Chartered Governance Institute UK & Ireland

Effective board reporting

July 2026

Developed in partnership with

BOARD INTELLIGENCE

Contents

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Comments, questions and observations

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Foreword

In Formula 1, the driver gets the car over the line. But no driver wins alone. Behind every lap sits a team reading thousands of data streams — tyre temperature, fuel load, the car three corners ahead. They distil it into the few things the driver needs, at the moment they need them.

Boards work the same way. Directors bring the judgement and experience that steer an organisation. But judgement needs something to work with: the right information, framed clearly, at the right time. Without it, even the most capable board is driving on instinct alone.

The track has become faster and less forgiving since we first published this guidance in 2018. Organisations operate in a more volatile environment, under sharper scrutiny, with more variables to factor into their decision-making at every turn. New questions, from geopolitical risk to how boards should govern AI, compete for limited time. And the volume of information that directors need to engage with has grown far quicker than the hours they have to read it.

More data has not made boards better informed. Too often it buries the signal that matters under everything that might. A board pack that reports everything leaves directors to do the distilling — work that should have been done before the papers reached them.

That is the challenge this guidance sets out to meet. It is the product of a partnership between the Chartered Governance Institute UK & Ireland and Board Intelligence, and of the governance professionals who told us what their work demands of them today. Our aim is simple: to help you give your board the things it needs to take each corner well.

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Introduction

Why board reporting matters — and why it's hard

Modern organisations are complex entities operating in a complex world. To govern them well, boards need enough knowledge to discern the most important issues and ask the most important questions. This is only possible if they get the right information.

When board reporting works well, directors get the information they need, in the way they need, at the time they need it. Board meetings focus on the conversations that matter. Directors arrive prepared and able to bring their experience and intellect to bear. They spot biases and blind spots, challenge effectively, and make better decisions. With sharp and supportive governance, the organisation is more likely to succeed over the long term, and less likely to stumble in the short term.

Unfortunately, board reporting is more often an obstacle to board effectiveness than an enabler of organisational performance. Since 2018, the Chartered Governance Institute and Board Intelligence have conducted research into board reporting, gathering data from 1,857 individuals and 1,676 organisations. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents say they are not confident the board pack has been fully read and digested, while 42% say the materials themselves are actively limiting board effectiveness.

This can have real consequences for the quality of governance. Directors cannot challenge what they cannot see, and boards cannot spot a threat or opportunity when they do not know about it. Simply being unable to find information can delay decision-making, turning the board into a drag on organisational agility. Poor board reporting is also more expensive and time-consuming: overlong or unfocused board papers take longer to write and read, require more revisions and reviews, and cost more to distribute.

> "You keep coming back and the board keeps asking for more and then you lose confidence. You can't really put a cost to it, but those are costs, aren't they? You don't want to go back to the board three times seeking approval for something."
>
> **- Roundtable participant**

£2.8m

Average annual cost of board reporting in 2025

220 pages

Average board pack length in 2025 — up 27% since 2019

42%

of respondents say materials are limiting board effectiveness

What's changed since 2018

When we published our original guidance in 2018, we set out the structural causes for why board reporting presented such a persistent challenge, not only for boards and governing bodies, but also for those who advise and assist them.

These have not changed. Boards still face significant competing demands on their time, balancing strategy-setting with compliance and the obligation to explain their decisions to stakeholders. Governance teams and management still sometimes struggle to know what information the board actually needs, which can make it tempting for those preparing board papers to include everything they can think of just in case it is needed.

What has changed, for the worse, is the level of pressure on boards and governance teams. The number of board and committee meetings held by the average organisation has risen by 34% since 2019. The overall cost of the board reporting process — from writing papers to distributing and reading them — is 177% higher, today standing at £2.8 million annually for the average organisation. Average board packs have grown by 27%, to 220 pages, despite the amount of time allotted by directors to read them remaining the same — anecdotally, around four hours per meeting.

The increased pressure comes from the more demanding context in which boards operate. On the one hand, the 2018 Corporate Governance Code expanded the burden on large company directors to explain how they considered the impact of decisions on various stakeholder groups when making decisions. This inadvertently strengthened the impulse to include unnecessary information in board reporting 'just in case', which one CFO described as "saturation bombing — just write down everything you know about a subject in the hope that some of it will deal with the issue concerned."

On the other hand, the operating environment for organisations themselves has become even more complex, due to geopolitical volatility and technological advances. That in turn has increased the breadth and depth of knowledge — and therefore the amount of information — that boards require. The emergence of AI is a particular example — despite its potential as a tool to support board and governance operations, it has increasingly taken meeting time as boards try to work out how to govern it.

All of this translates to additional strain on the governance teams responsible for board reporting, who are required to produce faster, better insights on more topics, all of which takes more time. For example, one company secretary told us of increasing dissatisfaction from boards at the traditional contents of reporting — they wanted more projections and up-to-date information, not just historical data.

Yet governance professionals are also being stretched from the other direction, with several describing budget pressures and tough internal competition for resources. One suggested that management teams are more likely to cut corners as a result, for example by repurposing past papers rather than commissioning new ones.

34%

Increase in meetings since 2019

177%

Overall increase in cost of board reporting since 2019

1,857

Governance professionals and board directors surveyed

How this guidance was developed

In the face of such changes, this revised guidance exists to help organisations to assess the quality of their board pack and the efficiency of their processes, and to identify ways in which they might be improved. The guidance does not seek to prescribe an approach, but to help organisations develop arrangements that meet their own needs and are fit for purpose.

It draws on eight years of data — and responses from more than 1,800 individuals — from the board reporting self-assessment tool and board reporting cost calculator, co-developed by Board Intelligence and the Chartered Governance Institute UK & Ireland. It also draws on previously published guidance and resources and reflects findings from roundtables held with CGI members in early 2026, in which governance professionals discussed the challenges they faced, how their work had changed, and what they needed from updated guidance. Many CGI members also shared perspectives, recommendations, and ideas by email. We would like to express our sincere thanks to everyone who contributed.

The target audience

This guidance has been written to be used by all organisations, irrespective of size or sector.

While the time and money that large organisations need to expend to support their boards and committees may be greater in absolute terms, proportionately they are just as significant for smaller organisations with more limited resources. The decisions that have to be taken by the governing bodies of organisations in the public and charitable sectors are just as complex as those taken by commercial organisations. Determining what information is relevant to making that decision is just as challenging.

Within each organisation, the guidance is aimed at all those involved in the process, from commissioning, writing, and reviewing papers through to distributing and reading them. This means whoever is responsible for overseeing and co-ordinating the process — often the company secretary or equivalent — as well as the authors, contributors, and reviewers responsible for the individual papers.

The chief executive and senior management also play an important role in ensuring that the board receives the information it requires. Crucially, it also involves the board members themselves and in particular the chair. Boards must take ownership of their own agenda. Unless the board is clear about the issues it needs to address and the information it needs to do this, any improvements in the process may not be matched by improvements in decision-making or oversight.

