



SHELAGH DONNELLY

Speaker/trainer and writer

Fun fact:

My career provides opportunities to enjoy two significant interests, travel and photography. This can make for adventures, such as finding oneself with a flat tire while driving a remote road in the Scottish Highlands, or being immersed up to one knee in a local “sinking spot” of mud in England’s New Forest while photographing horses galloping under moonlit skies!

Why have you joined GPC?

I’d long belonged to other professional associations whose membership rosters consisted predominantly of directors or executive assistants/chiefs of staff.

Such opportunities are pertinent, and yet I sought something more. I found it in GPC, which is unique in providing a high caliber of professional development designed specifically for governance professionals.

Active participation in GPC affords exposure to other people, ideas and practices. Even as these pandemic days drive digital communications, I remain in touch with fellow members and engage in online learning through GPC. I know that, whatever the medium, I can count on GPC for current, relevant information.

How did you get into governance and your current role?

Having worked in Canada’s college sector for over a decade, I was looking for a growth opportunity as well as a return to Vancouver. Both took shape when I was hired to support the board of another college.

This was no random move. I’d observed governance at a distance, working with the CEO of my former college and having some contact with that organization’s board chair of the day. I found governance stimulating and spent the next decade immersed in the world.

One of the five board committees I supported triggered my keen interest in cybersecurity, and I’ve presented on this critical topic to executive assistants in Canada and abroad. As of last year, my career is one of speaking, training and writing about governance and about high performance for executive assistants. The world of governance continues to fascinate me and I strive to remain current, hence my ongoing membership in GPC.

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What do you believe is a key topic right now in the governance industry?

If we'd had this discussion a few months ago, I'd have focused on board composition in addition to environmental, social governance (ESG). The conversation on composition extends beyond board matrices and diversity to encompass inclusion, onboarding and board culture.

Since this is July 2020, the word "pandemic" also springs to mind. Think of your risk register or your board's enterprise risk management (ERM) discussions. This unprecedented crisis is such that it would be surprising if it hasn't unleashed some variation in the degree of oversight boards typically exercise. Boards and management teams face significant challenges right now. While boards should ask questions and challenge assumptions, this is also a time in which management teams will benefit from board support.

Digital and organisational resilience are major topics for discussion, as are returns to work and employees'/stakeholders' safety and wellbeing. There's also oversight of supply chain management and financial liquidity. Boards may be engaged in challenging, financially-driven recommendations and decisions. What metrics does the board need, and is management providing a range of financial scenario planning?

Given the degree to which not only board members but also management teams and employees are communicating remotely, boards will want to know about cybersecurity strategies and employee awareness of cyber risks.

The list goes on. The pandemic has created challenges and, perhaps, opportunities for governance professionals. At some point in time, boards will want to consider lessons learned and review crisis management plans.

What is the most fulfilling part about your role in governance? What do you love most about your job?

Governance represents an opportunity to add value, and to positively impact an organization and its people. I love the scope of the role, the opportunities to learn, and the exposure to people, practices and ideas.

Where do you see, or would you like to see the role of governance in the next few years?

We may see increased attention to ESG. As well, the COVID-19 pandemic and remote working experiences of recent months may drive greater attention to not only cybersecurity but also technology strategy in the context of bricks and mortar needs.

What is the best career advice you have received?

Do what you love.