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Hareesh Tibrewala is a Entrepreneur, advisor, and digital evangelist with 30+ years' experience building ventures like Mirum (WPP) and now MeruLife, Hareesh advises corporates on digital transformation and AI. He is also a mentor with Stanford Seed and an advisor to leading blue-chip Indian corporates. Now keen to contribute as an Independent Director, bringing innovation, governance, and impact to forward-looking Boards.

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FROM OUR FELLOW MEMBER

WHY INDIAN BOARDS NEED TECHNOLOGY-SAVVY INDEPENDENT DIRECTORS

For decades, Indian corporate board stewardship has been built around three pillars: domain knowledge, finance and law. This made sense. Domain knowledge brought a mature understanding of the business, market dynamics and networking. On the other hand, financial stewardship and legal compliance helped lay a strong foundation for the organisation. A Director with a CA background could decipher balance sheets, and a lawyer could parse regulations. Together, this trioka guided boardroom discussions.

But the ground beneath this equation has shifted. Today, technology is no longer a back-office enabler. It is the foundation of competitive advantage, business continuity, and even corporate survival. Boards now need to evolve and understand that technology is no longer just the purview of the executive leadership; it is now a boardroom conversation!

Why Technology Belongs in the Boardroom

Technology is now central to every industry, not just IT companies. Any and every function of the business: HR, Finance, Sales, Marketing, Manufacturing... all have information technology at the core. Building a successful business no longer means having a good product or a known brand; it also needs technology that delivers a solid customer experience and helps run an efficient back end.

For each of these, oversight cannot stop at "Do we have the right CIO?" or "Is IT within budget?" Boards must understand whether digital investments actually deliver long-term value,

whether data is being protected responsibly, and whether new technologies introduce strategic risks (and how those risks need to be managed).

The Dual Lens: Opportunity and Risk

A technology-savvy Director brings two critical lenses.

1. The Opportunity Lens

- **Spotting digital adjacencies:** A pharmaceutical company using AI to accelerate clinical trials or a robust CRM that helps to squeeze out every ounce of marketing spend.
- **Reimagining customer experience:** Gone are the days when large media spends helped build successful brands. Customer attention and long-term loyalty can now be earned only by providing a seamless customer experience, by leveraging technology at every customer touchpoint.
- **Scaling efficiency:** Manufacturers are reducing downtime through predictive analytics or using conversational bots to reduce customer service costs.

2. Managing Risk

- **Cybersecurity:** India faced over 2,000 weekly cyberattacks per organisation in 2023 (as per Check Point's Research 2023). Boards must treat cyber resilience as business-critical, not a CIO's headache.
- **Data Privacy:** With India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP) coming into effect, mishandling customer data can lead to regulatory fines and public backlash.
- **AI Governance:** Algorithms can embed bias, hallucinate, or open new attack surfaces. Independent Directors must know enough



to ask the right questions: Is our AI explainable? Who audits its training data?

The Evolving Tech Governance Landscape

A tech-savvy Director can help businesses understand the fast-changing digital law environment, as well as suggest means and measures to ensure compliance.

- **Data Protection & Privacy:** DPDP in India, GDPR in Europe, and CCPA in the US—global rules now shape local practice.
- **AI & Automation:** Draft frameworks from the EU and OECD are setting precedents. India will likely follow.
- **Digital Competition:** The Competition Commission of India is eyeing the practices of large digital platforms.
- **Cybersecurity Mandates:** RBI and CERT-In have already issued strict reporting and resilience guidelines.

Independent Directors: The Bridge Between Tech and Strategy

Independent Directors have a unique role. Unlike executives, they are not tied to quarterly firefighting. Unlike consultants, they are not fleeting voices. They can offer perspective and continuity.

- A Director with technology fluency can:
- Translate between CIO/CTO jargon and board priorities.
 - Evaluate whether digital roadmaps align with corporate strategy.
 - Challenge assumptions on AI, cloud, or data monetisation.

- Raise red flags when cyber risks are underplayed.
- Help balance innovation with ethical responsibility.

What Technology Fluency Means (and Doesn't)

A board member does not need to understand coding in Python or designing cloud architecture. Technology fluency at a board level means:

- Knowing the broad contours of emerging technologies: cloud, AI, IoT, blockchain, and cybersecurity.
- Understanding the business implications: cost models, risk profiles, and regulatory impacts.
- Asking the right questions and recognising red flags.

In practice:

- **Instead of nodding at “We’ve moved to the cloud,” ask:** Which vendor? What about lock-in risk?
- **When hearing “We’re using AI in hiring,” ask:** How do we test for bias and fairness?
- **On data strategy:** What data do we own, how do we monetise it, and how do we protect it?

The Indian Context

India’s corporate landscape adds urgency to this shift:

- **Digital-First Consumers:** India has 800+ million internet users; consumer behaviour is being shaped by platforms, not physical channels.
- **Public Digital Infrastructure:** Aadhaar, UPI, ONDC, and Account Aggregators

are global benchmarks. Boards must align with this ecosystem.

- **Regulatory Momentum:** With DPDP and RBI’s tightening norms, digital compliance is no longer optional.
- **Global Integration:** Indian firms increasingly serve global markets where digital governance is stricter. Independent Directors who can connect these dots will be invaluable.

Building the Next-Gen Boardroom

So what can companies—and aspiring Directors—do?

1. Diversify the Skills Mix

Regulators already require certain board diversity (e.g., Women Directors). Skill diversity is the next frontier. Nomination committees should actively seek candidates with IT, digital, and AI expertise.

2. Board Training

Even existing Directors can upskill. There are various programs from local and international bodies that train existing Directors to understand technology-related issues. Boards should make such training a routine, not optional.

3. Tech Committees

Just as audit and risk committees are staples, some global firms have board-level “technology committees.” Indian companies should consider this.

4. Scenario Planning

Boards should run simulations: What if our data is breached? What if a regulator bans part of our AI model? What if our cloud provider fails? Independent Directors must help frame these questions.

The Road Ahead

The corporate boardroom is evolving from a guardian of compliance to a navigator of complexity. Digital transformation, data governance, and AI ethics are now strategic levers. Independent Directors who bring technology fluency will not only guard against risks but also unlock new growth horizons. For Indian boards, this is not about “nice to have” expertise. It is a governance necessity. The challenge is not whether companies will adopt technology. That battle is over. The real question is whether Boards will govern technology wisely. The winners will be those that do.