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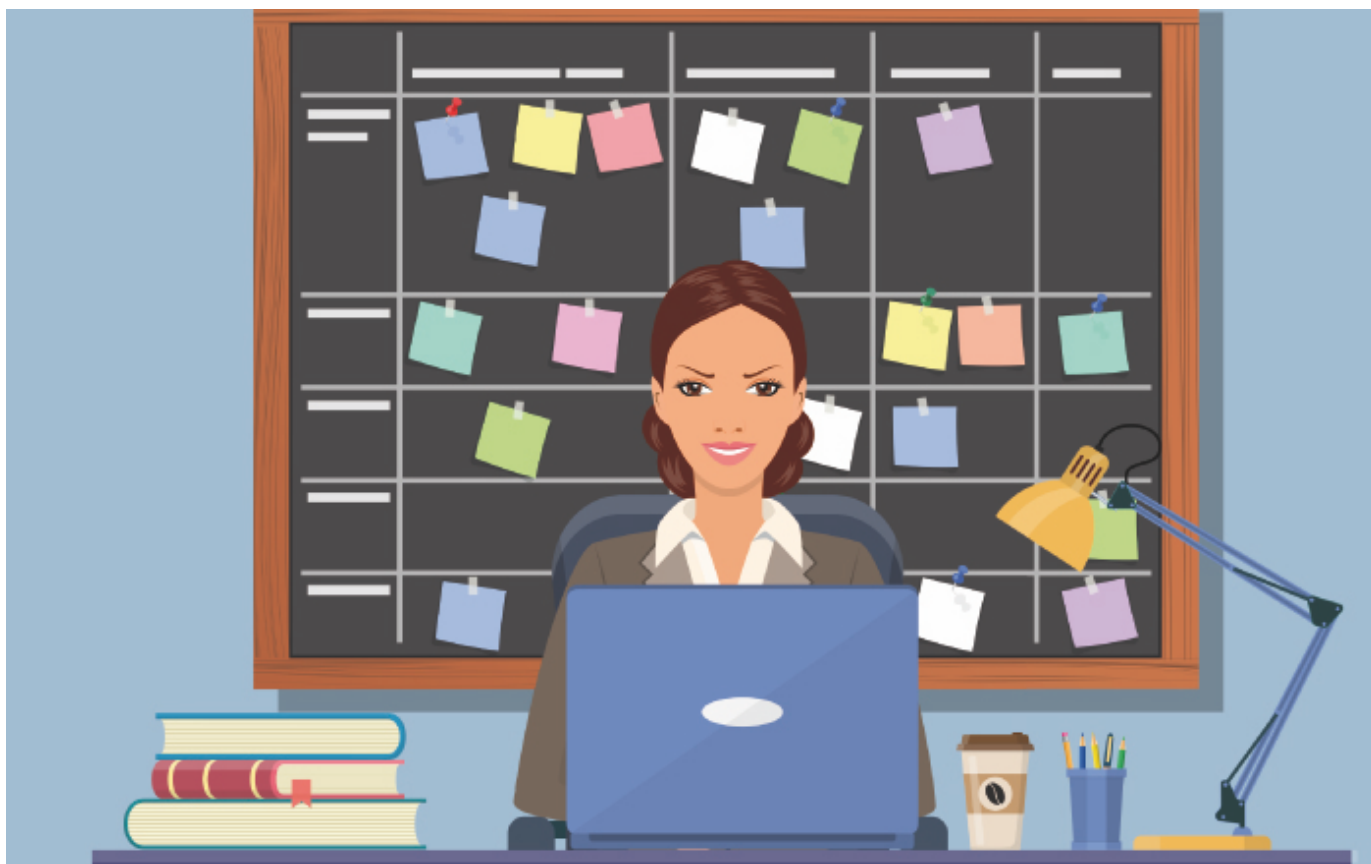


How not to forget about the 'work' from WFH

It may seem odd to conduct board meetings from directors' homes, but most one can do is not let go of professional etiquette



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When the Ministry of Finance refused to move the financial year, quarterly and annual board meetings had to be announced, to be held from homes. The virus has changed the world in ways that were unimaginable till a month ago. Besides working from home, we are going to see several types of mental illnesses crop up soon, but we are not worried about tectonic shifts right now as all

the focus is on simply surviving the crisis. To top it up, our prime minister is playing with the superstitious minds of the masses by clapping hands and lighting lamps instead of alleviating their difficulties or outlining clear steps for the future.

The virus is a great leveller as it does not discriminate between enterprises of small, medium or large – politically connected or not. At a time of global economic turmoil, when people are bombarded with words such as ‘quarantine’, ‘depression’, ‘curfew’, and ‘lockdown’, discussion on corporate governance may seem insignificant. But the fiduciary duties of enterprise boards and their legal enforcement must not be abdicated no matter how the world events shape up.

Though most business people have some experience in online meetings today, majority are not used to logging in from the kitchen table – and even less when it comes to conducting the important legal matters of a board in our *pajamas*. Here are some evolving good manners that can come in handy when your virtual board meeting is scheduled via tele conference, video conference or online meeting rooms:

- Try to be isolated *within* your isolation, particularly for video board meetings. Get away from that kitchen table to a home office, spare bedroom, any place that is out of traffic flow within your house. Your background should not be cluttered. This is good online etiquette for any virtual meeting, but matters even more for boards. Family, kids or other aspects of life bopping around in the background or interrupting the background just looks unprofessional and distracting. We know of a video board meeting where a very serious-looking board member’s black cat kept wandering in front of the camera. Additionally, board deliberation covers financials, strategy, planning and all sorts of *very* sensitive information that should not be floating around the director’s home. Respect this. Most importantly, current board meetings will be bringing up some very unpleasant challenges never experienced before by any of the members.
- Make at-home tech your ally. As a board member, a new fiduciary duty is to weigh how good the technology is at *your* end. The best practice would be to use a desktop computer with a quality camera, either separate from the monitor or built in. A pad computer is next in preference. It gives you more mobility, but sacrifices on video quality both ways, as well as sound. Do an online speed check of your Internet connection before the meeting. *Remember*, some directors may use their smart phones for meetings, but tell them to use that only as a last resort – selfie-governance is not cool.

All of these devices have built-in audio and microphones, but the quality can be iffy. Invest in a proper wired-in or Bluetooth headset, either with your phone, or better, through your computer USB port. This not only makes the sound much clearer for everyone, but also assures that you are the only one on your end able to hear discussion (and no, *don't* use a speakerphone). Headsets and video conferencing tools will have a mute button for microphone, and make good use of this when you are not speaking. The other board members don't want to hear you muttering, the dog barking, wife screaming at kids, or other noises. In fact, try making "mute" your default microphone setting, only going live when you actually have something to say.

- Stamp out distractions. Your board of directors has a right to your focused attention. That means blocking any popup notifications on your computer, not browsing your mail or texting while the board is in session, and putting your phone in silent mode. Let everyone in the house know that you are in a meeting, and request them to keep down background noise. Keep Fido and Mittens out of your virtual boardroom, no matter how cute they are.
- Even when sheltering at home, keep some board meeting protocol. Aim for business casual dress, or at least no *pajamas*. Be recognised to speak, and say your name before you do, even if the other directors are all familiar. If you need to take a break from the virtual meeting, let the group know, and pause your video and audio while gone. And no matter how tempting, no funny video memes please!

Get used to the new normal before it becomes normal!

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