The notion of the 'Employee Governor': an analysis of type, motivation and role in relation to the dynamics of institutional change

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Abstract

Governing bodies comprise members of diverse groups of stakeholders who bring varied perspectives and valuable capabilities to their work as school governors. Many governors can be termed 'employee governors'; that is, they volunteer to be governors but are in paid work outside the education system. These employee governors bring particular benefits to schools by applying their work-related capabilities to governing; facilitating relationships between their employers and the school; and helping to bring the school and the community together.

Employee governors are however extremely varied and the different categories are not clearly understood. The lack of an analytical framework for categorising the different types of employee governor limits understandings of: their motivation to be involved; their particular contribution; and the barriers to their participation and how to overcome them.

This paper seeks to develop a framework that enables the notion of the employee governor to be understood more fully and the different kinds of employee governor to be clarified. Different perspectives are invoked to develop such a framework.

The first perspective considers two characteristics that permit a categorisation of employee governors.
(i) An employee governor's route into governing and whether that route is related to their work organisation
(ii) The support of/connections with their work organisation that they are able to draw upon to support or link with their school.

Different combinations of these characteristics generate a framework of four 'groups' of employee governor. In the paper, we argue that there is potential for the development of all groups and identify the different forms of support that each group may require to reach their full potential as governors and developing opportunities in their place of employment.

The second perspective uses the notions of capability, motivation and opportunity to enrich the insights from the first perspective. Employee governors operate in a strategic environment, where different employers, volunteers, fellow governors, headteachers and schools have different capabilities, motivations and opportunities. Although there may be considerable overlap, analysing these differences can inform understandings of the behaviour, recruitment and retention of such governors.

The third perspective acknowledges that schools are in various stages of change – improvement, progression and maybe decline, all of which will be influenced by the local context. Schools in varied settings in different states of institutional change require governors with different capabilities and motivations which in turn has implications for what 'employee governor' can best contribute

Introduction

The notion of the governors and 'business volunteers in schools' has a long history. It originates in initiatives to bring industry and education closer together which began in the 1980s with the TVEI initiative and developed into more extended partnership working in the 1990s (James and Jamieson 1992). Arguably, those developments were part of larger movement which started in the 1970s, the purpose of which was to bring education and society closer, to ensure that schools were meeting society's needs and to involve a wider range of stakeholders in the education system (Balarin et al 2008). The term 'employee governor' is used in the UK, particularly amongst those who seek to facilitate closer partnerships between schools and employers.

Balarin et al (2008) argued that school governing is both important for school performance, particularly through its statutory role, and complicated, requiring high levels of capability and motivation. They further argued that many of the skills required are those that are developed and practised in the workplace. Employee governors can apply their work-related capabilities to governing; facilitate relationships between their employers and the school; and help to bring the school and the community together. Moreover, participation in school governing gives an opportunity to develop those skills further to the benefit of governors' employers. Such participants in school governing can be termed 'employee governors': they volunteer to be governors but are in paid work outside the school system. The current interest in 'employee governors' emerges from a growing focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR) in many commercial organisations and the CSR trend towards using volunteering to support staff development.

The development of the role of the employee governor and the optimisation of the benefits from participation are limited because the notion of 'employee governor' is unclear. Employee governors are varied and the different categories are not clearly understood. The issues surrounding them can be differently interpreted from different perspectives. The lack of an analytical framework for categorising employee governor limits understanding of the group, and in particular their different motivations, contributions and barriers to participation. It results in confusion both in analytical discussions and potential policy interventions.

This paper seeks to clarify the notion of employee governors by developing an analytical framework that enables the notion and diversity of the employee governor to be understood more fully. The framework analyses employee governor heterogeneity from the individual governor perspective, emphasising 'employer orientation' and the 'route into governing'.

