



Take on Board

Transcript – Jodie Willmer

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Jodie Willmer. And I'll be speaking with her about board portals and what you can get out of them how to choose one and why they might be a good or bad idea. So welcome to the take on board podcast, Jodie.

Jodie Willmer 0:16

Thank you, Helga. It's great to be here with you.

Helga Svendsen 0:19

So Jodie, tell us a bit about yourself. So those listening know who you are.

Jodie Willmer 0:25

Thank you. Well, I started getting involved in community activities and even groups at a young age. My parents showed me that there's ways to contribute to the community such as volunteering, and I guess that's been part of my DNA from many, many years ago. And so one of the my first board experiences was actually chairing a board. And I think over many years, I've worked in the not for profit sector in tourism. And now I work with my partner in East Gippsland and we work with small businesses and not for profits, and change makers. So I think over the years boards and involvement in some sort of governance related thing has sort of been part of my everyday life. And now it's great to be able to share some of the things that I've learned, but also the things that can make life easier for people who are giving up their time to contribute to our greater good of the community.

Helga Svendsen 1:18

Wow. Okay, so you're doing some fabulous and very important work. Two things. I just want to check now. You're in East Gippsland. We know that January has been a pretty tough time for East Gippsland. So just checking how are you and how's the community?

Jodie Willmer 1:34

Thank you. Thank you for asking, you know, we have safe and we're we're on the edge of where the major impacts were of the bush fires. And what has been quite amazing is meeting people and part of our friendship networks and family and our communities of how resilient people are, but also how tough it is. Lots of small businesses are impacted and obviously nature wildlife homes and tragically live. So I think it's going undertake a lot to rebuild. But we really are encouraged by the support from people all around the world. And even within our own friendship network people who've just reached out and offered places for us to stay and checking in with us, I really appreciate you asking that. And, you know, it's a great region. It's great part of Victoria and encourage everybody to come and visit and spend their money here and make a difference in those regional communities.

Helga Svendsen 2:25

I've had a couple of Gippslanders is on recently, Nicola Pero, who's on Destination Gippsland and Ruth McGowan recently as well. So yes, there's been a bit of a call out to come to land and it is such a beautiful part of the world. So I strongly encourage that as well. Now, you said in your introduction, Good that I think you said your first board you cheered. Tell us about that.

Jodie Willmer 2:47

The funny thing is, and you've probably experienced this yourself, Helga, that there is this thing called being voluntold. Volunteering voluntold. My first board role was actually when I was completely ill equipped. I was in a paid role as working for Tourism Organisation and working with our members on advocacy on legislative reform on membership benefits professional development. And I was asked by one of my managers or the CEO at the time, could I go and be involved in another group to help them get on their way, and to help actually move forward on some of the strategic goals that were of interest to the industry. And I really didn't know what I was in for. And I found out pretty soon that there was a whole body of knowledge that I didn't have. And I'd worked in organisations where I'd reported to a CEO who reported to a board but the board were these mysterious people who came and ate sandwiches like what did they actually do? So I did a course through Leadership Victoria, who I know is dear to your heart as well. And the course was really about being able to perform on a board and understand what's involved in the obligations and I realized this was over like a couple of months. This program and I realized that very first day that I was so out of my depth. And I ended up asking one of the course lecturers or speakers, if I could have a cup of coffee and have a bit of a one on one, fast track on some of the issues that I really needed support. And so it was a fascinating experience. And I learned a lot. And I know that now I can see the legacy of the work that may and many other people did for the industry. But I think it was a very big lesson about being clear that when you're on a board, you're not there to represent anyone, you're there to work in the best interests of that organization. And that was a pretty steep learning curve.

Helga Svendsen 4:39

Fantastic. It is often one of the things that people talk about that difference between being a representative and being there for that organization. So pretty incredible that you've got that so early on. Quite often people have been on boards for quite some time and don't necessarily have that clarity around that. So well done you and he did the other things. In Getting there, making sure you do some training and finding somebody to whether it's mentor or just have a coffee with to get the lowdown on what's going on. So there's some great lessons in there for people as well. So today, Jodie, we want to talk about board portals. Lots of people use them. Lots of people don't use them. Well, firstly, can you just tell us what is a board portal, that not everybody might be using it on their boards? What's a board portal?

