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An alternative approach to oversight: the case of the supervisory committee in Irish credit unions

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Abstract

The credit union supervisory committee, as a distinct model of organisational oversight, is very much invisible within corporate governance research. The focus is almost entirely on its corporate counterpart, the audit committee. This means that best practice is based almost entirely on audit committee experience, even though the audit committee model has not always prevented large-scale corporate losses. Audit committee and corporate and co-operative governance literature may benefit from the perspective of alternative models, such as that of the credit union supervisory committee.

This paper explores the role of the supervisory committee in credit union governance and the structure of supervision, oversight and regulation within the Irish credit union movement. It reports the findings of a survey of credit union supervisory committees and qualitative interviews with key players in credit union supervision and development in Ireland, including the regulators of the credit union movement. A profile of the composition, activities and skills levels of supervisory committees is examined. The findings show that it is the high level of activity of the supervisory committee and its clear-cut independence that set it apart from other organisational oversight models.

Key words

Audit Committees, Credit Unions, Governance, Regulating Financial Services, Supervisory Committees.

Introduction

The credit union supervisory committee, as a model of organisational oversight, is very much invisible within corporate governance research, where the focus is almost entirely on its corporate counterpart, the audit committee. Thus, best practice is based almost entirely on audit committee experience. This is despite the existence of over 40,000 successful credit unions worldwide, safeguarding US$600 billion in member savings under the supervision of credit union supervisory committees.

Given the changing nature of regulation of credit unions in Ireland, the role and value of the supervisory committee is coming under increased scrutiny, particularly as a result of its increased importance under the 1997 Credit Union Act. In the Republic of Ireland (RoI) alone, there are over 400 credit unions with ?7 billion in member savings, and all credit unions are required by legislation to elect from their membership a supervisory committee charged with *'the general duty of overseeing the performance by the directors of their functions'* (Credit Union Act 1997, S.58 (1)). The Irish Financial Services Regulatory Authority (IFSRA)1 has expressed the view that credit union supervisory committees should develop along the lines of the audit committee model. With the abundance of research and best practice guidelines on audit committees, compared with little or no research on supervisory committees, this is hardly surprising. Therefore, the authors are of the view that it is important to examine the value of the supervisory committee model before any drastic changes are made to its structure and practices.

This paper explores the role of the supervisory committee in credit union governance and presents a comparison with the audit committee model. It reports the findings of a survey of credit union supervisory committees and qualitative interviews with key players in credit union supervision in Ireland. In order to compare the audit committee and supervisory committee models, the authors draw on past audit committee research. It is hoped that this paper will be a useful starting point for further research into the Supervisory Committee model of organisational oversight while also presenting an alternative model to that of the audit committee in corporate governance literature.

The corporate audit committee

The corporate audit committee is an internal control or monitoring body in an organisation. According to Collier (1997:74), they have 'responsibility for

reviewing the financial statements and the accounting principles and practices underlying them, liaising with the external and internal auditors, and reviewing the effectiveness of internal controls'. The audit committee is now recognised has having a central role to play in good corporate governance. This has led many of the corporate governance guidelines and codes such as those produced by Cadbury (1992), Higgs (2003) and Smith (2003) to focus on strengthening the role of the audit committee.

The Irish Companies (Auditing and Accounting) Bill (2003) requires all public companies (whether listed or not) and all large private companies to have an audit committee (Devlin, 2003:25). Much of the corporate governance literature also focuses on audit committees. The following quotes give a flavour of some of the views in the literature:

'One of the many lessons from the still unfolding Enron scandal is the critical role of audits and the trouble that can befall an organisation when its audit committee is not doing its job'. Reed (2002, p40)

'Recent events in the U.S. economy have organisations scrambling to ensure they have all the right pieces in place to avert financial disaster. Many are discovering that one of the most important is a strong audit committee'. Verschoor (2002, p26)

The audit committee model, however, has not prevented recent corporate losses (such as those in Barings, Enron, AIB/First Maryland). Some observers (Sweeney 2002; Spira 1999; Collier 1997) refer in particular to its lack of independence as a key factor in the weaknesses of this committee. Most literature and corporate governance reports grapple with the notion of independence and rarely make clear recommendations in this regard. On one hand, independence is seen as essential to effective oversight (Verschoor 2002; Spollen 1997), while on the other, it is viewed as potentially damaging, where separation between the board and audit committee might result in difficult tensions within the organisation (Smith 2003).

