

Q&A: Jacquelyn Gernaey, The Alternative Board

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Jacquelyn Gernaey has been busy. In addition to advising, coaching and training through [Hy Tech Consulting](#), she set up 10 advisory boards for about 100 Suffolk companies through [The Alternative Board](#), helping business owners unite in a kind of brain trust. The Suffolk franchise is now the largest within TAB nationwide.

How'd you start in business? I was a microbiologist. I ran a 450-bed microbiology laboratory in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. They helped diagnose infections. They tell the physician, if it's bacterial,

what antibiotic will be effective. I'm certified through the [American Society of Clinical Pathologists](#). After I did that for about five years, I went into sales and sales management. I sold microbiology products to hospital laboratories and then went into marketing.

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How did you end up on Long Island? I moved from the Midwest to do marketing in New Jersey for a division of Baxter [Pharmaceuticals]. I took a job in Plainview as the director of marketing for a microbiology diagnostic company, ran a 21-person marketing department and got promoted to president. I was the first female division president. The division was \$25 million, 200 employees, of the then \$8.5 billion company, American Home Products, now Wyeth. After a number of years, we sold the division. I started consulting.

Did you get stock options as part of the sale? I did well. There were lots of stock options. Because I was the president selling my own company, they paid me handsomely, to make sure I was on their side. Then I started doing consulting for pharmaceutical companies. I did all these wonderful business plans, marketing plans, sales plans. I'd present them in a nice package and they didn't implement. Planning is stupid if you're not going to implement. This annoyed me because implementation is what it's all about. I started looking for a mechanism to make sure they implement it. I found The Alternative Board.

What is The Alternative Board? It's out of Denver. It's based on peer advisory and coaching. We put people in board of director groups with peers, other business owners, who hold them accountable, give them advice on what to do and what not to do, and act like a board of directors. They meet monthly for four hours. I founded this on Long Island in 1999 and we subsequently added another franchise in Nassau. I was the first female franchise owner.

What was it like to launch The Alternative Board on Long Island? When I had my first board meeting, I had contractors, accountants, manufacturers, although mine had been a manufacturing company. I was sure somebody was going to ask a question I wasn't going to be able to help. I found that, really, it's not about the facilitator, the person running the meeting. It's all about the brains of the people sitting in the room.

What types of issues are you seeing now among businesses? The very small businesses, up to \$1.5 million, the focus is on sales, marketing, sales and more sales. Each person brings an issue or opportunity to discuss. They lay it out on the table and get advice from the group. The [owners of] medium-sized companies want a life. They have built up the company between \$2 million and \$5 million. The company is them. They need processes and procedures and to get people hired, so they can get out of the day-to-day and not kill themselves. The bigger companies we categorize as having managers of managers. Those people are looking for how they can make the team work better, mergers and acquisitions, exit strategies.

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Do they help each other beyond advising at meetings? They help each other inside and outside of the boards. They tell people, 'Don't try that. I tried that and it doesn't work.' They might give them help with their thinking. Sometimes, saying something out loud makes them rethink it. They might give each other resources.

Are you trying to replace accountants or attorneys? You need your accountant. You need your attorney. We are kind of the glue between everything: the business owner, their employees, the accountant, the attorney.

Can you give me examples of people who went in with problem and came out with solutions? The problems might be they're in a family business. They're not getting along. That has a negative impact not only on the business, but the family. We help deal with interactions. It could be a qualified emerging [technology] tax credit. Suffolk County TAB members have received about \$2 million in grants from New York state because of their affiliation with The Alternative Board. They would not have known about this. We put them in touch with the appropriate people to help them get these tax credits for companies doing research and development.

Are you seeing particular issues because of the economy? During the rough economy – we're coming out of it – they cut back. Some of them had to step back into the role of doing it, doing it, doing it, instead of being the leader and the visionary. They're having to outsource hiring. Seventy-seven percent of TAB members said they're going to be hiring this year.

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