



FEI Observations and Recommendations

Improving Financial Management, Financial Reporting and Corporate Governance

Overview

Presented here are the views of Financial Executives International (FEI) on reforms aimed at strengthening financial management, reporting and corporate governance. We believe that most companies are governed and managed ethically and are fulfilling their fiduciary obligations to their stakeholders. However, the investing public and FEI share a common concern over the problems highlighted by the recent failures of corporate management, financial reporting, corporate governance, audit committees and independent audits. The U.S. capital markets are based, in large part, on trust in a checks-and-balances control system fundamental to good corporate governance. The weaknesses exposed in the system are highlighted in public documents, testimony before Congress, press interviews and special reports. We believe these revelations point to certain systemic issues and call for reform. FEI supports a clear and coordinated look at all areas of possible improvement. It is our intention to assist in this effort by making the following observations and recommendations.

We believe the following factors may have contributed to the recent problems observed in the areas of corporate governance, ethical management, financial reporting and external audits:

- Lack of ethical conduct and inappropriate “tone at the top”
- Failure of effective board oversight
- Lack of financial expertise on audit committees
- External audit failure due to compromised independence and failed quality control procedures
- Overly complex accounting standards
- Opaque financial reporting
- Emphasis on form over substance in applying accounting standards

We offer recommendations in four areas:

Strengthening financial management and commitment to ethical conduct

Rebuilding confidence in financial reporting, the accounting industry and the effectiveness of the audit process

Modernizing financial reporting, and reforming the accounting standards-setting process

Improving corporate governance and the effectiveness of audit committees

Recommendations

Strengthening Financial Management and Commitment to Ethical Conduct

Recommendation 1: All financial executives should adhere to a specialized code of ethical conduct.

FEI recommends that all senior financial professionals be required to adhere to a strong ethical code of conduct. For many years, members of FEI have signed such a code, thus committing to its principles. That code has been updated recently to include a call for all financial executives to acknowledge their affirmative duty to proactively *promote* ethical conduct in their organizations.

Whether or not they are members of FEI, all finance professionals should adhere to a code of ethical conduct containing all the elements of the FEI Code of Ethics. The Code states, for example, that financial arrangements involving actual or apparent conflicts of interest should be avoided.

FEI recommends that all senior financial officers, accounting officers, controllers, treasurers and chief investor relations officers annually sign a code containing all the elements of the FEI Code of Ethics and deliver it to their board or the board's designated committee. Further, we expect that best practice in this area will be that all finance, accounting, tax and investor relations personnel annually sign such a code.

The FEI Code is attached to this document as Appendix A.

FEI strongly recommends that Congress and the SEC implement regulations that call for stock exchanges and markets to implement this recommendation through listing agreements.

Recommendation 2: Companies should actively promote ethical behavior and provide employees with the means to report perceived violations of ethical standards without fear of reprisal.

FEI strongly endorses practices by which all companies adopt a code of conduct for their employees and conduct regular training sessions to assure understanding and compliance. We believe companies should provide support and broad protection to employees reporting code of conduct violations. Under such a framework, companies should:

- Adopt a written code of conduct for all employees
- Conduct employee orientation and training with respect to the code
- Provide employees with a mechanism (such as a hotline or help-line) to surface concerns about compliance with laws and regulations
- Adopt procedures for voluntary disclosure of violations of laws
- Participate in best practices forums
- Inform the public of the active commitment to implement these steps

We encourage all companies to set up "hotline" channels, providing employees with the means to report perceived violations of the code or of the law without fear of reprisal. Additionally, employees should be made aware of these lines of communication and be assured that the source of all calls will be kept confidential. Calls should go directly to a person, facilitator or committee specifically identified by the company's board. That designated person or entity should screen each call and initiate appropriate action within the company. The company's board of directors should be informed of calls made and their disposition on a regular basis.

Recommendation 3: Qualifications of the principal financial officer and principal accounting officer.