The 1992 Cadbury Committee, in reporting on corporate governance, defined audit committee independence as being 'freedom from company connection or relationship which might interfere with the exercise of independent judgement' (Spira 1999:263). In corporate companies, the audit committee operates as a sub-committee of the board and is comprised of non-executive directors. In this respect, the board can exercise some control over the audit committee and can decide who its members are. The members of the audit committee, as non-executive directors, can also participate in corporate decision-making. It is this 'blurred distinction' (Smith 2002:25) between roles that often causes confusion and lack of trust among shareholders and undermines responsibilities.

Another weakness raised is the level of relative inactivity of many audit committees, where they only meet four times per annum, which as Healy and Palepu (2002) suggest, translates into only a few hours in the year. Our findings later show that credit union supervisory committees meet regularly, with many meeting on a weekly basis.

Healy and Palepu (2002) also criticise audit committee members for their often modest background in finance and accounting. DeZoort (1997), in a review of relevant literature, states that:

'Findings in this area indicate that, while expertise and experience in oversight areas are perceived as critical components of overall committee effectiveness, they are lacking for many audit committee members.' DeZoort (1997, p213)

Sweeney (2002,) confirms the earlier findings by DeZoort (1997).

'Audit committee ineptitude, in particular, is generally acknowledged to be among the principal reasons why shareholders suffered billions of dollars in losses over the last year or so'. (Sweeney,2002, p16)

Smith (2003) states that at least one member of the audit committee must have

'significant, recent and relevant financial experience…It is highly desirable for this member to have a professional qualification from one of the professional accountancy bodies'. (Smith, 2003, p9)

Smith goes on to state that there should be an induction programme for new committee members and that training should be provided to all audit committee members on an on-going and timely basis. These sentiments are echoed in the Higgs Report (2003). So while active, experienced and trained audit committees are now seen as an essential element of good governance in corporate companies, the jury is largely still out with regard to the operational definition of independence.

The credit union supervisory committee

The supervisory committee in a credit union has a similar function to that of an audit committee. In Irish credit unions, it is a statutory committee, established by the Credit Union Act (Republic of Ireland) 1997. It is elected from among the members of the credit union, by the members of the credit union, and is responsible to the credit union membership. The committee consists of three or five members, all of whom work in a voluntary capacity and represent the interests of the general membership. The primary function of the committee is to oversee the performance of the credit union directors. The Supervisory Committee normally attends all board meetings but does not participate in decision-making. Thus, its independence from the board is secured.

Supervisory committees came into being at an early stage in credit union development, as early as the Raiffeisen movement of the late 1800s[i]. Possibly one of the reasons Irish credit unions adopted the idea of a supervisory committee was because the agricultural credit societies and village banks failed in the early 1900s partly as a result of 'inadequate control procedures' (Quinn, 1999:13). It seems credit unions were intent not to repeat the same mistakes.

The supervisory committee, as an independent entity, seems to be the most popular model of organisational oversight used in credit union movements[ii]. As indicated earlier, the credit union supervisory committee model does not appear to have played any role in the development of corporate governance theory or practice. Even within credit union circles, there is little focus on supervisory committees. However, within the corporate sector, audit committees are now seen as a key ingredient in a good corporate governance structure.

Credit union governance structure

Individual credit union

The governance structure in a credit union is comprised of four main elements: the membership at the AGM, the board of directors, the supervisory committee and the salaried management. As Figure 1 below depicts, the supervisory committee performs the pure oversight role in the credit union.