While we have used the term 'board' throughout the guidance for the sake of simplicity, it should be read as meaning all bodies responsible for leading and governing organisations, regardless of the name given to them. Similarly, while recognising that not all organisations have a company secretary or equivalent position, where we have used that term, we refer to whoever is responsible for supporting the board and organising its meetings.

1. The governance professional's role in board reporting

In brief

- Governance professionals co-ordinate reporting but rely on others: the board to say what it needs and executive sponsors to provide it.
- Their authority varies, from a full mandate to an advisory role, and each position calls for a different approach.
- Formal authority alone isn't enough. It works only alongside a clear mandate, regular feedback, and active CEO and chair sponsorship.
- Without that authority, influence is the lever: build credibility as a trusted sounding board and make the case for change with objective data.
- CEO and chair buy-in is decisive. Win it by framing reporting as a cost and meeting-quality issue and asking for specific, time-bound mandates.

Governance professionals are responsible for overseeing and co-ordinating the board reporting process, but they depend on the co-operation of two sets of busy, senior people: board members (to say what information they need), and the C-suite executives who sponsor board papers (to provide it).

The way governance teams secure this co-operation varies significantly, depending on things like reporting lines, organisational size, the company secretary's relationship with the chair and CEO, or the presence or absence of a formal mandate.

Some governance professionals own the process end to end, with the institutional backing to set standards and enforce them. Others operate in more of an advisory or administrative role. Neither arrangement is right or wrong necessarily, but they do require different approaches.

> "In my team, we do not review the papers themselves. We ask for them, we get them in, we put them in the packs, but it is the executive sponsor's responsibility to check that the content is appropriate — which they don't have time to do generally."
>
> **- Roundtable participant**

When you're in the driving seat

Company secretaries can use formal authority to raise the standard of board reporting, but on its own it is not enough to do so reliably or sustainably. That only happens when there are robust structures and processes around reporting — including a clear mandate, regular feedback loops, and the active sponsorship of the CEO and chair.

For example, governance teams can set expectations and communicate them clearly to report writers, but the writers are much more likely to stick to those standards if there are consequences for failing to do so. Where company secretaries have a direct mandate and the visible support of the chair and CEO, they are more confident sending reports back to their authors or sponsors when they fall short.

They are also able to guide report-writers after the fact with direct and constructive feedback from the board, thereby raising the standard of report writing over time. This can create a positive spiral, whereby better papers lead to better interactions with the board, reinforcing the value of better board reporting on both sides, and encouraging buy-in from the CEO, chair, and executive sponsors.

"A deadline is a deadline. Get the chair to let board members know that the next time someone is late with the papers they will not be accepted into the pack... and then make sure that these words are followed up by action."

- CGI member

When you have influence without authority

Some governance professionals have been given a clear mandate by their chair to ensure the highest quality of board papers. They have the authority to reject those that do not meet the required standard, regardless of who they come from.

Not all governance professionals can send a paper back to be rewritten, but there are still ways to shift culture and behaviour in the right direction. This requires mastery of the 'soft' but vital skill of influence.

For example, governance professionals can build credibility with paper authors as a trusted testing ground or sparring partner, helping them to deliver a paper that lands with the board — and therefore protects the reputation of the author and their executive sponsor. That might mean clarifying what the board expects from the paper or sharing sensitive feedback about what the board is likely to respond well to.

Governance professionals can also increase their influence by building the case for change. Not everyone involved will necessarily realise that there are weaknesses in the organisation's board reporting, which could be causing frustration among board directors and undermining their ability to do their job. By using objective data — such as from the CGI and Board Intelligence's self-assessment tool, board feedback, including from the board performance review, or analysis of paper quality — they can show the gap to report writers and their executive sponsors, without making it feel personal.

CEO and chair buy-in: the key ingredient

Wherever governance teams sit on the spectrum, from formal authority through to an influencing or advisory role, the most important variable is the visible and active support of the two people who have the greatest ability to enforce compliance and uphold the wider structures of robust reporting: the CEO and the chair.

"Senior buy-in is absolutely essential," one company secretary told us. "It has to come from the CEO or chair," said another.

While the chair's role in board reporting is self-evident (it is the chair's role to work with the governance team to ensure the board has what it needs to be effective), CEOs are not always as engaged with the board reporting process. In some cases, they recognise that it is important, but there are just too many other pressing, commercially impactful priorities competing for their attention. In some cases — often ironically because of poor reporting — CEOs are actively uninterested, seeing board meetings themselves as a time sink or tick-box, rather than something that can add real value to the organisation itself or make their own lives easier.

When approaching CEOs about this, the company secretary can start by framing the issue in terms of cost and resources, considering the time spent writing and revising papers as well as the physical production and distribution of board materials. Most CEOs are unaware of how expensive the board reporting cycle is, which reframes the conversation from a merely administrative problem to a return-on-investment problem.

In the same vein, governance professionals can connect board reporting directly to meeting quality. If the CEO experiences frustrating board meetings, there is usually a direct line from that frustration to the contents of the board pack.

Once they have convinced the CEO of the need for better reporting, governance teams should be strategic about what they ask for. CEOs are much more likely to approve a limited mandate than a blank cheque. Rather than asking for more formal authority or informal support in general, company secretaries are much more likely to see a change if they ask for a specific, time-bound initiative, for example to achieve measurable improvement in paper quality over the next two board meeting cycles.

The timing of the request matters too. It may be better to choose an apt moment — such as the arrival of a new chair, a restructure, or simply an occasion when the board loses its patience with poor papers — to catalyse a new approach.

TOP TIP: Building the business case

The board reporting cost calculator, developed by the Chartered Governance Institute and Board Intelligence, can help with this framing. It calculates the total annual cost of board reporting, from writing papers to compiling, distributing, and reading the board pack, in both time and money terms.

Read this explainer to explore the underlying methodology:

https://www.boardintelligence.com/finding-the-hidden-cost

> "If it's just about tolerable, no one's going to say, 'let's rip all this up and start again.' There needs to be a catalysing event — a new chair, or something that breaks."

- Roundtable participant

2. What good board papers look like

In brief

- A good paper gives the board everything it needs for a focused discussion, clearly and concisely — no more, no less.
- Strong papers share three traits: focus, critical thinking, and effective communication.
- Lead with a strong executive summary: why this matters, why now, the key questions, the answers up front, and what the board must do.
- Shorter is usually better: it imposes discipline and increases the likelihood a paper will be read in full. Pitch for the board, not the author's own domain.
- Make papers easy to read and digest: question-led headings, plain language over jargon, and graphics only where they earn their place.

Board members have a wide range of responsibilities that are reflected in meeting agendas and papers. In the same meeting, for example, they might need to explore the impact of economic developments on the organisation's strategy, give the go-ahead for major items of expenditure, review the performance of management, and approve detailed regulatory returns.

Non-executive and voluntary members in particular will have a limited amount of time in which to prepare for meetings and may have limited prior knowledge of the matter they are being asked to consider.