The primary contribution of this paper is analytical. Its evidence base draws on case studies in the existing published literature and those available via SSAT and online (e.g. www.the-guides.org). We also interview five governors (the Chair of the governing body of a south London primary school, a governor of a primary school in the west of England, a former corporate director, a property consultant, and a governor of a London primary school) and representatives of five companies (two investment banks, a medium-sized property consultancy, a global energy company and a global marketing communications group). In addition we draw on interviews with the founder of FEdS and SGOSS, as well as regular group discussions with members of the Education and Employers Taskforce Expert Group on School Governance from December 2009 to September 2010. This modest data set is substantively grounded in two major studies of school governing in England. The first (Balarin et al 2008) which analysed the policy and research literature relevant to school governing, carried out 43 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, undertook a large scale random on-line survey of over 5000 school governors and elicited the views of 42 headteachers. The second project, James et al (in press) extended the analysis of the Balarin et al survey data and undertook 30 case studies of governing in primary and secondary schools.

Context

The notion of the 'employee governor'

School governing bodies have typically drawn upon and labelled different categories of governor, including parent, staff, community, foundation, partnership and local authority governors. These categories are formally set out in statutory guidance (DCSF 2007). In recent years, another informal description of governors has arisen, that of 'employee governor'.

The clearest manifestation of this new notion of employee governor was the establishment of the 'Employee Governors Network' (EGN) in 2008 (EGN, 2010). The EGN was set up by education consultancy FEdS, on the basis that certain major employers wanted to provide information, seminars and networking opportunities to the governors among their staff. Their inaugural conference was in October 2008, and speakers included: the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families; the Deputy Chairman of Business in the Community (BITC); the General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL); and the General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT).

The EGN drew on a report, published at its inaugural conference, by BITC called 'Governing our schools' (BITC, 2008). The report discusses how employees can be encouraged into and supported in governing roles. In doing so, it explicitly introduces publicly the term 'employee governor'. The EGN's endeavours and the notion of the employee governor found fertile soil, and the concept is used in meetings and discussions on the promotion of school governance, for instance among organisations like SGOSS, NCOGS, the Education and Employers Taskforce, and the NGA that support school governors and governance.

The coincidence of two gradual trends - the growing responsibilities of school governors and a gradual shift in CSR policy to focus more on volunteering and staff development helps to understand why the concept of 'employee governor' has arisen as a category in its own right.

Trends in school governing

Governing bodies are legally responsible for the conduct of the school and must comply with numerous regulations which apply to all schools regardless of size, even where the responsibilities might sit better with the head teacher. Balarin et al 2008 argued that governing body responsibilities had accumulated over time. Thus although it is generally working well, *"School governing is overloaded"* (p.5). and it could be improved. They also argued that school governing is challenging and complicated. Governing body responsibilities are described ambiguously in policies and regulations. Many of the responsibilities are in conflict or in tension, for example: support and challenge; the representational role of members and their skills; the operational and the strategic; and management and scrutiny. Balarin et al's findings are supported by more anecdotal evidence and newspaper articles (e.g. Manchester Evening News, 2010; Guardian, 2009).

Despite reservations about the nature of the role there are considerable benefits from being a school governor. Amongst a range of beneficial outcomes from involvement, Ellis (2003) reports the development of new skills and networking opportunities, personal development and for some, enhanced employment prospects. Research published by Phillips and Fuller (2003) summarised the findings of four annual surveys of governors from 1999 to 2002. They found that, among other reasons, school governors often felt their involvement was worthwhile due to the opportunity for self-development and to use skills acquired elsewhere to benefit children.

Similarly, the Punter, Adams and Kraithman (2007) study of governors recruited by the School Governors One-Stop Shop, reported that the new skills developed by participation in governing included those in the areas of finance, knowledge about education, and increased social awareness. Governors who worked in less senior management positions reported having developed a range of personal and interpersonal skills that they felt would prepare them for more senior roles in their work.

Balarin et al (2008) report that there is already considerable involvement of the non-education (business) community in school governing, bringing expertise and skills from settings outside education. A number of respondents in the study felt there was scope for enhancing the contribution of employees and 'whole companies' to school governing. However, there was an awareness that work-based skills alone were not sufficient. Such governors needed also to be sensitive to the culture, purposes and ethos of the school and to be ready to learn about a different sector.