Jodie Willmer 5:24

Okay, so I'll just use my own life terms. I don't have a technical background, but I'm a real fan of tools that make our life easier, and help us communicate more effectively and keep on track and be accountable. So a board portal, in essence, is an online tool that enables board members to plan ahead for the meetings to schedule the agendas and the content that goes in them to have a single source of truth. So instead of people having things in different share drives or Google drives or USBs or big box of paper, having it in an online format that is safe and secure, but can easily be accessed by the people who have the rights and the entitlements to access it. So a lot of people who we work with through our business, happy changemakers are people who are really, really busy. So they're obviously committed to giving back in some shape or form. That's why they're on a board, whether it's paid or unpaid. They're also usually running a business or they've got multiple obligations, and then they might have family as well. So board portals are a really fantastic tool to help people stay on track and focused. But also from a succession planning point of view. What I see happen a lot is that there's a lot of corporate knowledge and information that people have, and that when those people leave, then there's this big gap and that can be really devastating for the strategic future of an organization, especially when there's really important information that had they have understood whether it's about stakeholders or Whatever it is that that could have made a huge difference to the success of the organization and the work that it does in the community. So, board portals are a great way to have a single source of truth. And also, in a sense, democratize the information, make sure that people who need it can access it without having to ask or, you know, try and go jump through hoops to find it. Does that make sense? Absolutely.

Helga Svendsen 7:23

Both of the boards that I'm on at the moment, have a board portal. And I know when I joined one of those the Royal Women's Hospital now about four or five years ago, having moved from my previous board, YWCA Victoria to the Royal Women's it literally took me months to shred all of my board papers from YWCA. And when you shred they expand, so it was hard to fit them all in the recycling bin from week to week. So I was determined when I went onto the board of the Royal women's. I wasn't going to have paper papers. I was going to use the portal. I confess it's taken me a bit of

getting used to in using that portal but you're right Having it all there at your fingertips in one little iPad that you can just carry around everywhere has just been fabulous.

Jodie Willmer 8:07

Well, it makes such a difference really, like if we think about what what's the whole purpose of a meeting, that's to help people come together and make wise choices, and have discussions, you can only do that if you're prepared. And, again, I think when we think about how people live their lives, and want to still contribute, not all of us are based in the same place where we were on a board. Some of our clients have boards that are almost virtual, they don't have, you know, there might be a national organisation and they've got people in all parts of the country, or indeed, depending on their structure, they might have people internationally. So having an access point where people can all view and access information is really, really critical to making really good strategic decisions and being prepared. And I think from a security point of view, shredding paper, you know, is the wise and the appropriate thing to do but when I think back over time, how many confidential business cases or, you know, merger type things were posted out in, in big prospects to people's homes or their workplaces. And I sort of really shudder to think, gosh, imagine if that gets in the wrong hands. So I think in this digital age, we have to think of ways to make it easier and secure, to have information and enable people to really perform well and not be delayed by getting big chunks of emails with about 17 attachments, when I look at a lot of the boards who we work with, and one of the challenges they have is wading through all the information. So we really need to think about how we can prepare our board directors. Well, and part of that is giving not just quality papers, but also being able to access them easily.

Helga Svendsen 9:47

God there's there's so many different board portals around I mean, we've heard some fabulous reasons about why they're important. They're more secure, they're more convenient, single source of truth, all sorts of reasons why they're incredibly helpful for boards. There's a number of different products, I guess out there. And sometimes on a board, you don't have a choice about which which portal you use, you just turn up and that's what's being used. But for those that are thinking about either introducing a portal or maybe looking at different ones to what they're currently using, what should people be looking at in choosing a board portal?

Jodie Willmer 10:19

Well, I think the first step is to have a discussion with the board. And I think sometimes people are very well meaning and they go off in one direction, and they, they think they know what the board need. And then they go and procure it, then they say, Did he go, you've got to use it. So like anything, if we want to bring people on the change journey, we have to involve them in that conversation. So my first suggestion is to have a discussion at the board about how well it things working at the moment about the current way that our papers and information is distributed. And in

addition to that, what could we do differently to improve things? One distinction I'll make is because often when I speak with CEOs about this, they say up through our website, our board members can learn And again, when I do governance evaluations or speak and doing strategic planning, I hear a lot of people who say, I don't know my login. I don't know how to use it, I can't find anything. Or I've just got so many different logins and it's overwhelming or all of

Helga Svendsen 11:15

Those logins are in a document somewhere in a not very secure place. So anybody can log in.