It is therefore essential that the papers on which they rely provide all the information needed for a focused discussion, clearly and succinctly presented.

75%

say papers are easy to read and make sense of

45%

say their pack helps the board have focused conversations

42%

say their materials limit board effectiveness

The alternative is that they waste their limited time attempting to work out what they are being asked to do or searching through dense documents trying to determine the most important factors. Such an outcome is all too common: according to Chartered Governance Institute and Board Intelligence research, 54% of respondents say the key messages in their board pack are buried like needles in a haystack and 47% consider their board packs light on the implications of the information presented.

High quality board papers display three characteristics: a rigorous focus on the problems and opportunities that matter most to the board and the organisation; critical thinking to surface breakthrough insights and robust plans; impactful communication that spurs readers to action. Taken together, these form the basis of a methodology for creating a board paper that is fit for purpose, which Board Intelligence calls the Question-Driven Insight (QDI) Principle.

The Question-Driven Insight Principle

The executive summary: start with the "so what"

To apply these principles of good reporting, start at the beginning. A good executive summary does so much more than setting the scene — bringing everyone up to speed, signposting key points and recommendations, and ensuring the board has good reason to read on rather than skip or skim.

It should start by establishing why the report matters, by connecting it to the board's wider priorities like the organisation's strategy or growth targets. Then, it should establish why this report needs to come to the board now. Has there been an external trigger or is this a routine update?

Next, the report should outline the main questions that the paper will answer: a small number (three to five is ideal, to avoid overloading board members), which are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive (so that nothing overlaps and nothing is missing). It's important that these questions anticipate the questions that board members will ask to elicit actionable insight from the paper; 'What are the implications?' or 'What does this mean for our plans?', for example.

Then, the report should answer these questions clearly, with a short answer directly below. This is no place for suspense: it is essential to put the answer up front to avoid the risk of board members missing it.

Lastly, a strong executive summary will make clear what the paper requires the board to do after they have read it — whether to note the information, approve or make a decision, or give input. The best examples contain a section titled "Input sought" or "Questions to the reader" to make this an explicit requirement.

All in, the executive summary should ideally be no more than one page.

Common challenge: "Our papers are too operational and I can't get authors to change that."

Three in five (60%) organisations report that their board papers are too operational at the expense of strategy. The upstream fix is in the brief and the template.

If the template's first heading is "What do we propose to do and why?" — not "Background" — authors are structurally guided to lead with the decision, not the detail.

The Question-Driven Insight Principle (introduced in this subsection) meanwhile gives you a shared language for the briefing conversation with authors.

Common challenge: "We have an executive summary but it doesn't change anything."

Too often the summary is an administrative formality. The template asks the author to restate the title of the paper, confirm who has sponsored or contributed to it, and chart its course through the organisation's governance.

The solution – to ensure it lays out the key messages and choices for the board – lies not in editing but in the template itself. A summary built around a handful of content-focused questions (for example, "What do we propose to do and why?") forces context over recap.

Enforce it through the gatekeeper. A summary that fails to state the ask or the recommendation is grounds to send the paper back, like any other quality standard.

Shorter papers: right length, right level

Concision has many benefits, not least that a shorter paper is simply more likely to be read. Board members are regularly tasked with reading large volumes of detailed materials before meetings, often in a matter of days while working only part time in the organisation. An average board pack, at 220 pages, would theoretically take between seven and 20 hours to read, with additional time required to make notes, fact-check, cross-reference with other materials, and analyse graphs and charts. Anecdotally, however, we've heard that board members spend just four hours on average reading their pre-meeting materials.

The implications of lengthy board packs can sometimes be difficult for paper authors to appreciate. As one company secretary relayed, "If it's ten pages, you can't see the wood for the trees. Directors have ten other topics to read, not just this one."

Shorter papers also impose discipline on paper authors to include only what is relevant. For each individual paper, authors and sponsors will need to make judgements about what information is essential and what is not, and how to ensure that the paper is succinct but also sufficient for the board's needs.

This requires empathy and awareness of the board's priorities and current knowledge. When authors put themselves in the mind of their reader, they may realise that certain aspects of the subject — for example operational matters that take up a lot of their time — may not be ones that the board needs to know about in detail.

Some organisations choose to limit the length of their board papers to compel authors to show such judgement, which simultaneously makes it easier for board members to find information and reduces the overall length of the pack. However, if applied too rigidly there may be instances where the issue covered in the paper is very complex and the board does not get all the relevant information that it should, so some flexibility may be required. This may also expand the use of appendices, which can add to the overall length of the pack, as management search for low-friction ways to share everything they think might be of interest to the board or will be asked for if not included.

> "Constantly put yourself in the shoes of the reader. Think about what they need to know, what they need to do, and make it as easy as possible for them to succeed."
>
> **- CGI member**

Whether they use page limits or not, organisations gain another benefit from encouraging empathy and judgement from authors: the paper is more likely to cover all the areas the board needs to know about to discuss it properly. A paper that adapts management knowledge for a board-level discussion will spell out the implications not just for the author's immediate domain, but for the organisation more widely, and important stakeholders such as employees, members, clients, customers, and local communities. It will also resist any temptation to hide bad news.

Similarly, pitching a paper for a board-level audience means not only reporting historical data but also alerting board members to relevant external developments and explaining the implications of both for the future success of the organisation. Such a paper will also give a balanced and candid view of risks, performance, prospects, and opportunities, detailing how confident the author is in their assessments and where that confidence comes from.

Readability and structure: style and substance

Even if a paper addresses all the important questions facing the board and clearly establishes for them the value of reading on, it is still important to make life easier for directors as they do so.

Clear and consistent formatting of papers can help considerably, as it means board members know where to look when presented with a new subject.

Headings make it easier to follow the shape of the paper's argument, not only signposting which information is found where, but also how each section relates to the others. For example, some questions follow directly and sequentially from others while others are best read in parallel ('Why should we divest this unit?' naturally leads to 'How should we divest it?', but 'How will the divestment affect our employees?' and 'How will it affect our suppliers?' could be read in any order).

The clearest way to surface this structure is to use those questions as the headers. That helps board members challenge the argument — it is easier to spot a missing question or a muddled dependency — and helps authors do the same before the paper reaches the board.

The style in which papers are written can also make a big difference. Papers should be easy to read so that board members can understand the contents more quickly. Again, concision will help here, as tighter language is usually clearer.

Wherever possible papers should avoid jargon, acronyms, and technical language. Board members may not have the specialist knowledge needed to interpret them. They may be involved with several organisations, all of which will have their own jargon.

Graphics such as charts and dashboards can be a good way of conveying information in board papers, but unless they are clearly presented and explained they can be confusing and take time to dissect and digest. The relevance test applies to graphics as much as it does to data, narrative reporting, and appendices. A chart can convey a lot of additional information, but that doesn't mean the messages will land or that the information is needed. Report writers should also consider the cumulative effect of such cognitively challenging contents; imagine every paper in the pack has multiple graphs and charts, and you'll develop greater empathy for the board members tasked with understanding them.