The trend in the growing responsibilities of school governors is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, an enhanced role with more responsibility offers more opportunities for skills development, which is a priority for employers. Secondly, a larger role increases the challenge of being a governor, particularly alongside full-time or part-time employment. For this reason, a greater degree of acknowledgement and support is needed from employers if an employee is also to be an effective governor.

Trends in corporate social responsibility

This section introduces the second long-term trend in the attitude of employers towards corporate social responsibility. Initial philanthropic gestures have gradually developed into an embedded and systematised approach to volunteering and community engagement (Barthorpe 2010). CSR Europe (2009) surveys 20 countries across Europe to analyse the trends in CSR and finds that the welfare of employees is a driver of CSR, particularly in the UK. The consideration of welfare links closely to employee skills gains from volunteering, the potential of which has been increasingly acknowledged. For instance, Personnel Today (2004) makes the link between CSR and HR explicit. The number of publications that focus on skills development and volunteering (City of London, 2010; CBI, 2010; Education and Employers Taskforce, 2010) have grown. Further a number of organisations which exist to use volunteering as skills development (e.g. the Employee Volunteering Community Interest Company) have been recently established.

Our interview data confirms the influence of this long-term trend in CSR. FEdS describes a change in emphasis from the 1980s when CSR focused on enlightened self-interest to strengthen communities and encourage young people into qualifications and skilled jobs, to later decades which additionally saw the deployment of volunteering schemes designed to support staff development and business productivity.

There has also been a de-emphasis of philanthropy, in favour of human resource benefits. Again an interviewee reported that a major bank and a major retailer separately explored projects in the late 1990s and early 2000s to develop a work experience scheme which aligned the roles of both the young people and the staff temporarily managing them to newly introduced competency frameworks. NatWest's early 'face-to-face with finance' program deliberately moved from an environment of providing resources direct to schools, to encouraging schools to use NatWest volunteers to deliver the programs. This shifted the emphasis from philanthropy alone to relationship building and staff development, where volunteering is seen as an effective and low-cost option.

The shift from philanthropy to volunteering in CSR and an increasingly explicit HR emphasis on skills development motivates employers to develop schemes and structures around volunteering that promote skills development. The complexity of school governance and the growing responsibilities within that role provide an excellent candidate for such structure, and the concept of the 'employee governor' has a natural role to play.

How the term 'employee governor' is used

In general the term 'employee governor' is used in a common-sense fashion, without the need for an explicit discussion of who is included and why. For example, throughout the BITC (2008) report into school governing, the context of employees volunteering is used as sufficient detail to motivate the discussion. For instance, the introduction to the conference report of the second EGN conference in January 2010, explains:

> *"We probably don't need a sharper definition of 'employee governor' than somebody with relevant business skills and experience whose employer supports them as governor."*

This statement reflects the admirable emphasis within the EGN on bringing people together and generating activity, engagement and excitement. Although the term is proving capable of influencing networks and activity, as it enters the discourse there is a risk that the different ways it can be interpreted might confuse analysis of the underlying issues and the development of policy.

Ambiguities in the employee governor concept

Since many governors are involved in some form of employment, there is an immediate grey area between governors who 'happen to have a job as well' and employee governors. This grey area has different characteristics from different perspectives.

From the school's perspective, the value of an employee governor might be seen in terms of benefitting from a skills base developed in the world of work. In this context, those skills might exist in equal value among the self-employed, the temporarily unemployed and the retired, as well as those employed in a more conventional sense. The skills also exist equally in someone whose employer actively supports their governing as opposed to one who does not. In this scenario, the concept 'employee governor' has little concrete meaning.

Similarly, if we focus on the skills development potential for individual volunteers, school governing roles may be more valid for someone who is on a career break, maternity leave or perhaps job seeking, even if those roles also have value for those in full employment. For this category of people, the notion of 'employee governor' invoked above will be felt too narrow.

Alternatively, the school may see value in a governor who has links with an employing organisation, because they might then draw down additional support for the school or form a catalyst for a partnership between that school and that employer. In this scenario, the definition of 'employee governor' given above is appropriate. This angle is picked up in more detail later on.