The key issue in governance is that in most organisations, including credit unions, there is a degree of separation between those who own the organisation and those who manage the organisation[iii]. Thus, there must be an oversight function of some sort in organisations to ensure that management always acts in the interests of the owners. In corporate companies, this role is performed by the non-executive directors and the audit committee. In credit unions, the board of directors perform an executive, and to a lesser extent, an oversight function. The supervisory committee in the credit union performs a pure oversight role.

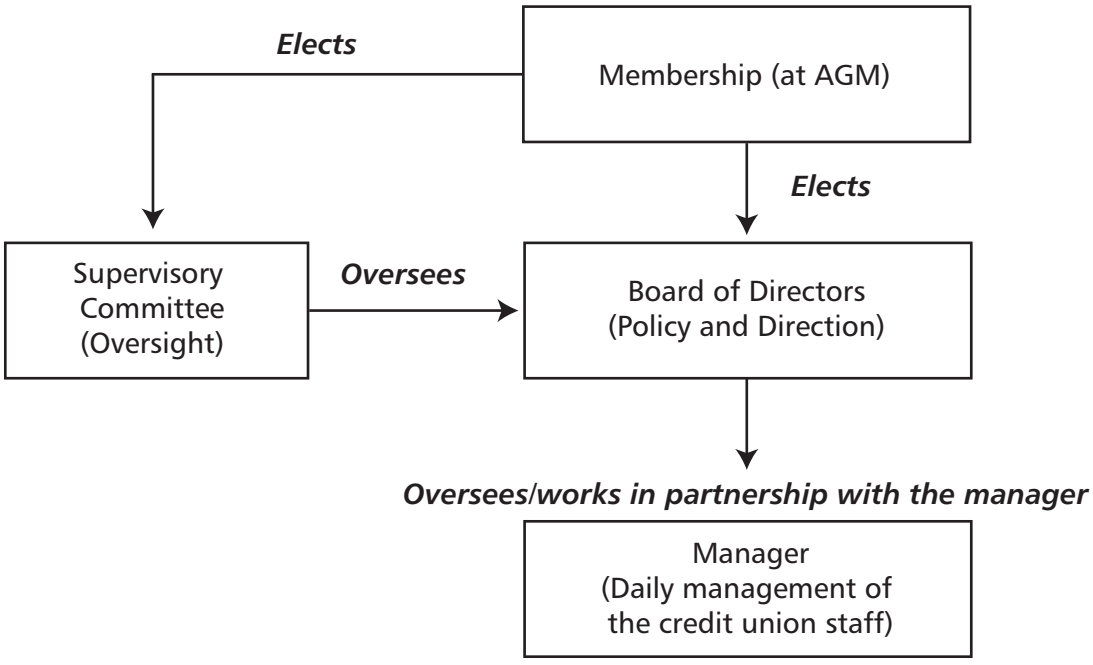
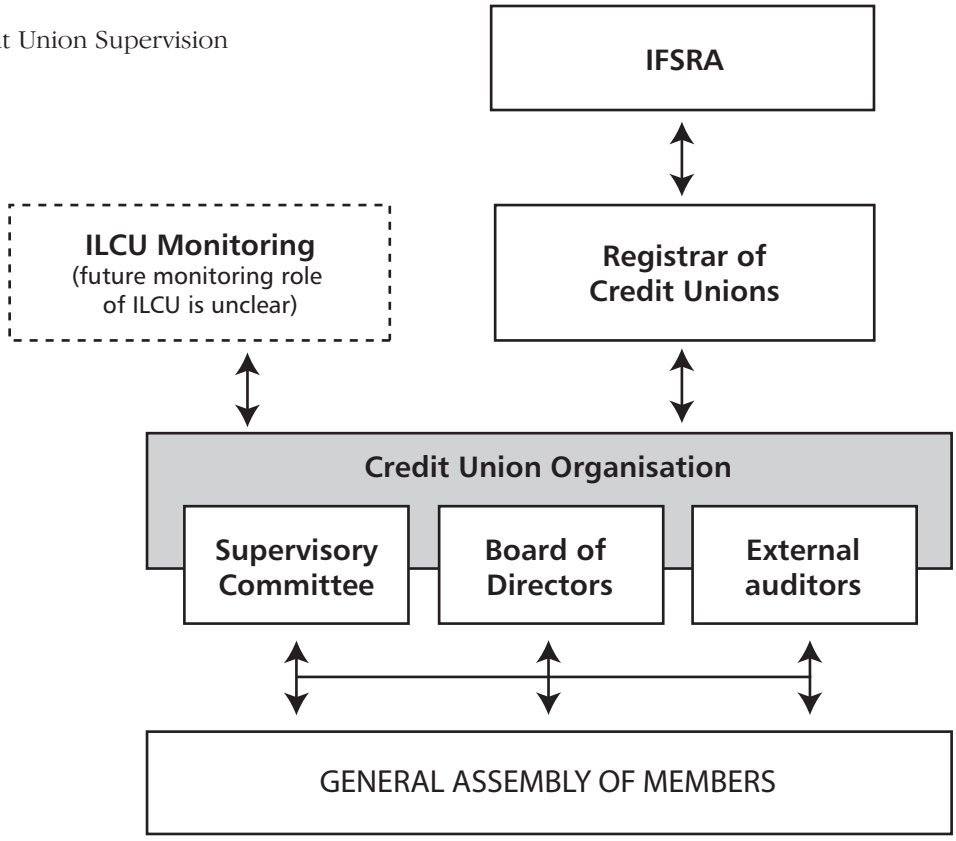


