

Hanging onto the telephone...

by Caroline Evans

“Don’t leave me hanging on the telephone” forms the popular chorus of a Blondie song and it echoed the truth for many of us. For so long, the telephone was a tool to communicate verbally, one-to-one, and nothing else. But during the past few years we have grown to using our phones for so much more. Now it seems that even these developments aren’t enough.

When they arrived on the scene, we thought FaceTime, Skype and WhatsApp were pretty revolutionary. Not now! One for the upsides of the awful situation we all find ourselves in is the chance to use Facebook Portal, Google Hangout, Microsoft Teams, Zoom and so on to conduct our conversations with everyone we know, work with, random connections and even celebrities.

But are we enjoying it? Is it for the better or are we just experiencing the ‘emperor’s new clothes’? And is it adding to the mental pressures we are facing?

Obviously, in a business context it is important to be able to conduct meetings and make decisions but would we really contemplate a 9-hour face-to-face conversation or conference call? Are good decisions made after hours of virtual concentration? If we add the new protocols to consider – around dress code, online security, backdrop, lighting and domestic interruptions – not to mention the vagaries of ‘bandwidth’ etc, isn’t it all just leading to brain overload? In a physical meeting there’s the chance to drop your gaze, make an aside, grab a coffee, escape to the loo. These can still be done whilst ‘on camera’ but are much more unwantedly attention-grabbing.

On a more positive note – and a cause of huge celebration to Company Secretaries, I’m sure – there are no sandwiches to order, no coats to be hung up, taxis to organise. Suddenly Company Secretaries are allowed to get on with their real job unhindered. They are liberated to be the key contributors and governance resources that they have trained for, free to be more interactive attendees supporting the meeting participants – directors, NEDS and management teams.

At a domestic level, who truly enjoys all the family and friends’ virtual catch-ups – quizzes, musical performances, ‘pub nights’ – they have found themselves participating in since lockdown?

I used to call my parents once a week, I’ve upped this a bit to allow for the fact that I can’t pop in, but I know they are safe and well and they know where I am (rather more than they used to!). So why did I suddenly feel obliged to organise a family Zoom call to

include my brother and his family, who used to catch up with my parents separately? I'm rather relieved that it turned out to be impossible. I don't know if anyone else has had to assist (remotely) an 89-year-old install an App on their ancient desktop that runs ancient versions of software, 'assisted' by an impatient tech-savvy teenage relative but I'm still suffering from PTSD. And what did we miss in failing to make the connection? Not much! We're all at home, ok and getting on with 'stuff'.

This leads me to calls with friends. Again, why should we want to talk to each other more when we're all doing less? Or if we are doing more, we're too tired to chat. I'm generally a gregarious person, my lockdown situation is pretty comfortable and I still have work to do, but I certainly didn't want to hear about my friends who are enjoying a relaxing retirement in the sunshine from the comfort of their newly refurbished house and garden. They are getting up late, catching up on their hobbies and re-watching classic films. The worst thing that had happened to them was some rather disappointing food delivery substitutions. I love them dearly and they are wonderful friends but I think we'll wait until we have more shared experiences to talk about!

All in all, I'm with Blondie; as she sang all those years ago – "It's good to hear your voice".

But just your voice, please!

Caroline Evans FCIS is founder of MindLeap, a corporate governance boutique. Caroline partners with several organisations providing expert advice and practical support, connects and collaborates across the corporate governance community and gives guidance as a company secretary and corporate governance speaker at conferences. She also offers coaching on career decision-making for company secretaries, governance professionals and aspiring NEDs.

www.mindleap.co.uk