From the employer's perspective, employee governors present at the same time an opportunity to benefit from staff development and community links, as well as access to the education sector and potential recruits. The degree to which and ways in which they engage proactively with these opportunities are likely to vary by industry, typical recruitment demographics and by scale of organisation.

It is perhaps because BITC and FEdS are both positioned to support the country's largest employers, that they are able to invoke 'employee governors' in a straight-forward fashion. The EGN and FEdS support large employers in developing comprehensive schemes to support their staff as employee governors, and the BITC recommendations for employers focus on the kinds of structured and formal support that fit naturally into larger organisations. For smaller organisations, 'supporting' their staff as governors may take very different forms.

The presence of these different perspectives explains the need to interpret the term 'employee governor' precisely. One policy concern focuses on the availability of volunteers for school governing, their capacity to deliver and the degree of support they receive. Therefore, the most useful perspective on employee governors is perhaps the individual governor, and it is this perspective which we develop in the following section.

The employee governor: a conceptual framework

We restrict this section to governors who are also existing members of a (non-school) employing organisation, where that organisation is large enough to have a meaningful team and/or management structure. Depending on the individual institution, this structure may work with as few as three staff, although some of the example schemes and structures given below will be more appropriate to organisations of different sizes.

We define a framework based around two axes. First, a binary category defined by the individual governor's route into their volunteering – whether they came across the opportunity and were inspired into it as a result of their employing organisation, as opposed to some other means, such as having a child at the school, long-standing habit or some other network. Second, the employer's orientation towards their volunteering, which ranges along a scale from disinterest to institutionalised engagement. This scale is driven by the full range of staff in the organisation and a wide range of activities, as described in Table 1 below. For instance, while some managers may be disinterested in governing, others may engage. In some cases, the HR, CSR and senior managers may appreciate the potential of employee governors, but other tiers of management less so.

Table 1: Activities and behaviours defining an employer's level of engagement

Activities and behaviours defining an employer's level of engagement
▪ Disinterest and unresponsiveness
▪ Providing time off willingly rather than grudgingly
▪ Awareness among scattered individual managers of the potential skills benefits
▪ Awareness of the number and types of governors among their employees
▪ The central provision of information and advice to governors (either within the organisation or by supporting access to networks)
▪ Providing a forum through which governors can engage with each other
▪ Running seminars and activities to bring their employee governors together
▪ Integrating governing activity into formal skills development processes and the managerial tool-kit

Reducing this multidimensional set of actors and activities to a single scale isn't straightforward, but provides a way of summarising the overall experience of being a governor in that organisation.

Two types of activity are deliberately excluded from the above list, not because they are not relevant but because they are better addressed separately. This allows us to maintain analytical traction on the notion of employee governors.

One type of activity excluded from the vertical axis is promotion. For instance, we accept that an employer who circulates details about the school governing role and opportunities is different to one that does not. But from the perspective of an individual governor, the operative question is whether or not that promotion motivated them to become a governor. Where our key concern is increasing the number of school governors through raising awareness of the role, employers circulating information could form part of an initiative, but this is a separate activity to supporting 'employee governors' in their own right.

The second type of activity is education-employer partnerships. For instance, some employers may provide additional support to schools which governors may be able to draw on. We deal with this separately later.

The framework, which is depicted in Figure 1, loosely defines four groups of 'employee governor' – two of these are less widespread than the others, which we describe by curving the corners of the framework. For instance, some employers promote volunteering opportunities but have little interest in whether or not members of staff take them up. In general, this is less common than employers who both promote opportunities and take an interest in their future engagement.

