

Technology in the Boardroom: from portal to platform

Board portals are the modern way of keeping directors informed, says **Joe Ruck** of BoardVantage

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Keeping the board informed is a crucial job for any company secretary and until recently that meant generating an enormous amount of printed material. But there is an alternative to producing hard copies of board books for every director ahead of every meeting. Board portals are the technological equivalent of such books: they provide directors with access to a secure website where confidential data can be uploaded as soon as it is ready for their perusal – from anywhere in the world.

One company that has played a significant role in the evolution of board portal technology is BoardVantage. Based in the Silicon Valley, the company has won a large base of Fortune-500 customers in recent years. And Joe Ruck, the company’s President and chief executive officer, is a flag-bearer for the new technology.

Joe, compared to a few years ago, director interest in board portals has jumped. What accounts for this shift?

If there’s one thing I’d single out, I would point to the iPad. It combines ease-of-use with the immediacy of online access. You can make notes, highlight text and use a stylus to write in freehand. Or you can drop a pin, just like on Google maps, to mark pages or paragraphs. That’s what directors have been waiting for.

Equally important, the iPad lets you do things you could never do with paper – for example, meeting access. There we’ve taken advantage of the iPad’s graphics engine to give you more than just the current meeting. We now put all previous meetings at your

fingertips. This is done with animation, which makes it visually very compelling.

In effect, board portals are no longer about reaching parity with paper, they’re about delivering an experience that is better. And because the iPad can serve as a common platform for all directors, whether progressive or traditional, it is creating an inclusive meeting experience. Combine all of these and the iPad has been a game changer in the boardroom.

But is the boardroom ready for this sort of technology?

The boardroom is certainly no stranger to technology. It’s just that in the pre-iPad days, directors’ use of technology was light – for a quick check of materials prior to the meeting. In-meeting use was virtually non-existent, mostly by a handful of tech-savvy directors, whereas traditional directors stuck with their paper.

Now suddenly, and without much fanfare, the game has changed. Between the iPad front-end and a modern architecture on the back-end we deliver a portal with mobility, security and interactivity, as well as a great user experience. That lets boards capture all their board process, whether formal or informal.

But it’s not that directors have undergone some sort of magical metamorphosis. All that’s happened is that technology has evolved to meet the long-standing expectations of directors. So rather than asking: “Is the boardroom ready for technology?” it would be better to ask: “Is technology ready for the boardroom?” To that question the answer is an emphatic yes.

But what if no internet access is available? For example, what happens when a director is flying to a meeting – how does he access meeting materials then?

Offline access remains central to the board experience, so we must be sure to address that need. Laptops may have been the accepted standard of mobile computing inside many businesses, but that was never the case in the boardroom. Although laptops were present they were not mobile. Often companies provided them for their directors but held them for meeting use.

With the advent of the iPad, things could not be more different. Directors now carry their iPads wherever they go and rely on them for access to their board materials. Not unreasonably they expect ready access to those materials even if they're out of Wi-Fi range. So a challenging but essential requirement has sprung up: seamless offline synced access to board materials.

We address this need with the Briefcase facility. The Briefcase syncs with our servers so that any notes made while offline are immediately available when a director is back online. Also, to make sure that directors always have the latest information at their fingertips, the technology lets the company secretary push new materials directly to the director's Briefcase. All of this is accomplished without the director having to organise it himself.

Won't confidentiality be compromised?

Not if you have the right technology. The Briefcase is built so any downloaded board content remains under the central control



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of the administrator. Even if a director neglects to delete his or her own notes, the administrator can manage that task from the central control and delete the notes of all directors. This is not dissimilar to the practice of collecting and shredding paper board books after the close of a meeting.

Also, the Briefcase is encrypted and password-protected to safeguard its content in the event that an iPad is lost or stolen. Even then the Briefcase can be purged of all its content by the administrator remotely.

So what's next – what might we be talking about two years from now?

The shift from paper to paperless has opened the door to many possibilities, so it's best to think in terms of a 'pre- and post-iPad world', with realities that couldn't be more different.

Already boards that have gone paperless want to go beyond book access to capturing board processes such as email, approvals with digital signatures, screen sharing and discussions.

Basically they want to do all their work on the iPad, which means that the old-school board portals will become broader board communication platforms, which is what you need to capture that two-way process.

What's fascinating is that directors are becoming quite advanced in their use of technology. In the past they kept technology at a distance, but now the sentiment has shifted and they're putting themselves at the cutting edge – moving from a laggard to a leader role. All of that will lead to a greater use of technology in the boardroom.

About the author

Joe is the President and CEO of BoardVantage. Joe is responsible for setting the company direction and communicating it to the BoardVantage customer base. He has led the company from its start-up beginnings to its current position as a technology leader in board and leadership team communications. Joe also serves on the board of directors of BoardVantage in order to ensure seamless communication between company stakeholders and leadership.

Joe has been the CEO of BoardVantage since its initial VC funding at the end of 2002. He has led the company through two rounds of institutional financing, most recently in 2006. Joe is a

frequent speaker on the impact of technology in the boardroom and the author of many articles on that topic in the press and on his blog.

Joe actively participates in all aspects of planning and design of the BoardVantage product, particularly the mobile director experience and the ongoing effort to improve leadership communications in a geographically dispersed world.

Prior to joining BoardVantage, Joe was senior vice president of marketing at Interwoven. Previously, he held sales, marketing, and executive positions at Sun Microsystems and Network Appliance. Joe holds a BS in Engineering from Oregon State University and an MBA from Santa Clara University.