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# Governance Notes

## Elevating the Board Onboarding Experience

By Betsy Chapin Taylor, FAHP, CEO, *Accordant*

**Health organizations have a precious opportunity to leverage the unique influence and insights of community leadership volunteers who serve on the board.**

Yet, many board leaders describe the onboarding experience as a deflating, check-the-box endeavor to convey access to organizational documents rather than a meaningful and effective process to set them up for success. At the same time, many board support professionals counter that it feels impossible to balance a meaningful onboarding experience with the genuine time constraints of busy leaders. To get board members educated, acclimated, and integrated to add value from the start, here are a few considerations for improving design and delivery of the board onboarding experience.

### Craft Journeys

Board orientation is often an event. Leaders hunker down for a day—or days—to thumb through fat binders of materials and to listen to speakers explain a mind-numbing amount of information. This is a recipe for information overload. Further, it ignores the psychological reality of “the forgetting curve” where new information is quickly lost without ongoing review or application. Therefore, board onboarding must be a journey with information and engagement dripped over time rather than an event. Great onboarding also uses multiple methods of conveying information to maintain energy and adapt to various learning styles. Therefore, craft an eight-week cadence that not only includes a board manual and formal presentations but also integrates pre-reads, site visits, discussions, case studies, patient stories, on-demand digital learning, access to a digital document library and other tools, as well as opportunities for practical application of information shared. Ultimately, the onboarding journey should not only educate but also inspire and motivate each new member.

### What’s Inside:

- Elevating the Board Onboarding Experience
- Advance Governance Support through a Board Portal

## Illuminate Mission

Board members are called to safeguard and advance the organization's mission, so a board member's understanding of and passion for the mission is a linchpin of effective engagement. Thus, organizations must add richness and context to their mission story. An acute care hospital doesn't just exist to address illness and injury; it is an anchor in the social fabric of the community with deep commitments to serve people from all walks of life regardless of ability to pay. Digging deep into the societal implications of the hospital's mission and its legacy of service allows board members to embrace a deeper sense of purpose. Illuminating mission also enables board members to understand the alignment between the hospital mission and their personal values and intentions to affect positive change.

## Unpack Expectations

How a board member can add value should be crystal clear. Too often, the only quantifiable expectation conveyed is around meeting attendance—which is a very narrow slice of the contributions expected and required of each member. Orientation should explore board roles and responsibilities in a clear and specific manner with examples of what excellent performance looks like. Information should also delineate between the legal and fiduciary roles of board governance and individual expectations for volunteerism.

## Create Connections

The quality of relationships between board members has real implications. The accumulation of interactions shapes the inclination and capacity of each board member to foster trust and to engage in productive collaboration with others. That's why cultivating positive working relationships between board members is a legitimate onboarding issue. Board onboarding should not only include social niceness to make new members feel welcome and valued—such as a personal greeting and note of thanks for agreeing to serve from the board chair—but also support systems to allow leaders to comfortably enter the board arena. For example, there is value to assigning a current board member peer ally to share information about board work and dynamics, to answer questions in a comfortable setting prior to the first board meeting, to have a friendly face when walking into the boardroom, and to facilitate check-ins during the first year.

## Demystify Norms

High-performing leaders don't want to misread the culture and misstep. So, while culture can feel more nebulous to address, it's worth going there. Board members must understand positive and productive debate and dissension are valued, so they should not

**Digging deep into the societal implications of the hospital's mission and its legacy of service allows board members to embrace a deeper sense of purpose.**

hesitate to explore issues or ask tough questions. New members should understand that healthcare is a complex environment that demands agility, adaptability, and conscious courage to speak up when things are unclear. Board members should also be briefed on how the organization makes decisions as well as that once decisions are made by the collective board body, every board member is expected to support those decisions. Understanding simple normative behaviors, communications standards, and decision-making practices can enable a new member to engage instead of feeling tentative.

## Key Takeaways

- **Make onboarding a journey rather than an event.** Spreading learning over time helps ensure new board members retain the information and fully understand practical applications.
- **Use multiple methods of conveying information** to maintain energy and adapt to various learning styles.
- **Illuminate the mission by adding richness and context to your mission story.** Digging into the societal implications of the hospital's mission and its legacy of service allows board members to embrace a deeper sense of purpose.
- **Clearly define board roles and responsibilities**, providing examples of what excellent performance looks like.
- **Cultivate relationships between board members from the beginning** so that new members feel comfortable entering the board arena. For example, assign a seasoned member as a mentor for the new member to help support them through their first year on the board.
- **Don't skip over culture.** Discussing normative boardroom behaviors and decision-making practices upfront will enable new members to engage quicker.
- **Ask about fit during onboarding.** Ensure that the leader still desires to move forward in the role and is willing to put in the time and effort needed to add value to the board.