Presentation formats such as slides can be used to supplement or replace 'traditional' board papers. Where they are, they must be written in a way that enables board members to understand the information being conveyed and what they are being asked to do with it without needing someone to explain it to them. Otherwise, it is difficult for them to prepare properly before the meeting and wastes valuable time in the meeting that could be better used for discussion and debate.

The board paper checklist

This checklist can be used by paper authors and governance professionals before a paper is submitted to the board pack.

Focus

- [ ] Is it clear why this paper is going to the board, and why now?
- [ ] Does it link clearly to the organisation's strategy or priorities?
- [ ] Is the "ask" of the board explicit — what it must decide, discuss, or note?
- [ ] Is it pitched at the board's level — strategic, not operational?

Critical thinking

- [ ] Does it answer the key questions on directors' minds, with nothing essential missing?
- [ ] Is the analysis balanced — forward- and backward-looking, internal and external, and candid about bad news?
- [ ] Does it draw out the implications: "so what?" and "what will we stop, start, or do differently?"
- [ ] Where a decision is sought, are the options, benefits, risks, and costs set out?

Communication

- [ ] Is there an executive summary and does it give the key messages and answers up front, in no more than a page?
- [ ] Do the headings signpost the argument — ideally as the questions the paper answers?
- [ ] Is it in plain language, with any jargon or acronyms explained?
- [ ] Is the paper as short as it can be, with charts and tables carrying a short narrative, not just data?

For a fuller assessment, use the board reporting self-assessment tool developed by the CGI and Board Intelligence.

3. Building a system for effective reporting

In brief

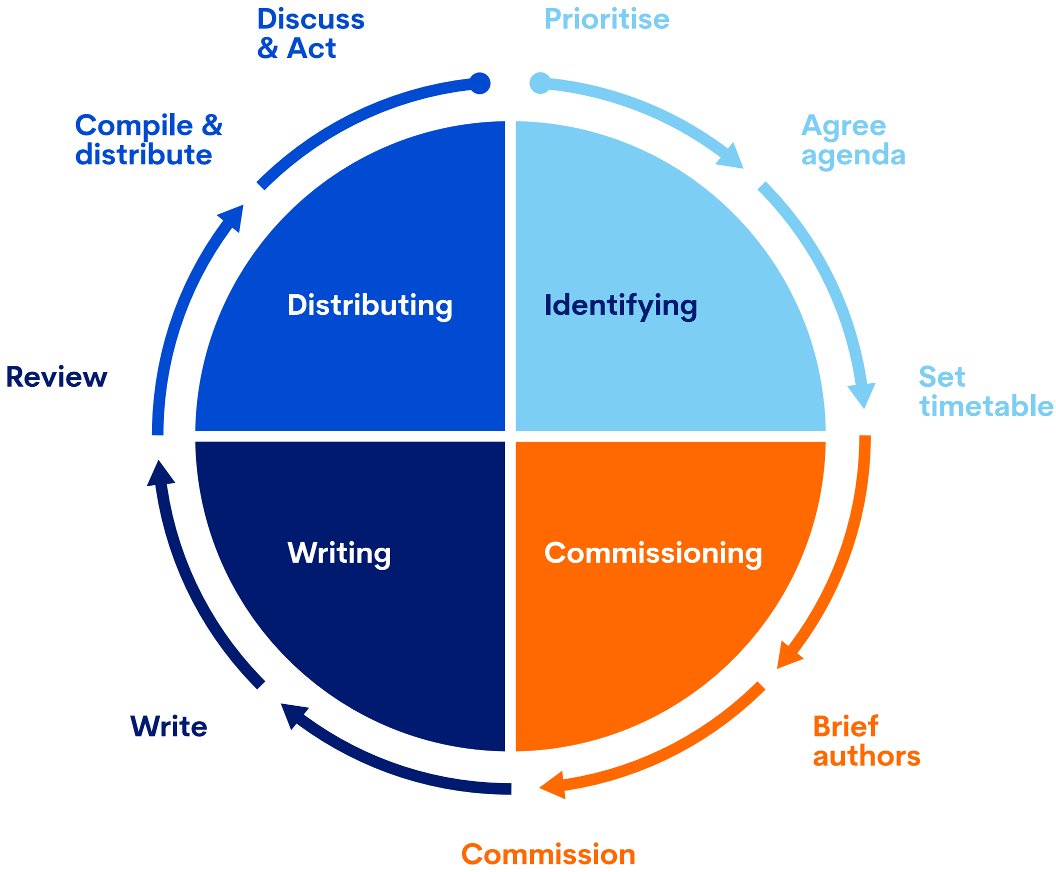
- Treat board reporting as a designed system, not a heroic individual effort.
- Plan around the board and organisation's priorities, using a structured approach to meeting planning to build a forward agenda that aligns board time with what matters most.
- Brief authors well, providing a clear and comprehensive brief that tells them what the board needs and why. This is the most direct and reliable way of improving paper quality.
- Distribute papers on time: late papers eat into both review and reading time, so build in deadlines, reminders, and enough notice to enable you to play your part well.
- Sustain the process by building skills and providing actionable feedback. Templates and training raise the baseline; systematic feedback turns one-off gains into lasting improvement.

Board reporting is a designed system. There is a place within it for heroic, individual effort — the governance team that pulls together board packs on time and against the odds, the CEO who demands higher standards, the paper authors who think deeply about what the board needs to know. Nonetheless, if the system is dysfunctional, such individual efforts will be in vain, while an effective board reporting system makes it difficult for individuals not to do their part.

As with any system, it helps to break it into its constituent parts, each of which offers opportunities for governance teams to make improvements.

Four core elements of the board reporting process — planning, briefing, writing, and distributing — are repeated, to varying degrees, in every board or committee meeting cycle. These are underpinned by two further elements — building skills and habits, and review and feedback — which turn the process into a sustainable system.

