happens is everyone has things in different Excel spreadsheets that they've designed to their own specifications. There are post-it notes everywhere the uh, files aren't named correctly, like all this sort of stuff. And that is actually one of the key sticking points to being able to bring AI in in an effective way.

Helga Svendsen: Oh, the old data governance. Oh, but that's so boring. Candice AI is sexy. Right, right. You know what else that's really sexy is well labelled data. Okay. Right. So that's

interesting. It's a really, getting back to basics. Uh, the file names working, is everyone keeping things on their own local system rather than even in Yeah.

Candice DeVille: I tell you, if you as a board want to do an AI project, nothing will bring the skeletons in the closet to light faster than this. Oh, I love it.

Helga Svendsen: So it's actually data architecture, I guess, is step one of AI readiness? Is that what I'm hearing? 100%. Oh my God. That is much harder for people to get excited about, but that's interesting that it's step one.

I'm wondering if you've got any stories for us that you might be able to share about either you know and name names as much as you can or can't, as the case may be about AI readiness. Organisations and maybe the, either the conversations at the boardroom that have been helpful or maybe the conversations in the boardroom that haven't been helpful.

And yeah. Is there any stories you can share to bring some of this to life for us?

Candice DeVille: Yeah. Yeah. So I won't name names 'cause this is a, a well-known infrastructure company, but. What is so interesting is that the board has a view of the organisation that essentially things are, are kind of working according to the plan of this is what's happening.

Department heads have got it handled and so on. But when we're working with ai, we really have to look at who that end user is going to be as well, because without the good and solid adoption of the end user, you've also got another massive problem. And so we have to look at two different ends. And in this particular case, the board was like, these AI projects will be great.

There's no worries. We've got really good data system. We've got all of these CRMs and databases and you know, we have all this Microsoft stuff. But the reality was that as people were using it, they all had different ways of doing things and they had their own individual legacy systems. So particularly when we were seeing that, now we have a lot more hybrid work that.

Introduces another factor because people tend to keep things on their own machines. They might do something at home, they're doing something out of hours, and what happens is that instead of that data being really controlled and centralized and clean, it's all over the place. And so you have that to deal with, but also the human element of resistance to change and not wanting to do things a different way, both with their data and with ai.

So what starts off as, oh, this is just going to be a simple two- or three-month project to build This particular AI system ends up being a one to two year project to even get the organisation ready.

Helga Svendsen: . That is such a good reality check. It's fascinating too, and I think about if it's a one-to-two-year program to get people ready, by then the tech itself will have changed enormously as well.

Does that mean it is just this constant cycle of getting people ready? Yeah, it's quite tricky.

Candice DeVille: And so depending on the scale of what they want to do, quite often they'll look at that and go, you know what? We don't have that time to wait. We don't have the time to be in the perfect position. And that's very true because it's moving the, the pace of AI, both its development, but also the adoption is moving faster than anything we've had.

So how do you balance being ready and actually acting? And this is where having that expertise, what, what's the answer, Candice? What's the answer? Yeah, yeah. You have to then distill a lot of things and go, alright, so let's look at the organisation from a really bird's eye standpoint and say what? Our system is, say, really prone to human error.

What is just a lot of grunt work that's taking up time that it shouldn't like look at some of those key pain points where AI is very, very well positioned to help. And so when we actually can narrow that down, then we're able to say, okay, if it's just this one project that we want to tackle, that's low impact, at low risk and high impact.

Then we only need to get this piece of the organisation ready and we test. So instead of trying to boil the ocean, what we do is we do like a little micro test, and that also helps people understand here is where the organisation is right now. These are the challenges. These might be the resistance of a stumbling box in a much, much smaller way.

So that then just like testing all sorts of things, you can see where your successes are, where your roadblocks are, and what you might need to address when you take on the next project or the bigger project. It's not just, let's be an AI organisation and throw it. Everybody. It's been really surgical and strategic, which is why having that AI expertise to either consult with or what not is really important for boards because without that, they have no surgeon.

Helga Svendsen: And what are some of the pilots, the experiments, these high impact, low risk experiments, I guess, or pilots that you've seen that have worked well or even that have not worked well actually now that I think is useful.

Candice DeVille: Yeah, yeah. Well, your point before about how quickly AI moves is a really important one because in doing these projects, it's not like making a decision to buy one software package and then roll that out to the company.

Because by the time you've done it, a lot of the underlying models and things have actually changed. So we have to build modular type solutions, kind of like Lego, where we can put new pieces in and it still just keeps working as it goes along. But to give you an example of something like that, that we did that was really high impact and low risk was for, uh, an online retail company that has about 70,000 product SKUs.

So that's a lot of product, but they also get updated. Every single week, and when they were doing this, they have to get all of the data from the different manufacturers overseas. Somebody has to clean that data, make sure it's ready, write the descriptions, make sure they're SEO optimized, put them on the website.

It is a massive undertaking for a huge amount of people, copywriters, SEO experts, outsourced people. Very, very heavy man hours for this, and so turnaround time is also difficult. What we did is we worked with them to build an AI powered engine that actually connected the data source from overseas, did all of the cleaning that had to happen, standardize all of that and actually write these descriptions dynamically in the voice of the brand so that we could get even more information and something that was more helpful to the customer than just the two lines that someone had time to write before.