## Enable Exits

Serving on a healthcare board is not for everyone. Both the complexity of information and time requirements are significant; therefore, fit is crucial. However, there is often no "escape hatch" for leaders who realize during onboarding that board service is not

actually a good fit for them. While it would be highly inconvenient for someone to quit once they have been approved for and have accepted the position, it is much better to have someone opt out during onboarding than to carry them on the board without the willingness or ability to serve. Thus, there is value to continuing to ask about fit at each stop on the onboarding experience to ensure each leader desires both to go forward and to deliver value requisite with the demands of the role.

There is no reason to settle when it comes to providing board members with an optimal introduction to the organization, so governance support staff (working with the board chair and CEO) must be unabashed in taking the time needed to properly educate and integrate each new board member. The artful blend of sharing information and building social connections as someone joins the board has repercussions for not only that individual member but also for the culture and effectiveness of the board as a whole. Thoughtful experience design alongside an adequate investment of time for learning and affirmation can have endless results.

For more onboarding tips, view The Governance Institute's board orientation resources at [www.governanceinstitute.com/boardorientation](http://www.governanceinstitute.com/boardorientation).

*The Governance Institute thanks Betsy Chapin Taylor, FAHP, CEO of Accordant, for contributing this article. She can be reached at [betsy@accordanthealth.com](mailto:betsy@accordanthealth.com).*

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# Advance Governance Support through a Board Portal

By Kayla Wagner, Senior Editor, *The Governance Institute*

## Governance support professionals are the gatekeepers and drivers of board work.

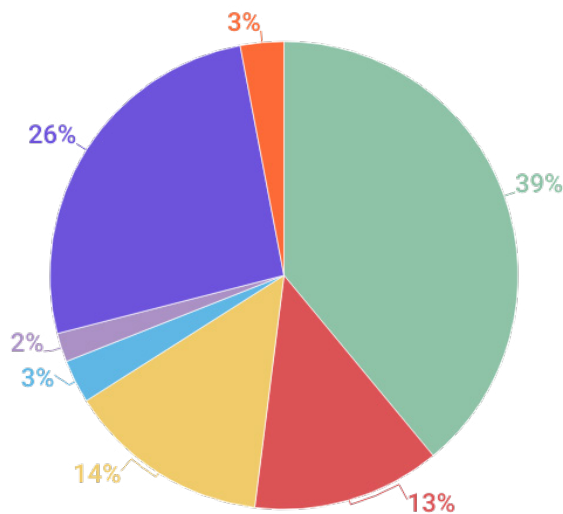
While demands on board members' time and responsibilities increase, so does the role of governance support professionals to help ensure that governance processes are streamlined, meetings are effective, and board members are prepared for the tough decisions ahead. Board portals can elevate board support efforts—easing governance practices so the board can spend time focusing on the strategic work of the organization.

### Benefits of a Board Portal

Many hospital and health system boards are realizing the value of this online tool. The Governance Institute's 2023 biennial survey of hospital and health system boards showed that 77 percent of respondents use a board portal or are in the process of implementing one.<sup>1</sup> Board portals provide a variety of benefits (see **Exhibit 1**). This article highlights some of the key advantages, as well as tips for maximizing use of your board portal.

### Exhibit 1: Most Important Benefit of a Board Portal

- Enhances board members' level of preparation for meetings
- Reduces paper waste/duplication costs
- Saves time
- Enhances communication among board members between meetings
- Provides no perceived benefit
- Enhances security and confidentiality of board communication and materials
- Other



1 Kathryn Peisert and Kayla Wagner, *Think Bold: Looking Forward With a Fresh Governance Mindset*, The Governance Institute's 2023 Biennial Survey of Hospitals and Healthcare Systems.

## *Enhance Board Members' Level of Preparation for Meetings*

Planning and preparing for board meetings is no simple task. A lot of effort goes into scheduling meetings, prepping agendas, developing board materials, and ensuring board members have what they need to effectively participate. In The Governance Institute's survey, 40 percent agreed that the most important benefit of using a board portal is that it enhances board members' level of preparation for meetings.

Some ways that Governance support professionals can utilize board portals to improve pre-meeting workflows include:

- Use meeting management tools to schedule board and committee meetings, invite members, and send reminders.
- Develop online agendas through the board portal.
- Create digital board books that pull all board meeting documents together in one place for boards to easily review pre-meeting. Board portals also provide the ability to edit materials directly in the platform in real time.
- Utilize annotation tools to help board members prepare for meetings. Shared annotations can create new collaboration channels that encourage board members to engage in materials before meetings.
- Use communication features that allow governance support professionals, board members, and committee members to have conversations prior to the meeting.
- Review and approve items such as written consents, resolutions, regulatory matters, and meeting minutes ahead of time.

When this level of communication and preparation takes place beforehand, it frees up board meeting time for bold, strategic-level conversations around key agenda items.