The board reporting system



Planning: building a reporting framework

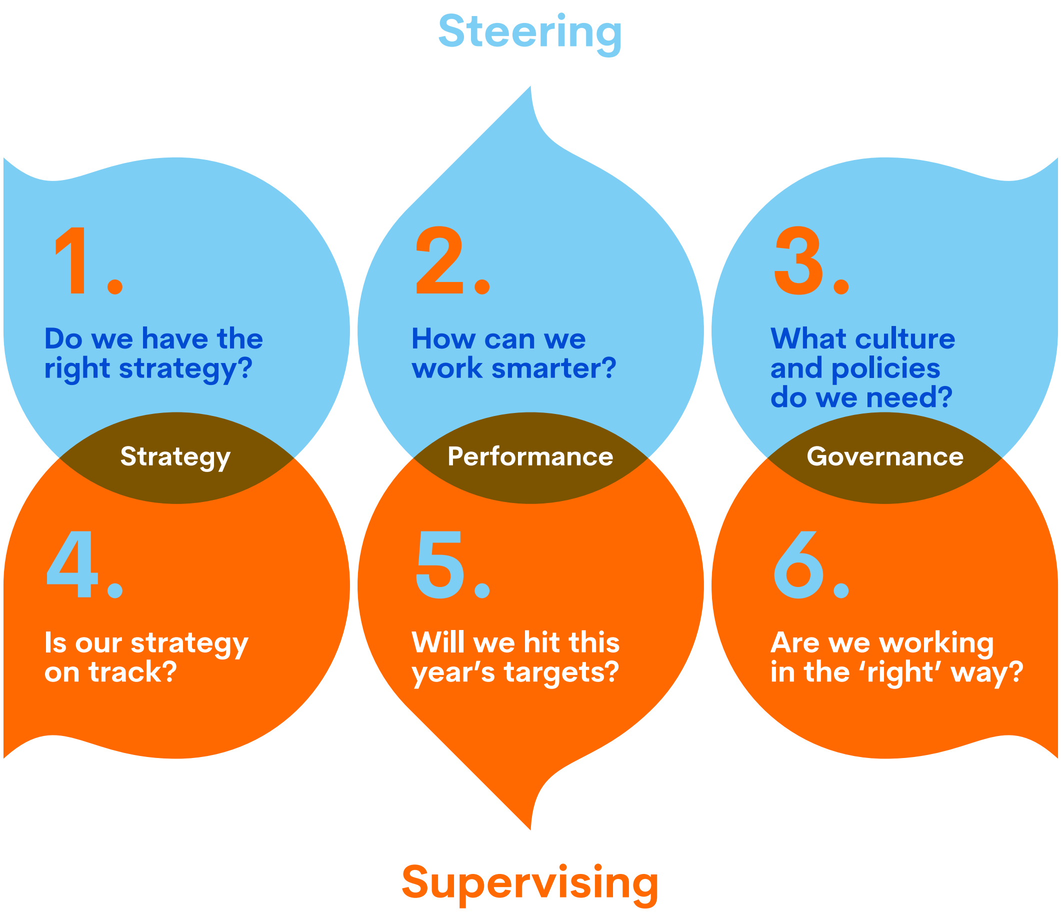
Effective and efficient boards give sufficient, timely attention to the most important questions facing their organisation. This requires strategic focus and discipline to prioritise between the many competing issues that can consume their time. Without this, key decisions will be delayed, threats and opportunities will be missed, and the costs of governance will expand.

The board agenda is central to imposing such discipline and strategic focus, aligning discussion time with the board's priorities, but it does not materialise in a vacuum. The agenda for any given meeting will depend on advanced planning for the year, which necessarily develops in tandem with the reporting framework — the architecture of what gets reported, to whom, at what time and frequency, and in what format.

The reporting framework and forward agenda plan can be a tool for the board to become more strategic and proactive, but too often this tool goes unused, for example with each year's framework defaulting to a slight adjustment of last year's rather than reflecting the board's current priorities.

To overcome this inertia, a well-designed framework begins with understanding what the board's priorities are, which can be done for example using Board Intelligence's Six Conversations model.

The Six Conversations model



This model asks six questions to help boards identify mission-critical discussions across strategy, performance, and governance that fulfil both their supervising role (monitoring performance and seeking assurance) and their steering role (shaping the organisation and its long term aims).

This is not the kind of deep reflection that the board will likely engage in month by month; governance teams are most likely to get the board's input as part of a structured, annual consultation, although that does not preclude ad hoc discussions.

With the chair and wider board, governance teams can then review the alignment between these priorities, and the board reporting calendar and provisional board agendas for the coming year.

This is a valuable opportunity to ensure balance between the board's steering and supervisory roles, and between strategy, performance, and governance.

"We make sure we share the reporting framework with report authors, asking if there is anything in their world coming up that they know they will need the board's input on."

- Roundtable participant

The consultation on the reporting framework and forward agenda plan should include considering whether the number and length of board meetings is adequate for what the board needs to do. However, it is important to be realistic about the time board members will be able to commit, particularly non-executive and volunteer members. If the work to be done still exceeds the time available, then it may be necessary to be more rigorous when deciding whether certain issues really need to go to the board, or whether they might be best dealt with at executive or committee level.

Once the board's priorities are clear, the next task is allocating time to reflect those priorities accordingly, both within and between meetings.

Within individual meetings, the priority level of an issue should be reflected in the length and level of detail of its requisite board paper. Chairs should also position items in the running order to reduce unnecessary cognitive load: it takes a different mindset to discuss big-picture strategy than it does to look at granular operational details, and it can be difficult for directors to move readily between the two. As one roundtable participant put it, "You can't just automatically switch into futurism from compliance."

How priority discussions are arranged throughout the year can also make a material difference to the quality of conversations. For example, many organisations choose to have one meeting a year devoted purely to strategy, but in other cases the board cannot be expected to complete their discussion of a substantial topic in one sitting.

One company secretary described the virtues of warming the board to a critical topic over several meetings, as well as in between them. "The last thing you want to do is take this item to the board for final approval in December," they explained: the board may not reach a decision in time. "Why not start that conversation with the board in March?"

The annual sequencing of board discussions, and therefore board reporting, is sometimes pre-determined, for example when they relate to year-end results or known external events. But it is also important for the chair and company secretary to review the agenda for each meeting in advance in case there are important matters that have come up between meetings that need the board's attention.

In these cases, they should be escalated to the board at the earliest opportunity rather than held back for the next scheduled discussion. The governance team should then adapt the reporting framework accordingly, if it means topics need to be moved between meetings.

Common challenge: "We produce the same paper in slightly different versions for five different forums."

A frequent efficiency drain for governance teams is the need to adapt reporting for the main board to different contexts, such as committees.

A way around this is to design a base paper that travels: a "rocket ship" structure, where the front section stands alone for the board and the back section is detached for committee use.

Review whether all five forums genuinely need a version of this paper — or whether some can receive the decision and its rationale rather than the full report. And use the reporting framework review to rationalise the reporting calendar before tackling the paper itself.

Briefing: putting report authors, and their papers, on the right path

Of all the interventions for raising the standard of board papers, the author briefing is the most direct, but potentially the most time-consuming. Here, a combination of governance professionals and executive sponsors tell the paper author what the board expects and answer any questions the author may have. In doing so, they can increase the chances that the paper delivers the information the board needs and reduce the need for late-stage intervention.

Currently, there is plenty of room for improvement in this practice. Management only receives a clear, detailed brief about what's required in 56% of organisations, with others left guessing what the board wants. Worse, nearly a third (31%) report inconsistent or conflicting signals.

Barring clairvoyance or exceptional luck, it is unlikely papers will hit the mark without a good brief, resulting in too much of the wrong information and not enough of the right information, more time wasted, patchy preparation for board meetings, and frustration all round. Indeed, only 14% of directors rate their board packs as 'good' or 'excellent' when writers don't receive a clear, structured brief, compared with 49% in organisations where writers do.

