

Robust, Resilient and Ready

Assessing and Strengthening Governance in Charities and Education

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Dispelling Clerking Stereotypes Encouraging Diversity Equity and Inclusion

Georgina de Costa

The room was quiet as the Chair of Governors addressed the board regarding the latest budget proposal.

The details and approvals were all carefully noted and documented by the person sitting quietly in the back of the meeting.

The unsung hero. The Clerk to the Governing Board. The person who would take decisions from the governors, give it to the school team, and follow up to ensure that they were enacted. The governors' support network, their critical friend.

Traditionally, a Clerk has been seen as someone sat at the back, a minute taker, on the fringes of the school system who took a few hours every month to come to school, minute meetings and prepare documents. They may have been retired with extra time on their hands or simply may have lived locally and wanted to help the community. Training was elusive and many clerks learned their skills on the job.

Many school leadership teams have learned the value of a good clerk. A good clerk provides constitutional advice, notifies the board of upcoming changes, runs elections, takes registers, sets agendas, supports panels, issues compliance reminders, takes part in governance reviews, analyses audits, listens and documents and much more. Clerks are the hidden roots that help keep the tree of governance thriving.

But the story I hear time and time again from schools across the country is how their clerk has retired after serving for 20 years and they can't find a replacement. In fact, the interim report published last year by the National Association of School and College Clerks (NASCC) has found the overwhelming majority of clerks are aged between 40 and 70 years,

with 50% of clerks surveyed being between 50 to 69-years-old. This aging workforce has led to a shortage of clerks across the country. This dilemma forces our hand to look at clerking with a fresh perspective which can be coupled with a goal of making the sector more diverse, equal, and inclusive. By dispelling stereotypes and ideas of what a clerk should be or do, we have opened the door to governance professionals who can become supportive, active members of the Governing Body, providing insight, organisation, and ongoing assistance.

A prime example of this is working mothers, or those returning from maternity leave.

Theresa, 53 recently joined our Judicium's clerking team after 12 years of parental leave. "I was a solicitor before having my son, but I took time off to raise him", Theresa explained. "Once he reached secondary school I had more free time. I sat on a panel hearing school admissions appeals, so I decided I wanted to do something in the education sector. Clerking seemed like a good fit."

Theresa wanted to re-join the workforce, but not in the capacity of her former career as a solicitor. She was also looking for a role that was part time, utilised her previous skills and allowed for a healthy work/life balance. Theresa has found clerking at Judicium to be a perfect fit for her transferable skills and knowledge base. She now supports a number of MATs, academies and maintained schools.

"In my previous role I was used to taking notes at meetings and court hearings and that experience transferred well to clerking. Although there is evening work, I can fit other requirements around my schedule so the flexibility it offers is very attractive."

Theresa is one of thousands of people across the country who have

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decided to make a career change and are looking for new opportunities. The Department of Education published an analysis on teacher supply, retention and mobility in 2016 which found there were 350,000 qualified teachers not teaching. With experience in schools, an understanding of governance, an interest in education and with sufficient training, these individuals are prime candidates to recruit into clerking.

However, to capitalise on the various benefits clerking has to offer, those in the education sector must create a more inclusive environment to foster growth.

There are three primary areas of focus to bring about change and diversity:

1. Embrace virtual operations to broaden the scope of qualified individuals

With the pandemic came an abundance of new regulations, guidance and measures which has largely progressed virtual operations to the forefront of modern governing of schools. Virtual meetings via Zoom or Microsoft Teams have become the norm, replacing the in person sessions that were the staple of the governing body's diary. Hosting meetings online allows for experienced and qualified clerks who may not live locally to take on a position to support a school's governance.

Since the pandemic, over 40% of our clients have opted to solely utilise virtual means for clerking meetings. We are also finding Governors, who give their free time to serve the school, are incredibly receptive to virtual meetings as it cuts down on travel time and subsequent costs. The NASCC found that of those clerks surveyed, 37% travelled more than 10 miles per meeting to fulfil their duties. Virtual meetings mean clerks are able to get the minutes out quicker, as they have saved time on the travel and can begin to write straight away. It also means they have more time to designate to the organisation of papers and their storage.

It is important to note that being restricted by a given geographical area

or region can create problems, especially for rural schools that struggle to find qualified clerks and governors to fulfil their needs. Virtual hosting opens the doors to many untapped resources and personnel.

2. Foster Flexibility

Prior to the pandemic, governance meetings were limited to times when 12 or so people could all be in the same room together at the same time. With the adoption of virtual meetings, those restrictions become less burdensome. Opportunities to potentially hold meetings during lunch hours, at the start of workdays or pre-evenings allow for more flexibility for clerks and governors alike, but also for teachers, who no longer have to wait around in school until 6pm for meetings to begin.

This flexibility may also entice more people to consider taking on such positions, if they know there is room for flexibility to work around childcare commitments.

The NASCC report also found 15% of clerks work more than 35 hours per week, while the majority of those surveyed worked in the range of 16-30 hours weekly. When those hours are limited to 6:00-8:00pm, the number of schools a single clerk can cover diminishes rapidly. Opening up alternative time options allows for increased capacity of clerking professionals.

3. Provide training and professional development

It is no secret that many clerks 'fell' into the role with little to no previous training. This shortfall was addressed by the Department of Education in April 2017 with the introduction of the Clerking Competency Framework and the NGA's Development for Clerks Programme. Despite its existence, many governors are completely unaware of the framework and programme, which is designed to provide training and a template to which clerks can evaluate and assess their work. The programme is offered nationally, but the NASCC still

found only a third of respondents had taken up the programme and a further 27.5% of clerks have no specific qualifications for clerking. Training is fundamental to creating governance professionals and distancing clerking from the stereotype of ad-hoc administration.

The 2013 School Governance Regulations (Regulation 11) states: “Boards should set demanding standards for the service they expect from their clerk and assure themselves that they are employing a clerk with suitable skills and training.” Despite its reference in regulation, there are no specific qualifications required for clerking, so it is often left to the school or governing body’s discretion as to the level of training provided to the clerk or that which is obtained prior to their hiring.

Which is why Judicium and NGA have created a bespoke training programme for all of our clerks, because clerks deserve to be recognised for their hard work and support. Anyone joining Judicium as a ‘clerk’ will have that job title until they have successfully completed the Judicium/NGA Level 2 training course regardless of any previous experience. Their job title will then change to Judicium Governance Professional.

We believe that the more time and training invested in your clerk will produce improvements in results and retainment as they will have a vested interest in the role. Training also puts the clerk in a better position to support governors to challenge individuals when necessary and manage bias within boards.

To conclude, by focusing on these three areas of change, clerking will become a much more diverse, inclusive and balanced field. Clerking is a profession in its own right, with a myriad of benefits to those who have a solid foundation of organisational skills to build upon. It is a field open to the young and the young at heart, to men and women, and to those of any background, religion or culture.