Management, in support of the audit committee and board of directors, should designate a principal financial officer and a principal accounting officer as those terms are used in the Securities Act of 1933. FEI believes the qualifications and roles of such persons should include the following:

- The principal financial officer should be that person with overall responsibility for the finance function within the reporting company, and should have knowledge in all areas of finance including, at a minimum, the requisite knowledge proposed for the financial experts of audit committees. The principal financial officer should be responsible for upholding compliance with ethical standards within the finance function.
- The principal accounting officer should be a licensed public accountant or possess equivalent knowledge and experience, and should be current and knowledgeable in the understanding of GAAP and the SEC's rules and regulations governing the preparation and audit of financial statements.
- The principal financial officer should report to the chief executive officer, and the principal accounting officer should report to the principal financial officer. It is further recommended that the principal financial officer and/or the principal accounting officer meet with the audit committee periodically (quarterly) to review significant financial statement issues, including key judgments, estimates and disclosure matters.

Rebuilding Confidence in Financial Reporting, the Accounting Industry and Effectiveness of the Audit Process

Recommendation 4: Create a new oversight body for the accounting profession staffed with finance and accounting professionals.

Enhanced oversight of public accounting firms by an independent body would increase public confidence in the audit process and effectiveness of the audit quality control process. This oversight board should be sponsored by the SEC and, recognizing the technical nature involved and the need to adequately understand the audit process, the majority of its members should be executives with knowledge in accounting and finance. These individuals should be clearly independent of public accounting firms or other audit industry organizations. We do not believe that a majority of members should be drawn from the audit profession.

This oversight board should oversee the peer review quality control process of the audit firms. Furthermore, the peer reviewers should be accountable to the oversight board for the scope of review, findings, recommendations and corrective actions.

We further recommend that a focused mission and scope will enhance the effectiveness of this body. Therefore, this new body should be principally tasked with the job of audit industry oversight and discipline. As FEI continues to support private-sector accounting standard setting, we believe that a separate and independent body should continue to oversee the FASB.

Recommendation 5: Place restrictions on certain non-audit services supplied by the independent auditor.

Even the appearance of a potential conflict of interest may now undermine an auditor's effectiveness. Therefore, we believe confidence in the integrity of the audit would be enhanced if certain non-audit services were prohibited for audit clients. In this regard:

- The independent auditor should no longer provide audit clients with internal audit services or consulting on computer systems used for financial accounting and reporting.
- Advisory services should be prohibited wherever the audit firm could be put in a position of relying on the work product resulting from such services.
- Tax advisory and compliance services, acquisition due diligence, audits of employee benefit plans and other statutory audits should be acceptable services for audit clients as they would not normally raise questions of conflict of interest. In the unusual instance where such services could present questions of a conflict of interest, such services should not be provided.

Importantly, in addition to the foregoing, we suggest that audit committees approve substantially all large non-audit services. In so doing, the audit committee should consider the impact of such services on the overall independence of the audit firm.

FEI also recommends that the SEC redefine the current classifications of audit and non-audit services to assure that the guidance is clear and that the distinction conveys a complete and meaningful picture to investors in regard to the proper characterization of audit and non-audit activities.

Recommendation 6: Restrict the hiring of senior personnel from the external auditor.

FEI recommends that companies adopt policies that restrict the hiring of engagement audit and tax partners, or senior audit and tax managers, who have worked on the company's audit for a period specified by the board of directors. FEI believes that this period should be no shorter than two years.

Modernizing Financial Reporting and Reforming the Accounting Standards-Setting Process

Recommendation 7: Reform the Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB).

FEI recommends that a "Blue Ribbon Committee" be formed to address FASB reform. While we support continuing private-sector standard setting through the FASB, substantive process and structural changes are long overdue. The Blue Ribbon Committee should complete its work promptly and produce initial recommendations within three months of its formation. The Committee should be guided by the basic principle of advancing financial reporting, notwithstanding divergent political interests. The Committee should address the following issues:

- FASB Organization
 - Board mission statement
 - Size of board
 - Length of board member terms
 - Voting majority
 - Staff effectiveness, accountability and structure
 - Restrictions on board member meetings ("Sunshine Rules")
- Timely Standard Setting
 - Timely standard setting with clearly defined priorities, objectives and milestones
 - Agenda management and accountability

- Financial Statement Content
 - A process for defining clear long-term objectives for financial statements produced under GAAP
 - Fair value accounting, in particular, needs to be addressed, given the absence of market values in many areas and the potential for such accounting concepts to create financial statement volatility
- Financial Accounting Standards
 - Reassess the conceptual framework as the basis for standard setting
 - Assure practical implementation of principle-based standards vs. specific, bright-line rules; examples of standard application and financial interpretations based on principles underlying standard
 - Impact of planned globalization of accounting standards
 - Review existing standards and disclosures
 - Address the need to increase the participation of the user and investment community and decrease tension with the preparer community

Recommendation 8: Modernize financial reporting.

