HOW RECENT FIDUCIARY DUTY CASES AFFECT ADVICE TO DIRECTORS AND OFFICERS OF DELAWARE AND TEXAS CORPORATIONS

By

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HOW RECENT FIDUCIARY DUTY CASES AFFECT ADVICE TO DIRECTORS AND OFFICERS OF DELAWARE AND TEXAS CORPORATIONS

By

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I. Introduction.

The conduct of corporate directors and officers is subject to particular scrutiny in the context of executive compensation and other affiliated party transactions, business combinations (whether friendly or hostile), when the corporation is charged with illegal conduct, and when the corporation is insolvent or in the zone of insolvency. The high profile stories of how much corporations are paying their executive officers, corporate scandals, bankruptcies and related developments have further focused attention on how directors and officers discharge their duties, and have caused much reexamination of how corporations are governed and how they relate to their shareholders and creditors. Where the government intervenes (by investment or otherwise) or threatens to do so, the scrutiny intensifies, but the courts appear to resolve the controversies by application of traditional principles while recognizing the 800-pound gorilla in the room.

The individuals who serve in leadership roles for corporations are fiduciaries in relation to the corporation and its owners. These troubled times make it appropriate to focus upon the fiduciary and other duties of directors and officers, including their duties of care and loyalty. Increasingly the courts are applying principals articulated in cases involving mergers and acquisitions ("*M&A*") to cases involving executive compensation, perhaps because both areas often involve conflicts of interest and self-dealing or because in Delaware, where many of the cases are tried, the same judges are writing significant opinions in both areas. Director and officer fiduciary duties are generally owed to the corporation and its shareholders, but when the corporation is insolvent, the constituencies claiming to be beneficiaries of those duties expand to include the entity's creditors.

Similar fiduciary principles are applicable to governing persons of a general or limited partnership and a limited liability company ("*LLC*"). These entities are often referred to as "alternative entities" in recognition that the rights and duties of their owners and governing

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persons can be modified by contract to greater extent than is permitted in the case of corporations.

The focus of the Congress of the United States ("*U.S.*") on how corporations should be governed following corporate debacles early in the last decade led to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 ("*SOX*").[1] SOX was intended to protect investors by improving the accuracy and reliability of corporate disclosures made pursuant to the securities laws.[2]

On July 21, 2010, President Obama signed the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act ("*Dodd-Frank*")[3] into law. This sweeping legislation governs not only the financial services industry, but also public companies generally.

While SOX, Dodd-Frank and related changes to SEC rules and stock exchange listing requirements have mandated changes in corporate governance practices, our focus will be on state corporate statutes and common law.[4] Our focus will be in the context of companies organized under the applicable Delaware and Texas statutes.

Prior to January 1, 2006, Texas business corporations were organized under, and many are still governed by, the Texas Business Corporation Act, as amended (the "*TBCA*"),[5] which was supplemented by the Texas Miscellaneous Corporation Laws Act (the "*TMCLA*").[6] However, corporations formed after January 1, 2006 are organized under and governed by the Texas Business Organization Code ("*TBOC*").[7] For entities formed before that date, only the ones voluntarily opting into the TBOC were governed by the TBOC until January 1, 2010, after which time all Texas corporations are governed by the TBOC. However, because until 2010 some Texas for-profit corporations were governed by the TBCA and others by the TBOC and

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1 Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-204, 116 Stat. 745 (codified in several sections of 15 U.S.C.A.) (*"SOX"*); *see infra* **Appendix A**; Byron F. Egan, *Major Themes of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act*, 42 TEX. J. BUS. L. 339 (Winter 2008), *available at* http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1186; and Byron F. Egan, *Perils of In-House Counsel* (July 22, 2010), http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1430.

2 SOX is generally applicable to all companies required to file reports, or that have a registration statement on file, with the Securities and Exchange Commission (*"SEC"*) regardless of size (*"public companies"*). Although SOX does have some specific provisions, and generally establishes some important public policy changes, it is implemented in large part through rules adopted by the SEC. *See* Summary of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 attached as **Appendix A**. Among other things, SOX amends the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (the *"1934 Act"*) and the Securities Act of 1933 (the *"1933 Act"*).

3 H.R. 4173, 111th Cong. (2nd Sess. 2010). *See* **Appendix B**. *See also* J.W. Verret, *Defending Against Shareholder Proxy Access: Delaware's Future Reviewing Company Defenses in the Era of Dodd-Frank* (2010), George Mason University Law and Economics Research Paper No. 10-37, *available at* http://ssrn.com/abstract_id=1655482.