To ensure strong and systematic author briefings, start with the fundamentals. What is the author being asked to prepare for the board and why? An update on performance will have different requirements from a strategy document needing board approval.

The context of the 'why' matters — what the board has previously seen and discussed on this topic, what areas are not required because they've been covered elsewhere, what key considerations the board should keep in mind, and crucially what the board is supposed to do with the information. Every paper author should approach their task with a clear sense of the intended 'so what' and 'now what' of their work.

Lack of exposure to the board's inner workings can be a challenge for paper authors. As one company secretary put it, "if you're never in a boardroom and you're not getting support from your sponsor, how do you work out what a board conversation is like?"

56%

give management a clear detailed brief

31%

send inconsistent or conflicting signals about what's needed

14%

board packs 'good' or 'excellent' in organisations that don't provide a brief

Briefings are therefore a good opportunity to explain how board conversations differ from management conversations. While some directors like to get into technical and operational detail, paper authors should not assume the same kind of reader understanding as they would when writing a management report. They may need to explain concepts and give context that for them is obvious, while also connecting the topic more explicitly to the organisation's overall strategy.

Governance teams and executive sponsors can sometimes help the author translate subject matter expertise into something suitable for board consumption. "I help with what the board looks for and then try and help them position it properly," said one company secretary, adding that they also help presenters know what to expect at the board meeting itself. Occasionally, they added, this can involve being quite direct: "I'm telling you what the non-executive directors are going to ask. Would you rather I tell you or the NEDs do?"

Directors and governance professionals can become so used to being in the boardroom that they forget how intimidating it can be for those unused to that environment.

Once the paper author knows what they are writing and why, a clear briefing then breaks down the specific questions the paper should answer beneath that, such as: What progress has been made against the plan, what risks have emerged, and what decisions need making next?

The person doing the briefing should invite the paper author to give a balanced answer, covering the bad as well as the good, and to show their own judgement about the implications of what they are telling the board.

Distributing: production process and timelines

It is self-defeating to produce first-rate board materials that board members do not read. A central feature of any effective board reporting system is therefore that papers are produced and distributed on time, so that they can adequately prepare.

This often does not happen; only in 48% of organisations do directors always receive papers five working days in advance, while 17% rarely or never do.

Delays can occur in any stage of the board reporting cycle, from commissioning and briefing papers through to review, collation, and distribution. The most common delay, however, is in the drafting process itself: busy paper authors often underestimate how long drafting takes or how difficult it is to find the necessary information, or they may choose to delay so they can use more up-to-date data.

Late submission of papers can have negative consequences even if they do not delay the distribution of the board pack itself. Company secretaries and executive sponsors have less time in the review stage, which not only increases the risk of errors reaching the board but also misses the opportunity to improve paper quality.

63%

not confident the board pack has been fully read

48%

always receive papers five working days in advance

56%

use a secure board portal — up from 40% in 2020

Late papers also make it harder for company secretaries to ensure the board pack is coherent and accessible as a whole, risking directors wasting precious reading time working out which paper belongs with which agenda item, sifting through duplicated material, or clarifying inconsistencies across papers.

There are other important considerations that should not be overlooked when examining the board pack production process. They include cost and cost-effectiveness, and the amount of time required of the company secretary or whoever is responsible for the process — time that might be spent elsewhere.

Information security is increasingly important too. Board papers are often full of highly sensitive commercial or personal data and are often distributed to people operating outside the organisation's normal control systems.

Ensuring a smooth board pack production process starts with knowing how far in advance of the meeting papers need to be circulated and then working backwards. How often and by whom do individual papers need to be reviewed? Do any papers require discussion or approval by another body in the organisation before going to the board? Is there a system for monitoring progress and issuing reminders?

> "It's difficult to make anything other than cosmetic changes to late papers. Every minute you don't pass on to the board is a minute they can't spend engaging with the material."
>
> **- Roundtable participant**

Common challenge: "Finance always submits late and nothing changes."

Make the impact visible with data by using paper quality metrics (timeliness, length, template compliance) to show the pattern, not just the latest incident of late submission. A chronic problem is harder to dismiss when it's documented.

Escalate to the right person. Timeliness is a governance issue that belongs on the chair's or CEO's radar, not just the company secretary's.

Use your board performance review or feedback process to capture the board's view. Directors saying papers are consistently late has a different weight to the governance team saying the same thing.

The papers in the board pack will often have been on very different journeys to get there, depending on, for example, whether they require prior review or approval, whether they are regular reports which can be planned well in advance or are reporting on new developments, and whether the information to be included in the report is readily available or needs to be identified.

These factors should be considered when commissioning papers and setting deadlines for review and completion. It is good practice for the person responsible for co-ordinating the production of the board pack to talk to the author or sponsor of individual papers as early as possible to identify whether there are processes or constraints that they need to factor in to the timetable — for example, the need to go through approval processes or to obtain data that is not currently available.

Different papers may need to follow a different timetable while they are being prepared. However, there are two deadlines that should be common to all papers wherever possible: the date by which they must be sent to the person responsible for any necessary quality assurance, and the date on which they are sent to the board. Organisations have different deadlines for sending out board papers, but it should usually be no less than five working days before the board meeting except in exceptional circumstances.

Some organisations have policies to incentivise people to submit papers on time. Some flag late papers to the board.

"Timeliness — that's really what the board is concerned about. But they also want it right."

- Roundtable participant

Others go further and reject all papers not received by the deadline (a stance that is easier to take with the support of the chair).

Well-planned timetables and regular reminders can reduce the chances of papers arriving late through earlier interventions, and governance teams can keep on top of this more easily today with board portals that monitor and flag potential issues.

Building skills and habits: templates and training

There is often insufficient time for governance teams and executive sponsors to deliver the necessary standard of briefing for paper authors, consistently across the organisation.

Training and templates are two common ways of supporting the briefing process at scale. Training can be particularly useful for first time authors and presenters, and those who will be expected to report regularly to the board, educating them on the principles of good board reporting. When delivered online it is also helpful in reaching a geographically dispersed workforce.

The challenge is ensuring that what gets taught not only gets learned but also applied. It can help to encourage paper authors to show empathy for those reading papers. "The first thing I did in the training was present them with a paper that was really poorly written and ask them to tell me how they felt — not about the paper, but inside," explained one roundtable participant. "Then I said, when a director reads a paper like this, that is how they feel."

Templates are even easier and cheaper to disseminate. Their advantage is in implicitly prompting paper authors at the point of writing to cover all the key features that every board paper ought to include. Consistent formats also make it easier for board directors to know where to look, saving time and making it easier to identify key information.

However, despite these potential advantages, templates are only as effective as their design. More than four in five (84%) organisations that don't use templates for their board papers rate their board packs as 'poor' or 'weak'. Even among organisations that do use templates, 50% still rate their packs 'weak' or 'poor' — better, but higher than it should be.