Figure 1. A depiction of the analytical framework which delineates four groups of 'employee governor' according to the route into governing and employer orientation.
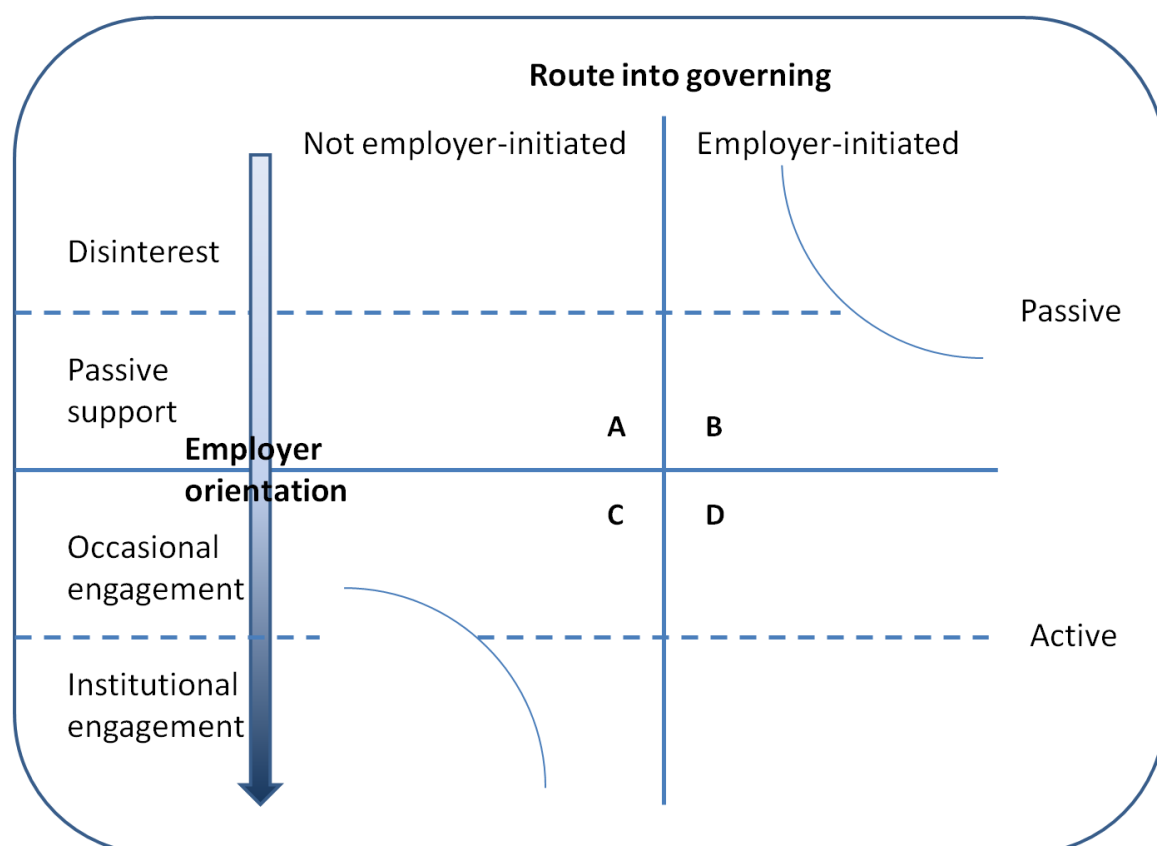
Illustrative examples

A. Governors who became involved with their school without the employer promoting the opportunity to them and without its active support

Julia works as an area sales manager for the British division of an international healthcare company. She is responsible for a sales team of seven who cover a large area of the south of England. As she put it, *"I'm on the road a lot"*. Julia's two children attend the primary school where she is a governor. *"I used to be chair of the PTA. The head invited me to be a governor, so I stopped being PTA chair but then also went back to work!"* She is on the Finance and Premises committee. *"It meets later, so that's good, and I think they wanted someone with a business and finance background which makes sense"*.

Julia's line manager and her team know she's a governor. She said:

> *"He's very good. He sees the value of it. When I did the FMSIS training and needed a day off he said, 'Just do it'. But it wasn't authorised by the company. They don't know I'm a governor or give me any allowance for doing it. His wife's a teacher perhaps that makes him more understanding."*

Julia knows of other work colleagues who are governors but their involvement *"is not recognised by the company"*. Her own involvement is not mentioned as part of her performance management.