4 *See* William B. Chandler III & Leo E. Strine Jr., *The New Federalism of the American Corporate Governance System: Preliminary Reflections of Two Residents of One Small State* (February 26, 2002), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=367720; *cf.* Myron T. Steele, *Judicial Scrutiny of Fiduciary Duties in Delaware Limited Partnerships and Limited Liability Companies*, 32 DEL. J. CORP. L. 1 (2007); Leo E. Strine, Jr., *Toward A True Corporate Republic: A Traditionalist Response to Bebchuk's Solution for Improving Corporate America*, 119 HARV. L. REV. 1759 (2006).

5 TEX. BUS. CORP. ACT ANN. arts. 1.01 *et. seq.* (Vernon Supp. 2007) [hereinafter "*TBCA*"].

6 TEX. REV. CIV. STAT. ANN. art. 1302 (Vernon Supp. 2007).

7 The TEX. BUS. ORGS. CODE ANN. [hereinafter "*TBOC*"] provides that provisions applicable to corporations (TEX. BUS. ORGS. CODE ANN. Titles 1 and 2) may be officially and collectively known as *"Texas Corporation Law"* (TEX. BUS. ORGS. CODE ANN. § 1.008(b)). *See also* Byron F. Egan, *Choice of Entity Decision Tree After Margin Tax and Texas Business Organizations Code*, 42 TEX. J. BUS. L. 171 (Spring 2007), and Byron F. Egan, *Good Faith, Fair Dealing and Other Contractual and Fiduciary Issues* (July 23, 2009), http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1220.

because the substantive principles under both statutes are generally the same, the term "*Texas Corporate Statutes*" is used herein to refer to the TBOC and the TBCA (as supplemented by the TMCLA) collectively, and the particular differences between the TBCA and the TBOC are referenced as appropriate.[8]

II. Corporate Fiduciary Duties Generally.

A. General Principles.

The concepts that underlie the fiduciary duties of corporate directors have their origins in English common law of both trusts and agency from over two hundred years ago. The current concepts of those duties in both Texas and Delaware are still largely matters of evolving common law.[9]

Both the Texas Corporate Statutes and the Delaware General Corporation Law (as amended, the "*DGCL*") provide that the business and affairs of a corporation are to be managed under the direction of its board of directors ("*Board*").[10] While the Texas Corporate Statutes and the DGCL provide statutory guidance as to matters such as the issuance of securities, the payment of dividends, the notice and voting procedures for meetings of directors and shareholders, and the ability of directors to rely on specified persons and information, the nature of a director's "fiduciary" duty to the corporation and the shareholders has been largely defined by the courts through damage and injunctive actions.[11] In Texas, the fiduciary duty of a director

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[8] The term *"charter"* is used herein interchangeably with (i) *"certificate of incorporation"* for Delaware corporations, (ii) *"certificate of formation"* for corporations governed by the TBOC and (iii) *"certificate of incorporation"* for corporations organized under the TBCA, in each case as the document to be filed with the applicable Secretary of State to form a corporation. TBOC §§ 1.002(6) and 3.001-3.008; DGCL § 1.01. *See infra* notes 999-1002 and related text.

[9] The "fiduciary duties of corporate officers and directors . . . are creatures of state common law[.]" *Gearhart Indus., Inc. v. Smith Int'l., Inc.*, 741 F.2d 707, 719 (5th Cir. 1984) (citing *Cohen v. Beneficial Indus. Loan Corp.*, 337 U.S. 541, 549 (1949)); *In re Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litig.*, 907 A.2d 693, 697 (Del. Ch. 2005) ("Unlike ideals of corporate governance, a fiduciary's duties do not change over time."), *aff'd*, 906 A.2d 27 (Del. 2006); *see also Burks v. Lasker*, 441 U.S. 471, 477 (1979). Federal courts generally apply applicable state common law in fiduciary duty cases. *See e.g. Floyd v. Hefner*, No. H-03-5693, 2006 WL 2844245 (S.D. Tex. 2006).

[10] TBOC § 21.401; TBCA art. 2.31; and DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 8, § 141(a) (title 8 of the Delaware Code Annotated to be hereinafter referred to as the *"DGCL"*); *CA, Inc. v. AFSCME Employees Pension Plan*, 953 A.2d 227 (Del. 2008) (Board authority to manage the corporation under DGCL § 141(a) may not be infringed by a bylaw adopted by the stockholders under DGCL § 109 in a manner that restricts the power of directors to exercise their fiduciary duties); *see infra* notes 1034-1038 and related text.

[11] Although the DGCL "does not prescribe in detail formal requirements for board meetings, the meetings do have to take place [and] the mere fact that directors are gathered together does not a meeting make"; where there is no formal call to the meeting and no vote taken, directors caucusing on their own and informally deciding among themselves how they would proceed is like simply polling board members and "does not constitute a valid meeting or effective corporate action." *Fogel v. U.S. Energy Sys. Inc.*, No. 3271-CC, 2007 WL 4438978 at *2 (Del. Ch. 2007) (citations omitted).

