

## Just a Minute! By Caroline Evans

There's so much that we've lost over the last 12 months, but were there any upsides? Well, I discovered one! A year ago, I would never have contemplated embarking on a new career and applying for a junior company secretary (CoSec) role. However, lockdown presented me with the impetus – time, financial imperative and remote access – to gather some real practical CoSec experience. I've absolutely no regrets so far. The challenges have been many and varied: intellectual, technical, practical and organisational. I'm certainly still on a steep learning curve but I'm starting to fit the pieces of the jigsaw together and hopefully becoming a productive member of the team.

I thought I understood the cadences of the board processes but now I realise that it's not until you are embedded that you really know how it all works. I've had to step up my Excel and Word knowledge quite considerably. Meeting administration is, I now know, much more complicated than it appears. But all this pales into nothing compared to minuting! The term itself is probably derived from the Latin phrase "minuta scriptura" (literally "small writing") meaning "rough notes", however, nothing could be further from the truth!

There's so much more to it!

I did know this would be a big challenge; the job of the minute-taker is widely recognised to be a hugely complex and time-consuming element of any CoSec's remit. I thought I comprehended what it must be like to sufficiently understand papers produced by subject experts and accurately record the key factors of a discussion arising from those papers. How little I knew!

Despite seeking advice from several experienced quarters beforehand, and even attending a minuting course (admittedly some years ago), I was completely unprepared for the enormity and complexity of the task. My first attempt wasn't pretty. But I'm lucky enough to have a very understanding boss and board who provided not only crucial technical support but also absolutely vital empathetic encouragement.

No amount of preparatory reading prepares you for the direction a conversation might take. In this virtual age of Zoom meetings, I'm not as good at recognising people by their voices as I thought. Listening to a recording (time and time again) is no substitute for your own notes; provided you made reasonable notes in the first place. There is simply so much to co-ordinate to deliver a decent set of minutes. I've been told that I'm gradually improving, which is encouraging but my list of things to do, and do better, is growing too. And, that's the point. I'd forgotten it can take time – and plenty of repetition – to improve, which is frustrating but necessary.

It's like peeling back layers of an onion and having to digest that layer before understanding the importance of the next! It's not until you start transcribing that you realise it's not just a

question of relaying the course of the discussion but also recognising the occurrence and significance of a myriad of formalities: actions, decisions, proposals, objections, resolutions, for approval, noted, etc...

On the one hand, you must be ready to respond to quick-fire technical questions on a multitude of complex issues; on the other you must remember to note arrivals and departures to and from the meeting, keep an eye on the clock, and manage the technology. Any one of which can require your complete attention.

I've been allocated 4 boards and about 6 committee meetings over the next 12 months and if you are also venturing down a similar route, the following tips might help you along the way:

1. Really try to understand the broad issues within the content of the board pack.
2. Know the people who are attending.
3. Have a format and structure in place that works well and don't deviate!
4. Firmly put aside time to prepare by reading the papers and setting up a template in advance and have, at least, one 'do not disturb' day to write the minutes as soon as it is possible after the meeting.
5. If you have queries, ask them early before you forget what your shorthand meant! In fact, read through all your notes immediately post-meeting.
6. Critically assess every sentence of your minutes; is it necessary? Is the information covered elsewhere or could it be?
7. Be patient! You will keep getting things wrong – but hopefully you'll make fewer mistakes each time and gradually stop repeating the same mistakes. Aim to improve one step at a time.
8. Remember that your draft will be reviewed by others and more changes will inevitably be made so don't take it too personally.

Do I enjoy minuting? Not in itself, although I'm proud when what can seem like a stream of random jottings is finally carved into a comprehensive yet concise summary. I'm not achieving this on my own but it's something I'm working hard towards.

Equally, do I enjoy being in the boardroom? Certainly, it's a real privilege and a terrific opportunity to learn. So, instead of admiring the value of the CoSec from the safety of the side-lines, I am now making my own contributions.

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