Figure 1 Corporate Governance Structure in Credit Unions. Adapted from Branch & Baker, 2001

Figure 2 Credit Union Supervision



The role of the supervisory committee within the overall regulation of credit unions is as an internal regulator.

Credit union movement

There is a number of layers of supervision and oversight in the credit union movement. The ultimate supervisory authority is IFSRA, which, as a result of intense lobbying by the Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU)[iv], has a dedicated Registrar of Credit Unions to regulate credit unions. The ILCU also acts as a monitoring body. It employs a number of field officers who visit credit unions and monitor their books and operations. (The precise monitoring role the ILCU will play into the future is unclear at the present time, as it may be taken over by IFSRA.)

The regulatory structure is presented diagrammatically in Figure 2.

The research

The research conducted consisted of both a quantitative and qualitative research methodology. The quantitative element comprised of a survey with 125 supervisory committee members from 39 Irish credit unions. These surveys were administered face to face and focused on the composition of the committee. The authors draw a comparison with the audit committee model in terms of compositional factors. The qualitative element of the study involved interviews with a number of key witnesses who are involved in credit union supervision, development and regulation. These interviews focus on the key issues of the role of the supervisory committee, skills required by supervisors and on whether the committee should remain fully independent or develop along the lines of the audit committee model.

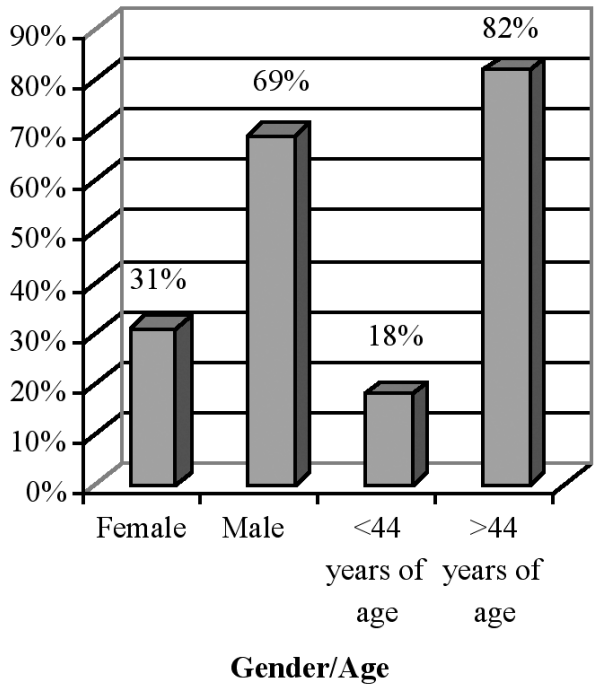
Findings – Survey

A profile of the individual supervisor in terms of age and gender is first presented. This is then followed by aggregated data on the committee as whole, in terms of composition.

General profile of the individual supervisor

The research presents an overall profile of the individual who volunteers their time to the credit union as a supervisor. The most striking characteristic is that supervisors tend to be male and over 44 years of age (See Figure 3). The numerical dominance of males on supervisory committees was also found by McKillop et al (2002).

Figure 3 Profile of individual supervisor



Thus, it could be suggested that for regeneration and for representational purposes, supervisory committees should attempt to have greater balance in their membership.

Committee composition

In order to determine the committee composition, we aggregated the data and examined each supervisory committee. The results are present in Table 1. While the Table only focus on the supervisory committee, we compare the results with audit committee research and suggested best practice. Table 1 indicates that credit union supervisory committees are numerically dominated by male members. As the authors are not aware of any gender research on corporate audit committees, it was not possible to make a comparison between the supervisory committee and the audit committee on this factor.