FEI expresses strong support for the following improvements in financial reporting and recommends that committees be formed promptly to address these matters.

- Improve Management's Discussion and Analysis (MD&A)
 - FEI should take the lead in developing best practices for MD&A disclosure utilizing 2001 annual reports as a primary source for data.
- Implement "Plain English" financial reporting as the new language of professionals involved in investor relations and financial statement preparation.
- Promote voluntary disclosures of business performance metrics
 - FEI recommends that companies consider providing Web-based reporting of key performance measures used by management and specific to the industry on a quarterly basis. (A possible source for additional key performance measures is information shared at analyst presentations.)
 - In order to encourage the expansion of reporting additional measures, it is essential that safe harbor rules be strengthened to specifically encompass the additional reporting.
- Develop and complement Web-based financial reporting
 - Internet delivery of hierarchical financial reporting that employs scorecards, current key performance indicators and analytical tools offering differing accounting standards is the future. Industry, users and the SEC should move ahead aggressively to develop models of such reporting frameworks without reducing access for investors in the short term.
 - Mandatory Internet access to financial reports — public companies should make the information available on their Web sites concurrent with SEC filings.
 - Voluntary business performance reporting, discussed above, may be more easily implemented through Web-based reporting.
- Expanded use of reports on Form 8-K
 - Items typically included in these filings could be expanded; however, the SEC's revised guidance should be "principle-based" and the current list of additional items to be disclosed should be presented only as "examples."
- Enhance filing requirements for foreign filers
 - Many foreign filers currently provide quarterly financial statements on a voluntary basis. FEI recommends that the SEC require foreign filers to file quarterly.

- Assess transition impact on paper documents
 - FEI does not suggest that hard copy mailings be eliminated in the near term. However, the content of paper mailings to shareholders should be examined to determine what modifications can be made and over what timeframe.
 - Financial disclosure to shareholders via paper documents has vastly exceeded a user’s ability to digest it. The availability of public filings on the Web and analysis of information accessed by users should assist in identifying what is considered important. The resulting information could serve as a basis to expand the disclosures most often accessed and reduce those disclosures that are of little or no interest. This should improve understanding and communication while reducing costs to corporations and, ultimately, to the shareholders.

Improving Corporate Governance and the Effectiveness of Audit Committees

Recommendation 9: Effective implementation of the 1999 Blue Ribbon Panel Recommendations re audit committee financial experts.

In 1999, the *Blue Ribbon Panel on Audit Committee Effectiveness* called for all audit committee members to be financially literate and for each committee to have at least one financial expert.

FEI recommends that the NYSE and the NASDAQ set **higher standards** for audit committee “financial experts.” These criteria should call for explicit experience requirements in the credentials of such experts. A financial expert should possess:

- An understanding of Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) and audits of financial statements prepared under those principles. Such understanding may have been obtained either through education or experience. We believe it is important for someone on the audit committee to have a working knowledge of those principles and standards.
- Experience in the preparation and/or the auditing of financial statements of a company of similar size, scope and complexity as the company on whose board the committee member serves. The experience would generally be as a chief financial officer, chief accounting officer, controller or auditor of a similar entity. This background will provide a necessary understanding of the transactional and operational environment that produces the issuer’s financial statements. It will also bring an understanding of what is involved in appropriate accounting estimates, accruals, reserve provisions, etc., and an appreciation of what is necessary to maintain a good internal control environment.
- Experience in the internal governance and procedure of audit committees, obtained either as an audit committee member, a senior corporate manager responsible for answering to the audit committee or an external auditor responsible for reporting on the execution and results of annual audits.

FEI strongly recommends that Congress and the SEC implement regulations that call for stock exchanges and markets to implement this recommendation through listing agreements.

Recommendation 10: Continuing professional education for audit committee members.