She works from home one day a week. *"I use that to take part in the school because you need to know what's going on - but I am restricted"*. As regards her motivation, she was clear: *"Doing it is the only way of contributing to my children's education. It's my way of doing something good"*.

She finds governing: *"relatively bureaucratic".* She felt there are some similarities between her work and governing but *"it's public sector and there are distinct differences* (her company is owned by a private equity company). *I want things done now! But I've learned that's not always possible when you're a governor and that's been good for me".* Of the commitment, she says, *"It doesn't take a lot of time but then again I haven't got a lot"*.

B. Governors who get involved with their school because their employer promoted the opportunity but without its subsequent active support

Jason was a policy officer in a central government department and had a history of volunteering outside of the education sector. He first came across the opportunity of school governing due to a volunteering bulletin provided by his employer. The bulletin contained an article describing vacancies across Westminster schools, and how to access more information.

The information prompted Jason to apply via Westminster Council to be a Local Authority governor in a local primary school. An initial conversation with a headteacher confirmed the appointment, although the full process took around six months. There did not appear to be any central network or advice service provided by the employer but there was a willingness to provide time out of the office, provided it was possible to make up the time elsewhere or complete the assigned tasks notwithstanding the time out of the office. While his immediate team were aware of his governing role, there was no wider awareness throughout the organisation.

C. Governors who became involved with their school without their employer introducing the opportunity but with their employer's subsequent active support

As reflected in the curved corners of the framework, the interviewees for this paper did not identify specific individuals in this category. Most examples and case studies allow individuals some time-off and passive support for their governing duties, but stop short of active support – except where the individuals were also identified and recruited by an employer's scheme (category D). A CSR manager and the founder of the EGN identified that individuals would be present in category C although perhaps not in as great a number as the other categories. Such individuals are likely to become involved in school governing as a parent or as a member of a faith community, and subsequently become aware of and engage in the forums and support networks established by their employers.

D. Governors who get involved with their school due to the promotion of their employer with its subsequent active support

Ellie works for a global energy company in finance and project management roles. She had been based in the UK for a few years when she decided to explore opportunities for volunteering: "*I was keen to do something in the community in England, as I'm originally from France.*"

Her company's intranet was a natural resource to explore and it contained a wide range of options on different volunteering opportunities. School governing caught her eye: "*My mother and grandmother worked as teachers and I was excited by the idea of working with children. Because I travel a lot I wanted to do something outside of normal working hours and I felt it fitted well with my experience in finance and working across different areas.*"

Her company supported her in identifying an appropriate school, a Catholic Primary School in London, where she has been a governor for three years. Her manager is flexible and the support structure at work, which includes meetings for school governors and a governors forum, helped her get on top of her new responsibilities: "*It's really helpful knowing that there are other governors at work, and resources I can tap. For instance, when we were changing our catering contract at the school, I asked the other governors at work what their experiences of their own caterers had been.*"

Ellie explained that she was the only governor without children, past or present, at the school, and the company support network helped her get up to speed. At times, however, being slightly more distant from the school helped: "*There had been a long discussion about an extra reception class which the group was struggling with - since parent governors are parents first and governors second- by being external it was easier for me to steer the conversation and make it less emotional.*"

Since volunteering at the school, Ellie realised the role was larger than originally thought, but that her project management and crisis management skills also became helpful in ways she hadn't anticipated, for instance in handling the discovery of asbestos in the school.

Although the school does not have other links with Ellie's company, it is an area she hopes to look into: "*now that I have settled in, I plan to think about other ways my colleagues might be able to help.*" In summary, Ellie says: "*I really enjoy it - it's worthwhile and you can see the impact in the school.*"

Factors conditioning engagement

The engagement in school governing will be complicated by factors that condition engagement generally: motivation, opportunity, and capability. As James et al (in press) explain, the motivation to become engaged is likely to be complex and may relate to self interest; the interest of others or may be an external motivation where there is an expectation to be involved as a consequence of other roles and responsibilities. For example, the Head of External Affairs managing a large company's CSR activities may feel it important that he/she is a member of the governing body of an academy the company is sponsoring.

