Helping to improve School Governance

It's 55 years since my parents took me to my prep school for the first term. Even today the smell of linseed oil on cricket bats transports me back to that day in an instant. One thing my eight year old self had little concern for was the school governors. But now, if I reflect on the environment in which the governors of that school were operating, and then reflect on the environment that governors operate in today, the difference is, to say the least, striking. And yet the modus operandi of some governors today is not so very different to what it was in 1955.

Five or six times a year they receive a large bundle of papers through the post, albeit prepared on a computer and reproduced by a copier rather than typed on an old Remington and 'Roneoed'. Sometimes email is employed in place of the postman.

These minor nods to technological advancement merely speed up delivery. Governors must still assimilate the information in one large, indigestible lump. The result? Too often, they find themselves trying to keep up with what is going on rather than fulfilling their intended role: leading, challenging and supporting the Head and their team. Governing body meetings can become exercises in getting governors up to speed at the expense of informed debate and decision making. And of course, the ensuing delays in decision making are not particularly helpful to Bursars.
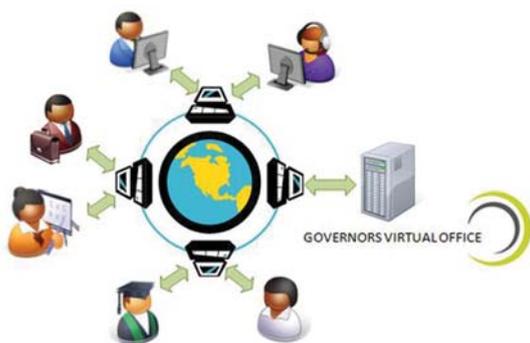
Figure 1 - Access to information whenever and wherever it is needed

A glance at the commercial sector suggests it doesn't have to be this way. Successful businesses have for many years been increasing the effectiveness of their teams by having them collaborate in shared virtual workspaces – a phrase used to describe a system, usually a secure web site, where teams store all their working papers and can communicate and collaborate over their work. (See Figure 1.) This technique is most often and effectively deployed when the team members work in many different locations and do not meet in person very frequently – exactly the position governors find themselves in.

Using these techniques, high performing teams stay well-informed, their output greater than the sum of their parts. Online discussions establish team members' positions and identify any necessary staff work. When the team does meet in person members are completely equipped for debate and decision-making.

If this way of working is employed by successful businesses, why are some school governing bodies operating in fundamentally the same way as they were 55 years ago? Schools are businesses after all. They operate in a competitive market place, made increasingly complex by large amounts of legislation. Many of those whom schools would wish to attract as governors work in the commercial world where they employ modern ways of working. The need for those charged with leading, challenging and supporting the Head and their Team to be really effective has rarely, if ever, been greater. So, why is change in this respect comparatively rare?

One of the principal reasons may well be that the effective deployment of shared virtual workspaces is not quite as simple as it might seem. The idea that just installing a piece of software will enable a team of governors to collaborate online is sadly misplaced.
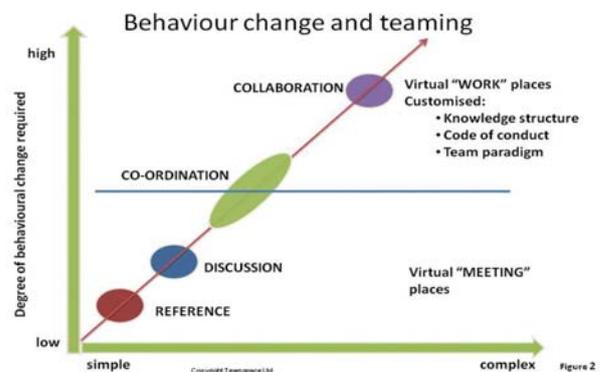

Figure 2 - Behaviour change needed for working in shared virtual workspaces

In fact several things are required for success. Most significant is team members accepting a different way

of working. (See Figure 2.) Whilst historically it has been possible for large companies to foster such acceptance, until recently it has been more difficult for smaller organisations to do so. Large companies have the resources to plan and execute programmes to teach leaders the skills needed to enable them to manage teams to work effectively in shared virtual workspaces; to achieve the behavioural changes needed. The organisation's Management Development function will often do this. Smaller organisations have found this more difficult.

But this no longer needs to be the case. Several recent developments have made it possible for even the smallest organisation – of which school governing bodies are a perfect example – to achieve success using a virtual workspace. First up, the near universal reach of broadband to homes of governors has made the necessary technology widely available. (See Figure 3.) Secondly, developers have finally come up with software that is <u>very</u> easy and intuitive to use. In fact, you can now get software specifically designed and developed for governors, their clerks and the roles they perform.
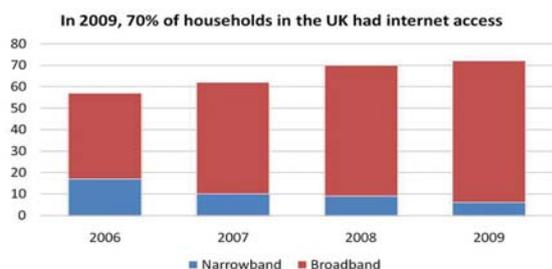

Figure 3 – Broadband use in United Kingdom

Finally, support for virtual space users is now affordable thanks to the widespread availability of broadband and web conferencing. These make technical assistance economical, as well as support to help the team leader, or Governing body chair and Clerk, alter the behaviour of their team and get used to working in a virtual space.