FEI recommends that all audit committee members attend continuing education in areas of financial reporting, risk management and/or accounting. Training can be “in-house” or via an outside provider. FEI, the National Association of Corporate Directors or an equivalent entity should establish the minimum content to be covered. Companies should disclose in the annual audit committee report whether members have undertaken such training. Non-audit committee directors are also urged to attend these sessions.

Recommendation 11: Periodic consideration of audit committee chair rotation.

FEI recommends that boards of directors periodically evaluate the need to rotate the individual holding the audit committee chair. Such evaluation may be done approximately every five years. FEI recognizes that outstanding audit committee chairs are valuable and difficult to replace. Yet there is also benefit in developing successors and additional financial experts on the audit committee. Therefore, rotation and successor development may further strengthen the overall governance mechanisms within the board.

Recommendation 12: Disclosure of corporate governance practices.

FEI recommends that all companies annually report their key corporate governance practices. Current best practice in many companies is to have a governance and nominating committee made up of independent directors.

Closing

FEI formed a task force of members to assemble this set of recommendations. The task force also had significant input from FEI’s Committee on Corporate Reporting. These recommendations were then reviewed and approved by FEI’s Executive Committee led by FEI Chairman David Young, CFO of Adaptec, Inc., and FEI Vice Chairman Ridge A. Braunschweig, CFO of Orion Corporation. FEI wishes to acknowledge and thank those involved in the preparation of this report. Also, special thanks to the contributions of Barry Brooks, partner, Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP.

TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Philip D. Ameen

General Electric Company
Vice President and Comptroller

Scott M. Boggs

Microsoft Corporation
Vice President and Corp. Controller

Fred Corrado

The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co., Inc.
Retired Vice Chairman & CFO

John P. Jessup

E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Company
VP Finance and Controller

Dennis D. Powell

Cisco Systems, Inc.
Vice President and Corporate Controller

Bryan R. Roub

Harris Corporation
Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Officer

David H. Sidwell

J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.
Chief Financial Officer - Investment Bank

Peter R. Bible

General Motors Corporation
Chief Accounting Officer

Frank J. Borelli

Marsh & McLennan Companies
Retired CFO

David J. FitzPatrick

United Technologies Corp.
SVP and Chief Financial Officer

Philip B. Livingston

Financial Executives International
President and CEO

J. Pedro Reinhard

Dow Chemical
EVP and Chief Financial Officer

David L. Shedlarz

Pfizer, Inc.
EVP and Chief Financial Officer

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APPENDIX A: Code of Ethics of Financial Executives International

FEI CODE OF ETHICS

FEI's mission includes significant efforts to promote ethical conduct in the practice of financial management throughout the world. Senior financial officers hold an important and elevated role in corporate governance. While members of the management team, they are uniquely capable and empowered to ensure that all stakeholders' interests are appropriately balanced, protected and preserved. This Code provides principles to which members are expected to adhere and advocate. They embody rules regarding individual and peer responsibilities, as well as responsibilities to employers, the public and other stakeholders. Violations of FEI's Code of Ethics may subject the member to censure, suspension or expulsion under procedural rules adopted by FEI's Board of Directors.

All members of FEI will:

- ✓ Act with honesty and integrity, avoiding actual or apparent conflicts of interest in personal and professional relationships.
- ✓ Provide constituents with information that is accurate, complete, objective, relevant, timely and understandable.
- ✓ Comply with rules and regulations of federal, state, provincial and local governments, and other appropriate private and public regulatory agencies.
- ✓ Act in good faith, responsibly, with due care, competence and diligence, without misrepresenting material facts or allowing one's independent judgment to be subordinated.
- ✓ Respect the confidentiality of information acquired in the course of one's work except when authorized or otherwise legally obligated to disclose. Confidential information acquired in the course of one's work will not be used for personal advantage.
- ✓ Share knowledge and maintain skills important and relevant to constituents' needs.
- ✓ Proactively promote ethical behavior as a responsible partner among peers, in the work environment and the community.
- ✓ Achieve responsible use of and control over all assets and resources employed or entrusted.



10 Madison Avenue
PO Box 1938
Morristown, NJ 07962-1938
973.898.4600
www.fei.org