## *Have a Safe, Secure Place to Store Confidential Information*

With the increase in cyber threats and the impact cyberattacks can have on a healthcare organization, it is critical for governance support professionals to have a reliable, secure place to keep board information confidential. Twenty-six percent (26 percent) of survey respondents said the best benefit of a board portal is its enhancement of security and confidentiality of board communication and materials.

Board portals protect against third-party accessibility. For example, Nasdaq Boardvantage<sup>®</sup>, The Governance Institute's board portal provider, has multiple layers of security including strict encryption standards, multi-factor authentication, remote purge, content segregation, and documents stored on segregated servers.

Another security benefit is that you can set permissions internally so that directors see exactly what they are supposed to—and nothing more. Permissions can be set on any document within the portal, so that governance support professionals can maintain appropriate confidentiality and the integrity of board members and the organization.

## Case Study: Paperless Board Books

Valleywise Health Medical Center recently implemented their board portal. Melanie Talbot, Chief Governance Officer and Board Clerk, has found the greatest benefit so far to be eliminating paper board books. “It saves us almost an entire day by not having to create divider or separator pages for each agenda item and another day to print and assemble three-ring binders,” she said. “We also had our transportation team deliver the binders to the board members homes, and we have members that live as far as 90 miles from the medical center.” Some of the benefits she has experienced from digital board books include:

- Reduces paper waste.
- Saves time—no more manually assembling binders or transporting them to board members.
- Board books can be accessed anywhere, anytime.
- Email notifications are automatically sent out.
- They can limit access to certain pages of the executive session packet based on attendees.
- Privileged and confidential information is secure. This reduces worry about paper meeting materials or emails getting in the wrong hands.
- All previous board packets can be accessed in one place.

“Effective governance cannot happen unless members have **timely, accurate, and consistent** content provided to them. When a board member is **thoroughly supported** administratively, they can be free to **fully engage with the strategic governance** taking place and **not worry about the small details**.

—Jordan Wylie, Board Governance Specialist, Corewell Health West

## Streamline Governance Administration

Effectively supporting boards and committees requires managing numerous detailed tasks. A board portal can simplify governance management and bring everything together in a central hub. “When supporting governing bodies, you will always have a mixed group of internal employed members and external executive members. Having a single platform that all stakeholders can access is a game changer,” said Jordan Wylie, Board Governance Specialist at Corewell Health West. “It significantly reduces the anxiety of version control and ensures that all users have a source of truth for their board materials and governing documents.”

Some of the responsibilities board portals can assist with include:

- **Meeting minutes:** Capture meeting minutes and track attendees directly within the board portal. The portal also ensures a safe place to store them and the feasibility to distribute meeting minutes as soon as they are created.
- **Task management:** Create, assign, and track action items that come up during a meeting. Post-meeting you can then hold individuals or groups accountable by sending reminders and notifications through the portal.
- **Centralized document storage:** Store board books, meeting minutes, board calendars, work plans, education materials, a reference manual of board bylaws and policies, and other pertinent information. For governance support professionals, having everything in one place makes it easy to search and find key documents—whether you are looking to reference a past board meeting, find information for a board member, or provide records for an audit or legal review.
- **Voting and survey tools:** Gather board member feedback and opinions through conducting votes and developing and distributing online questionnaires and surveys.
- **Board collaboration:** Tools such as in-app email and messaging allow communication to take place in between meetings.

“Everyone with portal access can see recent Governance Institute publications. Before implementing the board portal, I would email various articles and news briefs to board members, but emails get buried in your inbox. **Now the information is front and center every time they open the portal.**”

—Melanie Talbot, Chief Governance Officer and Board Clerk, Valleywise Health Medical Center



Board engagement is critical to effective governance. Having a portal means that directors can easily access all board information and communications in one place—ensuring they are always informed, on the same page, and connected to board work. Most important, simplifying administrative governance processes frees up directors’ time and allows them to home in on their key governance responsibilities. The Governance Institute’s biennial survey found that respondents that answered “yes” to using a board portal and “are in the process of implementing” a board portal were twice as likely than those that answered “no” to cite “excellent” performance in all of the board’s fiduciary duties and oversight responsibilities.

A board portal can truly advance governance processes and oversight, meeting effectiveness, collaboration, and decision making—all fundamental pieces to ensuring the board is prepared to tackle the challenges of today and beyond. Governance support professionals are key to effectively using this tool to take governance to the next level.

*Nasdaq Boardvantage<sup>®</sup> is a board portal available as part of The Governance Institute’s membership. It offers all the features included in this article and more, including one login that allows access to The Governance Institute’s resources and tools and a customizable dashboard that provides a sophisticated way to present a volume of content in a single view (for example, upcoming meetings, calendars, valuable files, internal and external links, and custom content). For more information, contact your Governance Institute Service Manager or email [TGISupport@nrchealth.com](mailto:TGISupport@nrchealth.com).*