And so by the time that was all rolled out, it was an automated system that was able to pull everything directly from the manufacturer, deal with it all, write lovely things about it, and publish it on the website in a regular basis. So it saved tens of thousands of man hours. But also the people who had been doing that job before, who knew the products well, and knew the business well, were able to move into more of a customer relationship role.

So they were able to be more effective on closing deals and making sales and these sorts of things that were really moving the needle rather than working in the weeds with all of this data that was coming in, making mistakes on numbers or spelling or anything like that. And instead we had this system.

Helga Svendsen: Interesting. Okay. And in that organisation, I mean, you know. That's the magic, I guess, that lots of boards go, oh, I want that. I want that. We want the magic. Tell me about their data readiness. Take the step back in that organisation, sorry, their AI readiness and therefore, you know, their data governance and their data architecture and their change readiness and those sorts of things.

What was the step before the magic?

Candice DeVille: Yeah, we were really fortunate that the founder of this business is excited about AI and had spent a lot of time reading and understanding and trying to educate himself as to what was possible. And so for me it's kind of one of those ideal clients that, you know, rings you or sends you a voicemail at 3:00 AM saying, I've just had this cool idea, can we do this thing?

You know, this is going to be amazing. So the other part to this that made it work for them is that we weren't looking at an internal data source. We were looking at something that came from manufacturers and it had no personal identifying information. So already that problem is gone. It's just product information.

It's coming from just a few defined sources, not 50 different places in the organisation and how we could handle that data was far less sensitive than something that did have, uh. Personal identifiable information. So when we looked at identifying the right first project for them, these are some of the key things that we looked at of how do we get this up fast without the risk, without the extra layers that were going to be required of governance, consent, ethics, all of this sort of stuff.

They didn't actually play into this project. So it meant that we were able to do this as a first run so that they could see the ROI for the organisation were able to work directly with the

staff who were impacted so that they could see, alright, AI is nice, but how does it really affect my life? What does it do for me that gives me a nicer life?

And that's really the question that will change people's mind at the end. They don't want to know that they'll be more productive or this or that. They just want to know, can I go home early on a Friday or can I go to my kids' school play? And that's the connect we have to make. So in this case, once we rolled that out, it meant that people were doing work that was more fulfilling for them.

They could actually do things that were more strategic for the business, things that allowed them to deal directly with customers, things that gave them back more connection, and that was a really important piece. In the foundational transition for them, so that before trying to hit everyone in the organisation with, oh, we're doing AI.

Now it's, we're doing this one little thing. Let's actually talk about how this is going to make your life better and let's measure that. As we go through the rollout, because we can't just talk about it and then never go back to it. We have to actually see what is the impact, and if there's an unintended consequence, how do we deal with that?

Helga Svendsen: Oh my gosh, Candice, such wisdom here and such. Take the step back. Think about your AI readiness, think about the data, think about change readiness, those sorts of things. Such useful stuff for boards to think about. So. From the conversation today, and folks, again, if questions are coming up, don't forget we've got the event coming up, but for today's conversation, Candice, what are the key things you want people to take away from what we've talked about today?

Candice DeVille: Be I think to not afraid. As well, to not feel like you're so far behind. You've got to catch up, have the anxiety, have the fomo. Just take a beat because it changes literally every day and it is impossible for anyone to keep up with it. So your job is to be the best board member that you can. It's not to be the best AI expert that you can.

So just. Take a breath and then at that pace be able to start to learn those AI foundations. Like what is it? It's not magic. It's not a Harry Potter wand. It's not killer robots in the end of the world. Like there is so much more in between those extremes and even having that simple understanding of how it can do what it does, will make you feel a lot more in control.

Because you don't have to know about every model and all of the things, but if you understand that, okay, this is math and this is how that works, even if you're not a math person, trust me, you don't need to know formulas or anything, but just to know that one plus one is two. You can see that, and that gives you a degree of confidence and trust in what you're doing.

Helga Svendsen: And is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Candice DeVille: Yes. I wrote a book called the AI Readiness Playbook, which people can access if they want for Kindle via Amazon, but I've also put it on a landing page for them so that they can download that as a PDF and read. At their own pace.

And what we've done is really taken all of the learnings over the last few years as we've been trying to roll out these projects into organisations and in the most plain English possible, explain what you need to do when you start thinking about ai. So all of those steps, it helps you understand a bit more about the structure of what needs to be there so that you can go into those conversations much more ready.

Helga Svendsen: Oh folks, what a gift. That literal gift, we will make sure there is a link to that in the show notes so you can access it. Candice, thank you. So useful to start this conversation. I know it's, there is always new things to be learned, but what I'm hearing is build your literacy. Focus on readiness rather than jumping straight to solution.

And your book there might be very handy on it. So thank you so much for joining us today and in anticipation of the event that we've got coming up in anticipation of thanking you for answering all the questions that the Take on Board community might have about this as well. So yeah, thank you so much for being with us today for this conversation.

Candice DeVille: You are so welcome. Helga, I definitely welcome questions from anyone and just know there is no stupid question at all. Excellent. Well, I'll be there then if that's the case. Thanks so much, Candice. Thanks. Helga.