In terms of length of service on the committee, 82% of committees have one or more members in at least their second term of service. This suggests a strong level of experience on these committees. 18% of committees are in their first term. It could be suggested that these committees are inexperienced and have the disadvantage that they lack the guidance of more experienced members. PricewaterhouseCoopers (2000) point out that committees must consider both continuity and the desirability of fresh perspectives for their development. They state that 'rapid turnover can be detrimental to the committee's effectiveness' since members need time to gain experience and the benefit of a historical perspective.

Eighty percent of the surveyed supervisory committees consist of members with previous credit union experience in some other capacity, as board member, sub-committee member, or staff member. This is a positive finding given that a good understanding of the business is essential to the effective operation of a supervisory committee. It is also interesting to note that 90% of committees have at least one member with relevant supervisory committee training. It is interesting to compare this with training provided for audit committees.

The American Society of Corporate Secretaries (ASCS), in its 1998 survey on audit committee effectiveness, found that only 6% of 550 public companies provide formal training to their audit committee members. The ILCU runs specific courses for supervisory committee members. 64% of supervisory committees surveyed have at least one member with accounting experience and/or qualifications. Smith (2003) recommends that there should be at least one member who is financially literate on the corporate audit committee. The aforementioned audit committee survey carried out by the ASCS found that 74% of respondents had at least one audit committee member who had a finance or accounting background (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2000). The credit union supervisory committee, at 64%, compares less favourably.

The research found that all the supervisory committee members work on a voluntary basis. This differs significantly from the corporate audit committee which is remunerated for its time. Supervisory committee members must be members of the credit union and must not hold a directorship or be an employee of the credit union. This helps to ensure independence and objective judgement. This differs from the audit committee where directors (independent and not) can be members of the audit committee. All the supervisory committees studied were elected by the membership of the credit union and are an independent entity from the board of directors. This differs from the audit committee selection methods. The Public Company Governance Survey (1999-2000) carried out by the National Association of Corporate Directors found that in 41% of companies the audit committee members are chosen by the full board and in 35% are chosen by the CEO and/or the board chair (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2000).