Opportunities to be school governors are not evenly spread and interviewed CSR managers raised concern at exciting their staff about the opportunity, only to realise it could take well over a year before an appropriate opportunity arose. Alternatively, an opportunity may naturally present itself. For example, an 'employee governor' in category A may have a ready made opportunity to become a governor at her/his child's school. For those in category B who wish to become governors the opportunity may not be so readily available. Their employing organisation may encourage involvement in school governing but there may be no appropriate vacancies near where the employee lives or works.

With regards to capability, not all occupations require the kinds of qualities and skills that are present and developed in governing bodies. We also acknowledge that schools can exist in various stages of change and development – e.g. start-up, special measures, improvement, coasting and perhaps decline, all of which will be influenced by the local context. Schools in varied settings and in different states of institutional change may benefit from governors with different capabilities and motivations.

For instance, a turn-around specialist or management consultant may be particularly helpful for a school needing to take dramatic measures to improve; an entrepreneur or local government official may be particularly helpful in the start-up phase of a new school. In other cases, governing bodies provide the crucial long-term vision and strategic consistency to support a school dealing with turnover among staff and senior leadership. In such circumstances, employee governors at an early stage in their careers, that are focused on self-development and likely to move offices or roles, may be less capable of providing the long-term consistency that is so valued on governing bodies.

From a certain perspective, only categories 'C' and 'D' would be accurately described as 'employee governors'. However, appreciating the range of the scale and the different activities that give rise to the category of employee governors affords a broader perspective that can help with exploring policy interventions. In this sense, policy is about driving change. It is helpful therefore to analyse dynamic interactions in this context, which we explore in the next two sections.

Institutional change

As Williams and Aguilera (2008) describe, there are many drivers of an organisation's CSR activity, including a nexus of social expectations and statutory levers. Earlier in this paper we suggested that long-running trends in approaches to staff development and institutional networks play a role. In this section, we give two institutional examples that have supported employers in shifting downwards along the vertical axis.

The Employee Governors Network

The Employee Governors Network (EGN) sheds light on the capacity of networks and communities to engender change among employers. The EGN grew out of a 14 year project to support a major manufacturer on a variety of education projects, with a particular focus on supporting and networking their community of governors. When the company reduced its staffing in the UK in the early 2000s, its internal community of governors was no longer large enough to be self-sustaining. The company decided to explore ways of extending the network to governors in other blue-chip firms.

FEdS works with some fifty member organisations, mostly large companies, providing regular expert education briefing, seminars and consultancy services. These established links afford a natural way to grow the EGN – by discussing the new project through existing contacts and in the side-lines of current projects. As of summer 2010, two organisations are fully embedded in the EGN with half a dozen currently pursuing the process to become involved, extending and strengthening the support they offer to their governors. FEdS's long-established relationships with employers have also provided new organisations to work with the School Governors One-Stop Shop (SGOSS) and help recruit governors into vacancies more generally. Although these are not organisations being culturally transformed in a dramatic sense by their relationship with EGN or FEdS, as they are already engaged and interested in education, these networks nonetheless provide an enabling mechanism to deepen their engagement and increase interest among other companies.

LawWorks and the ALLIES initiative

LawWorks is a London-based charity that provides free legal help to individuals and community groups who cannot afford to pay for it and who are unable to access legal aid. It also provides a wide variety of pro bono opportunities to lawyers through its activities. One dimension of its work is ALLIES (A Local Lawyer in Every School), which is a partnership of stakeholders in the legal profession and education sector. The aim of ALLIES is to bring together lawyers who are school governors, and encourage other lawyers to consider becoming governors. It was launched with the support of SGOSS in the East of England, in 2009 (LawWorks 2010).

These two examples show how communities and organisations can encourage and enable a gradual shift in employer attitudes. It is also possible that proactive individuals drive change within their organisations without the support of external institutions. For instance, in the case study of a global media company interviewed for this paper, a chair of governors was the instigator of a new and expanded group-wide CSR strategy and was subsequently employed to focus uniquely on implementing this strategy, which contained, perhaps unsurprisingly, a strong focus on supporting local education and volunteering in schools.