Evidence Base

There is growing evidence of the benefit virtual space working can bring to school governing bodies. In autumn 2008 a pilot project was launched to see whether schools' governing bodies could collaborate effectively in shared virtual workspaces. Five schools' governing bodies participated. The pilot was designed to gauge whether the kind of benefits enjoyed by teams working in a commercial environment could be achieved by governors using a 'Governors' virtual office', as the workspace came to be called.

The hoped-for benefits were:

For Governors:

- Fewer, shorter, more effective meetings;
- More time on focussed debate of important issues;

- Less time simply updating people;
- Better access to information about events as they occur rather than periodically prior to meetings;
- Shorter decision-making cycles;
- Less work for governors in maintaining files and finding documents;
- Better communication amongst governors between meetings;
- Improved document security;
- Basis to make existing communication processes more coherent;
- Help ensuring statutory requirements are satisfied.

For Clerks:

- Less time spent satisfying information requests from governors through making it easily available to them online;
- Time saved scheduling meetings and preparing and distributing meeting packs;
- Increased flexibility - with all information available in one place, accessible from any online device, the Clerk can work wherever they are, not just where the data is;
- Less work and disruption when a deputy stands in due to ease of handing over work and responsibilities;
- No need to send papers out by email which can be unreliable (i.e., if recipient's inbox is full);
- 'Paperless' system means reduced storage space required;
- Enhanced document security;
- Help in ensuring statutory responsibilities are not overlooked, i.e., all school policies are reviewed at the right time

The pilot was used to make sure the software was deployed so that it worked as effectively as it could for governors. This included understanding the specific requirements of an individual school's governing body, preparing the shared virtual workspace to meet those requirements, and training the clerks and governors to use it. Even more importantly, could the support that came with the software help governors and clerks prepare and execute a simple plan to achieve the behaviour change needed for a new way of working? Above all, could all this be done consistently and economically?

The Results

The Pilot ran for about nine months. It established that all of the above benefits could indeed be achieved, along with a particularly high level of user satisfaction with the new way of working. There was a strong correlation between the strength of the team and the benefits achieved. It found:

- It is possible to produce an application that is exactly tailored to the work and roles of Clerks and Governors;

- The application can be made sufficiently easy to learn and intuitive to use so that all the governors in a team can and will use it. (Interestingly, one lesson was that you can make something too simple to use so that people don't bother to spend the few minutes needed to read up on what can be done and so remain unaware of some capabilities.);
- It is possible to provide affordable technical and team leadership support to the required standard.

And there were lessons learned.

- Leadership from the Chair/Head and Clerk are prerequisites for success;
- The technology must be very simple and intuitive to use. The work processes that the Clerk, particularly, and governors use have to be really well understood and built into the software by the product designers. Quite small changes to layout, wording and process can have a very large effect in reducing the number of problems and difficulties that arise;
- Whilst well-designed technology reduces the need for training to a minimum, the package must provide good training and help tools that can be accessed and used at any time;
- There must be a really good support mechanism in place to help the Clerk and the Chair achieve behavioural change;
- To be successful all the governors need to work in the shared virtual workspace, or 'Governors' Virtual Office' as it's now known.

After the pilot ended these lessons informed a rewrite of the software based on collaboration software used by IBM. Thus the Governors' Virtual Office available today incorporates the changes and additions identified in the pilot in an industrial strength package.

Similarly, the tailored support offered to those using the package also accounts for the lessons learned from the pilot. (See figure 4.)
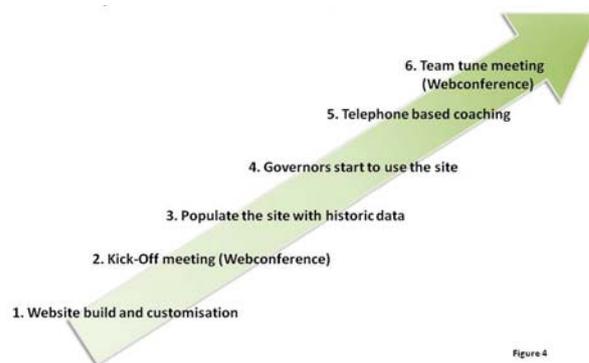

Figure 4 – Six steps to effective collaboration

Leaving the smell of linseed oil behind, and looking forward rather than back, I see the evidence that it is possible for governing bodies and their clerks to employ new ways of working. Ways of working that have been successfully deployed for some time in the commercial world - a world of which schools are very much a part in more senses than one.

The end result can be more rewarding work for governors and clerks and – crucially – better governance.

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