Rather than using vague headings like 'background' or 'recommendations' — which can be filled in any way the author sees fit — use headings that directly correspond to the key questions the board wants answered. This is because answering those questions is often difficult, requiring individual judgement; making them explicit makes it harder for paper authors to succumb to the temptation to circumvent them.

The questions that boards need answering will of course vary somewhat depending on the type of board paper, which will require tailoring the template accordingly. For example, the format that is most suitable for reporting on progress on a major project will not be equally suitable for approving financial statements or assessing the implications of external developments. Around half (51%) of organisations currently adapt their templates in this way, offering topic-specific templates to help writers structure board papers.

Whether using 'off the shelf' templates from outside providers or developing your own, it is good practice to test them out with board members to check whether they think the format is clear and contains the right sort of information. It is also wise to keep the format under review — for example, when there are changes in the regulatory context or when new board members join (many UK financial institutions revised their board paper templates when the Consumer Duty was introduced in 2023).

26%

offer training to report writers

51%

provide topic-specific templates for board papers

84%

organisations without templates rating packs 'weak' or 'poor'

Review and feedback: continuous improvement

Board reporting will only improve over time if there is some feedback mechanism communicating what worked for the board and what needs to improve in the next set of papers.

This should not depend on a particularly forthright chair or a single, brave company secretary; this risks feedback being inconsistent, infrequent, or overly subjective.

To be sustainable and impactful, feedback instead needs to be systematic, sending repeated, reliable signals not just to governance teams and paper authors, but also to the CEO and chair, helping to build the case for further improvement.

At present, only 43% of boards provide structured feedback on their board papers. However, there are various opportunities to build it into the board's calendar.

For example, chairs can ask directors what they thought of the board papers at the end of every board meeting, leading to more regular, immediate, and specific feedback. For more consistent, 'big

43%

provide structured feedback to management on papers

81%

board packs rated 'weak' or 'poor' among organisations not giving structured feedback

48%

board packs rated 'weak' or 'poor' among organisations that give structured feedback

picture' feedback, boards can consider the quality and usefulness of their board packs when they carry out formal board performance reviews.

"Review board papers before they go into the pack. If you, as company secretary, don't understand something, then the average NED stands no chance. This is your opportunity to ask the preparer for clarification."

- Roundtable participant

To be more methodical and to reduce accusations of subjectivity, it can be useful first to benchmark board members' views on the information they currently receive to identify where there is scope for improvement. The self-assessment tool developed by the CGI and Board Intelligence provides one possible means of doing so.

This then allows progress to be monitored against specific paper quality metrics — like length, timeliness, template compliance, and response to the brief — helping to ensure that feedback translates into measurable improvements.

Common challenge: "One director wants everything in detail; another wants a one-pager."

Design for the common denominators, not the outliers. What does every director on this board need from every paper, regardless of their preferences? That is your baseline.

Use the executive summary to bridge preferences: directors who want the detail will find it in the body of the report; those who want the headline will find it on page one.

Make individual preferences transparent: where they are known, a brief note to the chair or CEO ("Director X has asked for more financial granularity in the CFO paper") can head off conflicting feedback before it reaches the author.

The board reporting system checklist

This checklist can be used by governance professionals to assess and strengthen the whole board reporting system.

Planning

- [ ] Is the board clear how it wants to divide its time between strategy, operational performance, and governance and compliance?
- [ ] Is it clear which decisions the board must take and the criteria for bringing other matters to it?
- [ ] Do the forward meeting plan and individual agendas reflect the board's priorities?
- [ ] Are the forward meeting plan and meeting agendas reviewed against those priorities each year?

Commissioning and briefing

- [ ] Are responsibilities for commissioning, writing, reviewing, and collating the pack clear?
- [ ] Are authors briefed on why the board wants the paper, what information it needs, and how to present it?
- [ ] Do the agenda and individual papers make clear what action or input is needed from the board?

Skills and habits

- [ ] Do you have — or need — standard formats for different types of board paper?
- [ ] Are there agreed principles for paper length and format?
- [ ] Is training and support available to authors, especially first-time writers?
- [ ] Are there agreed principles for responsible AI use in reporting (human in the loop, transparency, data security, accountability, fitness for purpose)?

Distribution and access

- [ ] Is the board pack easy to navigate and readily accessible for board members?
- [ ] Are the methods by which the pack is stored and distributed secure?
- [ ] Do papers reach the board in good time — ideally at least five working days ahead — with a system to track progress and chase late submissions?

Review and feedback

- [ ] Does the board give feedback on the clarity and usefulness of the papers it receives?
- [ ] Is that feedback systematic and tracked against paper-quality metrics over time?

4. AI in board reporting

In brief

- AI is already being used in the board reporting process, acknowledged or not.
- Used well, it can help at every stage of the process: drafting and stress-testing papers, reformatting, chasing deadlines, drafting minutes, and in directors' meeting preparation.
- AI changes how papers are produced, not who is accountable. Human ownership of the substance, judgement, and risk assessment remains essential.
- Transparency and data security are non-negotiable. Undisclosed use creates accountability gaps and sensitive data must not leak into models.
- Judge any tool against five durable principles: human in the loop, transparency, data security, accountability, and fitness for purpose.

There have been some changes to the questions we ask in our benchmarking research, but none so significant as those concerning boards' use of generative AI, which only entered mainstream public use in late 2022.

The results are surprising. As of mid-2026, when this updated guidance was written, only 5% of governance professionals and directors say they are confident that AI is being used smartly in their board reporting process. The rest — the overwhelming majority — are split nearly evenly between those who say there is room for improvement (49%) and those who say it is not being used smartly (46%).

This is not a matter of boards and governance teams being somehow isolated from AI. The technology is being

5%

confident AI is being used smartly in board reporting

46%

say AI is not being used smartly in the board reporting process

49%

say there is room to improve how AI is being used in board reporting widely used not only in the organisations that they govern, but in the boardroom itself, whether they realise it or not.

Shadow adoption — colleagues using AI for tasks without acknowledgement, oversight, or organisational sanction — is already widespread. As one roundtable participant put it, with reference to board papers themselves, "How do you know whether somebody has used AI?"

At the same time, directors are often unsure what an appropriate board-level use of AI is, while many governance teams lack the capacity to conduct rigorous experiments into using it themselves. "Teams are quite stretched with day-to-day tasks," one company secretary told us. "Carving out time to play with AI is tricky."

Nonetheless, the question before them is whether they will engage with AI in board reporting on their own terms or whether it will happen without their input and guidance.

Where AI can help

Our roundtable participants discussed several specific use cases where AI can — and in some cases already does — demonstrably improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the board reporting process.

For paper authors, one such benefit comes from AI's ability to draft executive summaries, particularly for longer reports. While it is advisable for the paper author to draft the report itself, it can be difficult to condense it into a single blank page. The advantage of using AI to generate a summary is that it is generally easier to refine a draft than it is to start one yourself, and it takes far less time to get the first draft down on the page.