Jodie Willmer 11:20

That's right. That's right. So you know, when we think about governance, and we think about risks, and we think about cyber security, these are issues that need to be addressed by the board themselves, not just inwardly looking at the organization and data governance. So the first distinction is what do we already have, and how well is it serving us? Again, I've a lot of people who use the website that have a like a login section often have lots and lots of folders that are very hard to navigate. The other thing to be looking out for if you're in the market for a board portal, is understanding the usability. So are people using devices like an iPad or a tablet? What are the demographics of the group? Are there any people on the board who have disabilities or some sort of needs that may need to be considered? And I mean, if we think about social justice and universal access, and I know that they're, they're really core values of yours as well, hell yeah, is that we should begin with the end in mind. So don't buy products that are not going to be user friendly for everybody on the board now or into the future. Again, a lot of people are not often thinking about that. So that's really important from an access and inclusion point of view. And again, if we want people to utilise something, we can't create barriers because it does just doesn't meet their needs.

Helga Svendsen 12:42

It was the exact question I was going to ask a moment ago is about which if any of the board portals or whether it's common that they read the papers to for me, increasingly, I am consuming things via podcast or audible books or whatever it may be, and it has only occurred to me recently. I would love to have the first rate of board papers read to me. And then I would go back and actually read them. So I'm wondering if you know, whether that's a reasonably common feature in some of these board portals.

Jodie Willmer 13:11

You know what I've never actually come across that the ones that I've looked at don't have that technology as far as I'm aware. But I think people who use are the screenwriters, so people with vision impairments, or have a preference to have, you know, it auditory could probably have a

different tool. So for example, if you think of the workflow, you've got a meeting coming up for one of your boards, the papers get loaded up as attachments into the different parts of the agenda. And then when you're ready to read them and consume them, then you could download those and use it another tool that would help bring them to life. But again, I think that's a fantastic point. So many papers and information relies on written word to communicate and one thing I've started doing most recently, is doing short videos like using the zoom for clients. If I'm trying to Talk about complex things, or just make it more personal. So again, I think we will find an evolution in the way that people create board papers in the future. And I wouldn't be surprised if people don't start using video with an opportunity for people to have transcripts as the sort of written record of those reports as a way to consume and communicate information.

Helga Svendsen 14:22

There's some tips in there about choosing what sort of portal to look at, what are some of the ones that you've looked at?

Jodie Willmer 14:28

Well, before we launch into that, maybe I'll just give a little overview of some of the different features of different portals as sort of a generic, and then we can talk about some of the specific so I've talked about board papers as one of the benefits of using a board portal. So if you think about your meetings throughout the year, one of the benefits is you can load up the agendas of all of those meetings, get them sort of pre populated if you will, in advance and have them ready to go and as the papers are ready, you can add them as attachments. And the other thing I love that board portals is that In a board meeting, you might have a discussion that says, okay, in September, we're going to review our risk management plan, let's make sure that we get that on the agenda. Well, the board support person or the CEO, or company secretary, or whoever's got the fingers on the keyboard can go into that September meeting and actually put that in as an agenda item. So I love that because it's not just some, you know, Wish List of we have to do that sometime. You can then have that as a task. And you can allocate that to a person with an accountability of who's doing it, what's the task, and when's that going to happen, and importantly, to know, in advance so that you can set reminders. Now all the board portals that I've looked at have features that you can create these as tasks, and the person gets an email ping to them to say you've been allocated a task. And so therefore, you can be clear on what you need to do and when you need to do it. And what I love about these portals as well is that instead of having this sort of vague notion of Okay, last meeting we talked about someone was going to follow up with this topic, then we might get to the meeting and a lot of time is spent saying, Well, have you done or have you not? It's unproductive use of time. But with the board portal, the person who was allocated the task has to take responsibility and update the progress of that task. Yes, I've completed that. And most of the portals have pretty user friendly ways of doing that embedded in emails, when you get a reminder as opposed to having to log into the tools. So that's something to just be aware of, as well. So you can use it as a task management tool for for the actions of the meetings, and they in fact, become part of the minutes of the meeting. So it's a hugely efficient way to take the minutes as well.