Supervisory Committee Composition	
Gender	
• All/majority male	78%
• All/majority female	22%
Length of Service	
• All members in their 1st term (3 years and less)	18%
• At least one or more members in their second term or more	82%
Previous CU experience	
• No previous credit union experience on the committee	20%
• At least one or more members with previous credit union experience	80%
Participation in relevant supervisory committee training	
• No supervisory committee training received by the committee	10%
• At least one or more members who have participated in supervisory committee training	90%
Formal accounting experience and/or qualifications	
• No formal accounting experience and/or qualifications	36%
• At least one or more members on the committee with accounting experience and/or qualifications	64%
Remuneration	
• All supervisory committee members work on a voluntary basis	100%
Independence of the committee	
• All members of the supervisory committee are elected by the membership (shareholders) of the credit union.	100%
• There are no credit union directors, employees or other credit union committee members on the supervisory committee	100%

Table 1, Compositional Profile of Supervisory Committees

Activity level of the committee

Supervisory committees meet approximately 40 times or more in the year to carry out on-going spot checks on the general operations of the credit union. In addition to these meetings, supervisory committees are required to meet four times a year with the board, in the absence of salaried management, to report on the performance of the board. In contrast, the corporate audit committees normally meet on a quarterly basis. They also attend all monthly board meetings. It might be argued that twelve board meetings, versus four audit committee meetings, might well leave non-executive directors with a greater sense of their duties on the board rather than their responsibilities as audit committee members.

Unlike corporate audit committees, supervisory committees are observers at an operational as well as a strategic level in credit unions. This ensures that they are close to the everyday, operational activities of the credit union, are familiar with the staff members and can build positive relationships with management. They also attend all board meetings as observers and can easily be familiar with decisions made and the rationale behind them, while retaining the committee's independence. The on-going interaction at both of these levels of the organisation may enable supervisory committees to recognise and deal with a potential difficulty or issue early and before they can develop into more serious problems.

In reporting to the board, the supervisory committee can make recommendations to the board for improving performance. While these are not binding, they are also a useful measure of committee activity. Figure 4 shows the level of activity of supervisory committees in terms of recommendation-making.

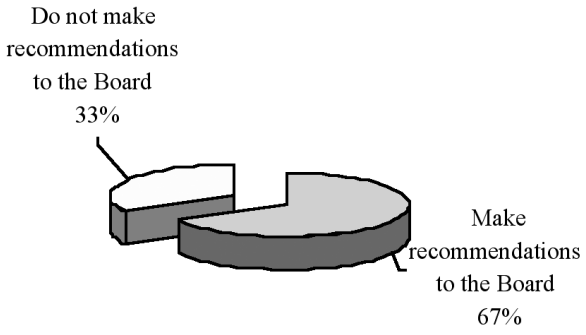


Figure 4, Supervisory committee recommendation-making to the board

The majority (67%) of the studied supervisory committees make recommendations to the board. However, a significant 33% claim not to make recommendations. Why do some committees make recommendations and others do not? To attempt to answer this, we cross-tabulated supervisory committee composition with the tendency to make recommendations to the board. The results of these cross-tabulations are presented in Table 2.

While none of the above results are significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, there would appear to be a slightly greater tendency for those committees which are male dominated, those with longer serving members and those with previous credit union experience to be more active in making recommendations to the board.

Supervisory Committee Composition	Committees which make recommend ations to the board of directors	Chi Square Result P< 0.05
Gender • All/majority male • All/majority female	21 (72%) 4 (44%)	.122
Length of service on committee • All members in their first term (3 yrs or less) • At least one or more members in their second term or more	3 (43%) 23 (72%)	.140
Participation in supervisory committee training • None of the members have participated in supervisory committee training • At least one or more members have participated in supervisory committee training	2 (50%) 24 (69%)	.455
Previous credit union experience • No previous credit union experience on the committee • At least one or more members with previous credit union experience	4 (50%) 22 (71%)	.262
Formal accounting experience and/or qualifications • No accounting experience and/or qualifications • At least one or more members with accounting experience and/or qualifications	9 (64%) 17 (68%)	.813

Table 2, Cross-tabulations of supervisory committee composition and recommendation-making to the board

It is important to remember that the sample size was small, being only 39 credit unions. An extension of the sample size in future research may alter the statistical significance of the findings.