Dynamic between governor and employer

When an individual's route into governing is employer-initiated, this might simply be because the employer circulated information and the individual was prompted into exploring the opportunity further.

A more interesting dynamic arises when the employer has a pre-existing link with the school, which leads to a new governor becoming involved. For instance among our interviewees, a medium-sized property consultancy experienced this after beginning a reading scheme in a west London primary school. Two major investment banks also built partnerships at the governance level several years

after a local facilitator (an EBPO part-funded by the local authority) had begun engaging their staff in volunteering schemes at the schools.

A consistent message from these examples was that the governor link deepens and strengthens the relationship between the school and the employer. In practical terms, this might mean more supported activities or joint projects. For instance, the public profile of the banks results in a large number of requests for support from schools, which the banks rationalise to avoid over-committing. Schools with existing volunteers from the bank and the governor link are preferred choices.

However in a deeper sense, the governor link allows the relationship to exist on a strategic level as well: reducing the communication barriers between the two organisations; providing a channel through which new ideas might be explored; demonstrating a more profound level of commitment; and linking individual employee volunteering activities in the school that might otherwise be ad-hoc or lack coherence.

This dynamic can also occur in reverse – an existing governor may be able to use their relationship with their employer to draw down additional support for their school. It might be possible to engage the employer more easily from the inside – to support careers events, mentoring, enterprise projects or other activities in the school. This hope was expressed in the BITC report (BITC 2008:36).

From the employer's perspective, there is a risk to capacity. One major energy company set up a network of governors, inviting members of staff who were already governors to get involved. One concern she had was an increase in the number of internal requests for support to schools, when her team was already at capacity coordinating the existing school programmes. In practice, this did not occur. Indeed, one of the only instances where a governor successfully drew down more formal support for their school was only eventually successful when the governor in question took over management of the volunteering scheme.

Case studies tend to demonstrate broader volunteering schemes initiating the governor link, rather than the governor link proactively instigating such schemes for their school. The interviews suggested this might be because governors already contribute a great deal to their school and applying pressure to their workplace to generate additional activity might feel like an excessive request. Alternatively, governors may not have thought in detail about the possibility of building links between their school and the employer, which is not something given prominence in standard governing literature or standard agenda formats. Since this has the potential to add value for both school and employer, raising awareness of the possibilities is likely to be a worthwhile activity.

6. Concluding comments

This paper has explored the different ways of viewing and constructing employee governors. From the perspective of a school making use of an individual's skills base and from the perspective of an individual exploring self-development opportunities, the notion of employee governor is neither clear nor helpful, since it pays too little attention to the skills of the self-employed, the formerly-employed and the unemployed.

Instead, "employee governors" should be understood from the perspective of the individual governor as an employee and the perspective of their employer. In these instances, it refers to those governors in full- or part-time employment outside the school system. For instance, "Teacher governors" would not be considered "employee governors" although those working in colleges, universities or education policy may well do. This definition does include small enterprises, although

a sufficient team structure should exist such that the word 'employee' has relevance. By focusing the definition in this manner, we enable policy-makers, academics and interested institutions to engage with the term in a meaningful manner.

Given the compelling evidence on the value of good governance, see for example Balarin et al (2008) and (James et al, in press) and the evidence on skills gains for governors[1], there are good policy reasons to encourage more well-supported employee governors in the D quadrant. Better supported governors will perform better in the governance duties. Where their skills gains are better understood they can also be more appropriately deployed and appreciated by their employers.

A key insight of this paper is there is no automatic or direct trajectory from an organisation that does not support its governors to one that does. There is no 'single' solution for individuals in the different quadrants specified by the framework in Figure 1. Instead, a combination of attitudes and behaviours can be encouraged across an increasing number of individuals in the employing organisation (these are summarised in Table 1), invoking those most appropriate to the circumstances of each specific employer and thus most likely to succeed.

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[1] Education and Employers Taskforce (2010:27;35); City of London (2010) e.g. 71% of school governors felt their team working skills had improved and 67% their negotiation skills as a result of their work.

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