Even before that point, AI can also help steer the report writing process. For example, it can prompt paper authors to consider key questions during drafting, alerting them if their paper is becoming too long or too light on implications, or if it lacks balance between positives and negatives or between forward- and backward-looking material. It can then provide on-the-spot guidance for how to improve, bringing a coaching element into the drafting process and reinforcing messages delivered during training or briefing sessions.

In some cases, AI can also help authors find internal data and resources that they may need to write the paper more quickly, with one roundtable participant suggesting that it could automatically populate some sections of a paper by "pulling in KPIs from the organisation's data".

> "If you ask what's missing from the paper, AI is quite good at identifying the gaps."
>
> **- Roundtable participant**

For governance professionals, roundtable participants flagged AI's ability to check reports for structural weaknesses during review as even more useful. Flagging gaps or flaws early then quickens the review process, while making it less likely that a problem paper will get sent back by the CEO during the latter stages of board pack preparation.

AI can also help governance teams with the otherwise time-consuming task of converting papers into different formats. For example, another roundtable participant said this was particularly useful when reviewing draft papers, "when you have a long report and you need to get it into a board paper template". Again, ideally the report would have been written with the template in mind, but if a paper author does file a draft that doesn't fit, a governance professional can use AI to condense and reorder much faster than they could manually.

On a more practical level, AI embedded within board portals can help the governance team keep track of paper authors' progress, while also automating reminders as the deadline approaches, reducing time spent chasing and the risk of late submission. After the board meeting, AI can then transcribe and prepare the draft minutes for initial review by the company secretary, with action points pre-flagged, again saving the governance team time.

Then there are the benefits for the readers of the board pack. Again, board papers should already have a clear and concise executive summary but, if not, then AI can summarise it so that directors know where to prioritise their reading time.

Natural language searches of individual reports or whole board packs, meanwhile, help directors quickly find sections that cover certain topics, connect papers to past decisions, flag where their expertise would add most value, or even raise questions that they may not have thought to ask. In all such cases, it can free significant time for board members and enable them to prepare more effectively for the meeting.

Common challenge: "We're thinking about using AI but don't know how to govern it or what's appropriate."

Start with principles, not tools. Before evaluating specific products, agree internally on what your non-negotiables are, like data security, human review of outputs, and transparency about AI use. These give you something to evaluate tools against.

Pilot in lower-stakes contexts first: meeting minutes, draft summaries of reports the company secretary has already read, and first drafts of internal documents. Build confidence and familiarity before AI touches papers going to the board.

Where human judgement remains essential

AI changes how board papers get produced, but not who is accountable for their content. The substance of a paper presented to the board — the analysis, recommendation, and candid assessment of risk — requires human ownership, regardless of how it was drafted.

On one level, this means oversight to mitigate the risk of hallucinations, but human ownership of board reporting goes deeper. As one company secretary put it, when the board receives a paper, "It still needs to be management's view."

This caveat extends to every benefit that AI can bring, at every stage. Paper authors may take on-the-spot 'advice' from AI, use it to summarise their writing, or even draft text from their notes, but only if they ultimately exercise their own judgement about what to say and what to leave out.

If a company secretary needs to convert a board paper into different versions for the full board and a committee, or to retrofit it into a template, then similarly they must consider for themselves whether they have preserved the intended meaning and checked for AI hallucinations. A director reading a report likewise cannot rely only on the AI summary, or the questions that AI suggests they ask. In each case, it is an aid to judgement, not a substitute for it.

"There's nothing inherently wrong with using AI. The issue is misguided application of AI," said one of our roundtable participants.

Such misguided application can include using AI without transparency about how it was used. Directors should not need to second guess whether they are reading what executives really think, not least because undisclosed AI use in board-facing documents creates accountability gaps and may even create legal and regulatory exposure in some contexts.

Another concern is what happens to the information input into AI. "It's the security side of it that worries people," explained one company secretary.

> "There's a real lack of transparency, and a lot of shadow adoption of AI. People are using AI for tasks and processes, and it's not being acknowledged."
>
> **- Roundtable participant**

Boards receive some of an organisation's most sensitive and confidential information, so they need confidence that it will not find its way into a model's training data or — worse — the public domain. If the organisation does not set and enforce the terms for which AI systems are used in which cases, it cannot be sure that its data is being kept secure.

Principles for responsible use

AI moves too quickly for rigid rules. Nobody knows exactly what it will or won't be capable of in the coming years, even if it is clearly likely to become more useful in more places.

Instead, here are five durable principles that governance professionals can use to evaluate any AI tool, now or in the future:

1.Human in the loop. There should be a human review of every AI output before it reaches the board. AI can be a starting point, or it can be used for refinement, but it should never be the complete or final product.

2. Transparency. Make it a standard requirement to be clear — internally and where relevant externally — about where AI has been used to produce board materials. Where possible, restrict AI usage to approved tools within the organisation's tech stack and prevent the use of personal accounts.

3. Data security. Does this tool handle confidential governance material in a way that meets your organisation's standards? Where is data stored? Is it used to train the model? How does the tool prevent information being served to other users within or outside of the organisation?

4. Accountability. The executive who presents the paper owns the content. It is up to them to ensure it reflects their views and is accurate. AI does not change that any more than typing, word processing or the internet did in the past.

5. Fitness for purpose. General-purpose AI tools are not designed for board-level governance work and not always suited to it — a very specific domain with unusually low tolerance for errors. Board work is also inherently confidential, which restricts the training data available to off-the-shelf models.

Conclusion

Raising the bar — and keeping it there

Board reporting is fundamental to effective governance. It is, along with the board meeting itself, the primary means by which an organisation and its board stay connected — to each other, to the organisation's strategy, and to the risks and opportunities that demand their attention. When it works well, directors arrive well-prepared, discussions stay focused, and the board's time is spent where it matters most.

That outcome is only sustainable when governance professionals treat reporting as a system to be designed and continually improved — not a task to be repeated with each turn of the reporting cycle. Systems-level thinking is what produces consistent standards without constant individual intervention and frees governance teams to focus on the work that adds the most value.

The pressures documented in this guidance — ever larger board packs, increasing meeting frequency, tighter resources — are not going away. But neither are the tools available to address them. Used well, the frameworks, practices, and technologies outlined here can help governance professionals do more than manage those pressures: they can use them as a catalyst for a more fundamental improvement in how their organisation's board reporting works.

The result is a positive spiral: better papers lead to better board conversations, and better conversations to better governance. In the words of the Institute's purpose, better governance then drives better decision-making — and better decision-making creates a better world.

To continue exploring the principles and practice of effective board reporting:

- The Chartered Governance Institute and Board Intelligence's board reporting self-assessment tool allows you to assess your board pack against best practice and benchmark against peers.
- The Chartered Governance Institute and Board Intelligence's board reporting cost calculator estimates the annual cost of board reporting in your organisation.
- Chartered Governance Institute guidance on board performance reviews, and specimen cover sheets and strategic agendas for charity boards.

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