The findings of the survey indicate that the credit union supervisory committee composition and structure compares favourably with the best practice guideline set out for audit committees. In some cases the supervisory committee outperforms the audit committee, particular in terms of its level of activity, independence and participation in specific training. However, it compares less favourably in terms of financial expertise. The next section of this paper will examine the views of a number of key witnesses from the credit union movement, including the financial regulatory body (IFSRA).

Findings – Key witness interviews

Ten key witnesses were interviewed from the following organisations: ILCU, Credit Union Development Association (CUDA), IFSRA, former Registrar of Friendly Societies, Credit Union Supervisors' Forum as well as other individuals who are deeply involved in the work of supervisory committees.

The interviews covered a number of areas, including the role and perceived skills of supervisory committees and the independence of the supervisory committee.

Role of the supervisory committee

Many of the key witnesses felt that there was often confusion in the minds of both the supervisory committee and the board of directors about their respective roles. The general agreement was that the supervisory committee must confine its role to oversight only. A quote from one of the key witnesses summarises this point:

> *"Supervisory committees do not have any role in the running of the credit union, they cannot influence board decision making, cannot voice an opinion, but can make a point of order/or a point of information…supervisory committees must know how far they can go and must not go beyond this point."*

One other key witness stated that

> *"on occasions, supervisors become involved in policy making and that this causes tension and problems in the credit union".*

Another key witness indicated that the supervisory committee and the board often only become aware of supervisors' roles when there is a difficulty in the credit union –"from this comes more understanding and possibly respect from the board about the role of the supervisory committee". If this is the case, it is unfortunate that the credit union has to experience some turbulence before the role of the supervisory committee is fully recognised.

Skills required

The key witnesses were in general agreement about the important skills required on a supervisory committee. These are listed as follows in the general order of importance:

1. Common Sense
2. Human resources or people skills
3. Financial skills
4. Independence, sound judgement and the ability to ask constructive questions

5. A clear understanding of roles
6. The ability to view the overall picture and not simply focus on the routine aspect of their work

Almost all key witnesses felt that supervisors need common sense primarily, and then specialised knowledge. A quote from one key witness summarises that view:

> *"A supervisory committee can have all the financial skills and qualifications but if it does not have common sense and people skills then this committee will not be effective."*

However, in saying that, many of the key witnesses highlighted that a major shortcoming in many supervisory committees is a lack of financial knowledge. It was also suggested by some of the key witnesses that supervisory committees may have a tendency to over-focus on certain elements of their work while ignoring other areas. Spollen (1997) alludes to this tendency when he says that sometimes the internal control function in a company tends to over focus on the areas known best and on simpler routine tasks while ignoring the more complex areas of the organisation. One key witness summarises this point as follows:

> *"Some supervisors will put all their effort into balancing the bank reconciliation down to the last cent. When the organisation has assets of several million, supervisors must be able keep their work in context and see the overall picture."*

Supervisory committee as an independent entity

Some of the key witnesses feel that the supervisory committee, as an independent entity, can create tension in credit unions. These key witnesses feel that the committee should become a sub-committee of the board similar to the audit committee in corporate companies.

In Ireland, the statutory independence of the supervisory committee has, in fact, increased. In the Credit Union Act 1966, one director could sit on the committee. The 1997 Credit Union Act changed this to ensure that no director could be a member of the committee. It was felt by the drafters of the 1997 Act that a supervisory committee which contains directors 'defies logic' in that it does not make sense for a board director to be responsible for reviewing board performance.

While the Irish legislation is strengthening the role of the supervisory committee, other credit union legislation from around the world would appear to have weakened the role of the supervisory committee. Of 104 summary credit union legislations from around the world, only 10 mention the supervisory committee. While this may be so, the World Council of Credit Unions (WOCCU) has kept the concept of the independent supervisory committee to the fore in its model law for credit unions.

