

London Global Convention on Corporate Governance and Sustainability

Special Session

Great Boards for Economic Growth and Resilience

Prof Colin Coulson-Thomas

Future board requirements and priorities will depend upon the time horizon and what we do now. They will be shaped by how we use the discretion we have as company directors.

The contexts in which companies operate; our economic, environmental and societal prospects, and our future lifestyles will likewise be determined by what we do now.

Many business, political and other leaders offer hope. Given current events, risks and trends, they seek to keep spirits up and stave off depression, disengagement and disorder.

Existing activities and operations are unsustainable, but they promise more. The growth they seek takes priority over whether their development models are resilient or sustainable.

Growing reliance upon digital technologies and the internet increases vulnerability to cyber and other risks and may reduce our collective resilience. They might not always be available, whether due to shortages of certain minerals, cable cutting or solar flares.

Offering hope gets applause. It makes people feel good, especially at the end of a four-day convention. However, rhetoric is not enough. To use an old proverb: Fine words butter no parsnips.

Board decisions have consequences. Externalities can be positive or negative. As directors we should look for evidence of the environmental and social impacts of corporate activities.

For example, board decisions might help or hinder the destruction of communities, eco-systems, and infrastructures wrought by Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine.

We should confront realities and recognise our individual and collective capacity to make a difference.

We are running down natural capital at an alarming rate. We need to do more with less and do it differently.

Economical and efficient use of scarce resources is now a critical priority. Across many sectors we need to improve productivity.

As President of the Institute of Management Services I find many people misunderstand what productivity is. They are also unaware of approaches and techniques to improve it.

Whatever our purpose and objectives, outside of the boardroom nothing may happen until our people have the skills and tools they need to implement our strategic direction.

We face shared challenges and existential threats, particularly climate change. Recent synthesis and stocktake reports suggest our collective responses to global warming are inadequate. They are “too little, too late”.

The overwhelming scientific evidence is that collectively we need to do more, and quickly. We need to confront realities and seize related opportunities.

The adjective ‘great’ in relation to boards should not refer to environmental harm that results from corporate operations and the board policies and priorities that underpin them.

Ideally, ‘great’ should relate to efforts to reduce and then eliminate negative externalities and innovation and actions to create substitutes and alternatives.

Opportunities abound to collaborate, reimagine, reinvent, relocate and transition to more resilient, sustainable and inclusive operations, lifestyles, communities and societies.

All our futures depend upon what we do now, individually and collectively. They hinge upon how we inspire, develop and equip our people. They will reflect our purposes, priorities, relationships and collaborations.

IOD’s relationship and collaboration with the University of Westminster has been particularly fruitful. We share a desire to influence aspirations, understanding and actions. We encourage responsible leadership.

We have a complementary interest in developing people at different stages of their lives and helping them to remain current throughout their journeys. Let’s work together and with them to create a better future.

As a member of the IOD India team and a University of Westminster alumnus I hope our collaboration will deepen and continue to be mutually beneficial. I would like to thank Vice Chancellor Peter Bonfield, Brendon Noble and their Westminster colleagues for being such welcoming and engaging hosts.

Brendon is a Professor of Re-generative Medicine. I hope you all feel re-generated, re-energised, and ready to face future challenges and seize opportunities. I do after four days of being with you.

Finally, I would like to thank Ashok, Manoj and IOD colleagues who work so hard on this and our other events. We are grateful to you, our partners and our delegates for making the 2023 London Global Convention possible and such a success. Thank you.