Helga Svendsen 16:45

I think I need a board portal just for running my life. That's how

Jodie Willmer 16:49

I know that's right. So one of the other great features is contacts. Now again, if we think about board members, often this contact list with people's names and details, you know, maybe have I come to be on the board if they've been a long term member or of the organisation or whatever. But again, there's often nuances that people don't really record anywhere. And again, I'm a big fan of only collecting relevant data and using it for the right purposes. But for example, you know, if you have a group of board members who meet and some people have dietary requirements, or you know, different cultural needs or celebrations, you can actually record that in the context there, so that you can be prepared and you can make sure that people are included in an appropriate way. And you can also keep track of when they joined the board or when they're uncertain subcommittees, again, you know, I see a lot of people waste a lot of time trying to troll back in their memory or look on their calendar to say, oh, When was I appointed? And how long have I been doing this? So again, single source of truth, you can record all of this senior board portal. And the other last feature that I really love is being able to sit and schedule the meetings in advance and have them People's calendars. So you don't have to then have Outlook or Google Calendar. And then you know, you don't know who's got access to that to change the meeting dates, or any details, and you can have it just in one tool. So there's sort of the top benefits. The final benefit of using a board portal is housing documents that are sort of corporate documents, such as the Constitution, bylaws, if you have that as well, and any particular governance policies and operational policies that are relevant for the board to have oversight on. So again, you know, often people get really overwhelmed about where all this information is. And if you're dealing with email, you have to scroll back through all the attachments. So again, board members can just look in there and say, Oh, I can just have a look at the latest version of our constitution and know that I can find it easily and I don't have to ask some

Helga Svendsen 18:50

Credibly useful having all of that at your fingertips and as you say, knowing it's the most up to date copy of each of those documents. And I was thinking as you were talking about the Contact section as well, and having the dates and what everybody else does. It's also really useful for succession planning, and for managing conflicts of interest and all of those sorts of things as well to just know where everybody's at.

Jodie Willmer 19:12

Absolutely. And you can use these board portals to record and have your register conflicts of interest as well, and update them as she required over time. And then again, you know, it makes it really

useful to have it all in one spot. So I think just in summary, there's a distinction between using a shared drive like Google Drive or OneDrive, which is really just document storage. But it doesn't have those other features. And then there's a difference between using a board portal and having a website that has a board members access only login. So they're three completely different things that serve different purposes. Wow. Okay, so

Helga Svendsen 19:52

What else do people need to know is are we moving to options now, what are some of the options for people,

Jodie Willmer 19:57

I looked at three different products that are in the marketplace. and compared them. And I don't have a specific sort of affiliation with any of these. I've worked with the the owner of Tidy HQ, which is one of the products. I've spoken at the Better Boards conference, which is affiliated with Our Cat Herder. And the other one is Board Effect. And they're a big player in the marketplace too. So they're all very different products. And I think and there are heaps of others out there. So I'm not pushing or advocating for a particular product. I think the key is working out what's needed for the board. And often I find that board members who are familiar and confident with one particular portal will come to a new board and say, Hey, we should use this too. And that's that's okay. But there is a big difference in the price ranges between sideboard affect and and Tidy HQ and Our Cat Herder? So I think boards also need to allocate a budget for these things. And when they're looking to reduce costs, not trying and sort of slashed the budget of subscriptions to things like this. Thinking that that's going to save them money? Because again, apart from accessing the information when they need it in a timely manner 24 / 7 in a secure way, but also how much extra time and effort does it take for somebody to manually do these things and digitally upload things into different places? How much time does it take to follow up on requests? How much time does it take to do the minutes of meetings, which can be done more effectively in the board portals as sort of a one stop shop? So I think it's a false economy when people say, you know, all that costly program of, you know, X number of dollars per month, we could save that. Well, actually, I think it's now with modern boards. It's a tool of the trade. I don't think we should be having conversations that are about reducing costs on the things that are really important that turn the curve in the board making really good decisions.

Helga Svendsen 21:50

Absolutely. And you know, before when you talked about making sure you get input from the board members about what are their needs and requirements. I think also from the company secretary or boards Secretary, because I have no doubt they'll have some views about what is the most efficient and effective way of distributing that information and getting the input that they need as well.