Should the supervisory committee remain an independent entity or should it be a sub-committee of the board? The view from the majority of the key witnesses was that the supervisory committee should remain independent of the board. Many felt that this independence was the key to its effectiveness. It was felt that this independence would only result in tensions between the board and the supervisory committee if both parties were unclear of their roles and responsibilities. Perhaps the real issue underlying that of independence is clarity of role.

In the corporate governance codes and literature, there appears to be a pre-occupation with the importance of independence, although precise definitions are not always forthcoming. Spira (1999) indicates that substantial emphasis is placed on independence in Cadbury (1992), which she says implies that "independence is a prerequisite for ethical behaviour in the context of corporate governance". In fact, Higgs (2003), Smith (2003) and also Cadbury (1992) recommend that at least half of the board should be made up of non-executive directors. However, the non-executive directors also sit on the board and are involved in decision-making. This has led a number of commentators (Spira 1999, p263, Collier 1997, p80) to highlight the conflict for the non-executive director in trying to carry out a decision-making role and a monitoring role at the same time. Spira (1999, p263) has indicated that the corporate governance codes have not sufficiently dealt with this dilemma. O'Higgins (2003, p32) highlights that this may result in a 'latent threat' to the unitary nature of the board.

Under the Stock Exchange's Combined Code, non-executive directors on an audit committee should be 'independent of management and free from any business or other relationship would could materially interfere with the exercise of their independent judgement'. However, because the audit committee is a sub-committee of the board and its members therefore also sit on the board, independence can be difficult. Vicknair, Hickman and Carnes (cited in Collier 1997) have raised doubts about the impartiality of 'grey' area directors, who are 'not wholly independent of management' and who may undermine the position

of audit committees as 'truly independent corporate governance entities'.

Thus, if independence and impacts on the unitary board are issues in corporate companies, perhaps it is better to have a group separate to the board who, if carrying out their role in an effective and clearly understood way, are truly independent and do not affect the unitary function of the board.

Conclusions

The supervisory committee model may well be a useful alternative model to the corporate audit committee model for organisational oversight. Its clear and unequivocal independence from the board overcomes one of the main, widely recognised shortcomings of the corporate model. The high level of activity of the Supervisory Committees surveyed challenges the so-called cavalier approach of many audit committees. This can be explained, at least in part, by the prior experience and regular training of committee members, factors which are deemed to be important in the literature, as well as the clear understanding of their role. It might also be accounted for by the fact that committee members receive no remuneration to fulfil their duties, which may indicate a commitment to the organisation and its members that goes beyond any pecuniary interest.

The supervisory committees surveyed are not without their faults. Their numerical dominance by males must be addressed. Their weakness relative to audit committees in terms of financially qualified members must also be tackled through revised recruitment and professional training strategies. As already indicated, this research was restricted by the lack of literature on credit union supervisory committees and credit union regulation. It is also limited in that it does not delve into the many complex issues which impact on supervisory committees, such as the psychological dynamics between the committee and the board/management, the issue of volunteer commitment to credit unions, and the levels of trust between members and their supervisory committee.

However, it is also disappointing to see that the audit committee research does not appear to cover these types of issues to any great extent either. It is the hope of the authors that this research will be the foundation of more in-depth research in the future. Such research is important as it helps those outside the credit union and co-operative world to better understand these unique and important organisations.

Notes

i The original legal framework for credit unions, the Cooperative law (1868,1871) paragraph 38 (I) stated 'It is the task of the Supervisory Board (Verwaltungsrat, Aufsichtsrat) to supervise the Executive Board (Vorstand) in their management in all branches of the administration…' (cited in Raiffeisen, 1970:55)

ii The English-Canadian credit union movement has adopted the corporate model of the audit committee which operates as a sub-committee of the board rather than as an independent entity.

iii In the case of the credit unions, the members own the organisation but they elect a board to run the organisation on their behalf.

iv The largest umbrella body for Irish credit unions.

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Co-operatives and Globalization. Adaptation or Resistance?

Edited by Yair Levi

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