Jodie Willmer 22:09

Yeah, absolutely. With any sort of change, there's always apprehension. So I think it's important to acknowledge that in those discussions, and also explain the benefits, I mean, there are some disadvantages as well. So certainly from a cyber security point of view, you know, if people don't have secure logins, and people were, you know, hacked into it, of course, then that's a big risk, but that can be managed. And I think the other thing is that sometimes people can be super confident about using portals and technology and then there's some people who are not super confident, and we don't want to leave those people behind. So my best suggestion is that once the board and the company Secretary board support person CEO, have had a discussion about what their needs are, it's important to write a list of the non negotiables or the requirements and then go out there and find the appropriate solution. And also have an onboarding process. Because there's nothing worse than suddenly one day turning up to a meeting and saying, oh, here you go, here's a login and, you know, go for it. So what I've done with a number of clients is created short videos on how to log on how to find certain things within the board portal, when they have to do certain tasks, showing them how to do that, too. I'm a big fan of doing that via video. And if you then have the resources to have that as a work instruction of a checklist or something like that, it just grounds people with and empower them with information to give them confidence to be able to use tools. Another way to think about it could be also buddying up board members. So people who may be a bit more it savvy or confident and buddying up with other people who aren't. And this is not about demographics of age, like I've worked with very, very young board members, who were people making the assumption that they are all over this, you know, ICT and social media. And I think that's a big myth. We can't make us About people, we have to ask what their needs are, and then have, how can we help support them to make them successful in using it. So maybe if I just talk about a couple of the the key focuses of the different products. So our cat huto is an Australian product, and it has a governance Document Library. It's got meetings, it's got tasks, and it's got committees as primary functions. So they're super important elements of every board from a governance perspective. And you can create a simple agenda that then creates invites to the meeting that can also then manage the tasks. So that's a very useful tool. I've used that myself just as a trial. And it is very user friendly and very mobile responsive. One of the things that I think could be improved about it is the sort of look and feel of it, but it's certainly a really robust tool, and it's very easy to use. And I think again, you know, when we want to set people up for success, we don't want too many barriers. One of the other products to compare is time. HQ which is again, another Australian product, they've got a governance Document Library meetings, tasks and committees. They also have memberships and events, which are different features again. So tidy HQ is more designed for organizations like clubs associations who want a full administrative tool. They also have a finance function. So if you think of it, at the moment, most people in their businesses on organizations use a software product for finance, like zero or QuickBooks. Tidy HQ is like a board portal plus plus plus. So it's got some other features. So for some boards, that's irrelevant. They don't want to events, they don't want ticketing, they don't want memberships. And they don't want the finance function. So I guess it depends on what your needs are. And then lastly, board effect. Now that's probably I guess, the top tier of product. It has a governance Document Library, which is very extensive. It's got meetings, which you would hope for fingerboard portal. asks, it's got committees and you can have multiple boards, which is really again, another level of sophistication. For organizations that might have subsidiaries, they might be have a different corporate structure, you might have a trust. And

then you might have another part of the organization, which is the board for a company limited by guarantee. So that's got another level of sophistication. I guess the downside to it is the cost, but also the meetings and the tasks that add on, you have to pay extra for those. So I think it would be great to see those as features that are built in as opposed to having to purchase those are separate. But you know, it's a really robust tool. And it is very, very popular, particularly amongst the corporate and large organizations.

Helga Svendsen 26:43

Fantastic. Gosh, this has been such a fabulous conversation and I think incredibly useful for the take on board community. You know, we've talked about why you might use board portals how that might happen. Some of the features some of the products incredible useful. What are the main things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Unknown Speaker 27:04

Well, the first thing is to know to have some awareness that board portals can actually help you make great decisions. And rather than seeing it perhaps as a cost or another thing you've got to learn, embrace it as a way to be across information in a secure way, and making decisions and reducing the administration out of out of your meetings, and do things more efficiently. And I think the other takeaway is, those board portals can't just live on their own and expect people to be able to use them with confidence. So think about the onboarding, and the training process. And also any checklists or other resources that can help create some systems about the way you do things as repeatable tasks and with a spirit of continuous improvement. So thinking about each time, and then reviewing how things are done, and how things can be improved and have that as a body of knowledge and look Culture of the way that the board works, I think a really important attributes. And

Helga Svendsen 28:05

Is there a resorts you would like to share with the take on board community?

Jodie Willmer 28:08

Absolutely. Well, I've done some comparisons of the board portals, which I'm happy to share. But also I have created a workflow of whether you're using a board portal or just a preparation for a meeting. And this really works back from the board meeting itself back to the preparation for the agenda, the papers, and then the actual meeting itself. And then what happens after the meeting, and who needs to do what in the sequence and the timing. So I've met this out for a couple of clients. And I found that to be useful. So I'd be happy to share that with the take on board community as well.

Helga Svendsen 28:42

I think that would be incredibly useful. Fantastic. So I'll make sure we put links to both of those things in the show notes for people to access. Jodie, it has been fabulous to tap into your wisdom about all things board portals today, and you know all things, just somebody ideas and tips you've got about efficiency and effectiveness for boards has been just fabulous. Thank you so much for being part of take on board today.

Jodie Willmer 29:08

Thank you so much. It was great to be here.