The *Fogel* case arose in the context of a confrontation between three independent directors and the Board chairman they sought to terminate (there were no other directors). The opinion by Chancellor William B. Chandler III recounted that U.S. Energy "was in precarious financial condition" when Fogel was hired in 2005 to become both CEO and a director (ultimately, becoming Board chairman as well). *Id.* at *1. Fogel's initial tenure with the company was successful, but trouble soon followed.

Upon learning of the entity's financial woes, the Board decided at a June 14, 2006 meeting to hire a financial adviser or restructuring official. The Board resolved to meet again on June 29 to interview potential candidates, but prior to that meeting, the three independent directors communicated with one another about Fogel's performance, ultimately deciding that he would have to be terminated.

has been characterized as including duties of loyalty (including good faith), care and obedience.[12] In Delaware, the fiduciary duties include those of loyalty (including good faith) and care.[13] Importantly, the duties of due care, good faith and loyalty give rise to a fourth important precept of fiduciary obligation under Delaware law – namely, the so-called "duty of disclosure," which requires the directors to disclose full and accurate information when communicating with stockholders.[14] The term "duty of disclosure," however, is somewhat of a misnomer because no separate duty of disclosure actually exists. Rather, as indicated, the fiduciary obligations of

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On the morning of June 29, the three directors met in the law offices of their outside counsel and decided to fire Fogel. They then confronted Fogel in the boardroom where the meeting was to take place, advised that they had lost faith in him, and stated that they wanted him to resign as chairman and CEO. Fogel challenged the directors' ability to fire him and ultimately refused to resign, whereupon an independent director informed him that he was terminated.

Thereafter, on July 1, Fogel e-mailed the company's general counsel and the board, calling for a special shareholder meeting for the purpose of voting on the removal of the other directors and electing their replacements. Later that day, during a scheduled Board meeting, the Board formally passed a resolution terminating Fogel and thereafter ignored Fogel's call for a special meeting. Litigation ensued.

The issue in the case was whether Fogel was still CEO and Board chairman at the time he called for a special meeting of shareholders. If the independent directors' June 29 decision to fire Fogel constituted formal Board action, Fogel was terminated before July 1 and lacked authority to call for a special meeting of shareholders. If not, Fogel remained Board chairman and CEO until the July 1 formal resolution, which passed after Fogel called for the special meeting of shareholders.

The Court noted that under DGCL § 141 termination of the chairman and CEO required Board "action, and the board can only take action by means of a vote at a properly constituted meeting. * * * Although the [DGCL] does not prescribe in detail formal requirements for board meetings, the meetings do have to take place." *Id.* at *2. In this case, the Chancellor concluded that the June 29 confrontation between Fogel and the independent directors did not constitute a meeting. The mere fact that directors were gathered and caucusing did not constitute a meeting as there was no formal call to the meeting and there was no vote whatsoever.

"Simply 'polling board members does not constitute a valid meeting or effective corporation action,'" the Chancellor instructed. *Id.* at *2. In any event, the Court added, if the meeting did occur, it would be void because the independent directors—who kept secret their plan to fire Fogel—obtained Fogel's attendance by deception. Although Fogel lacked the votes needed to protect his employment, the Chancellor reasoned that had he known of the defendants' plans beforehand, "he could have exercised his right under the bylaws to call for a special meeting before the board met. The deception renders the meeting and any action taken there void." *Id.* at *4. Accordingly, Fogel was still authorized on July 1 to call for a special shareholder meeting, and corporation and its Board were ordered to hold such a meeting.

The Chancellor disagreed with the independent directors' argument that even if the June 29 meeting and termination were deficient, "any problems were cured" when the Board ratified its June 29 actions during the July 1 meeting, holding: "When a corporate action is void, it is invalid *ab initio* and cannot be ratified later." *Id.* The Chancellor said the action taken at the July 1 meeting may have resulted in Fogel's termination, but the termination was effective only as of that vote. By that time, however, Fogel already had issued his call for a special shareholders' meeting.

Nonetheless, the Court concluded that the independent directors ignoring Fogel's call for a special meeting was not to thwart a shareholder vote, but because they "believed in good faith" that Fogel had been terminated and thus "lacked the authority to call for such a meeting." *Id.* Accordingly, the Chancellor held that the three independent directors did not breach their fiduciary obligations of loyalty.

[12] *Gearhart Indus., Inc.*, 741 F.2d at 719.

[13] While good faith "may be described colloquially as part of a "triad" of fiduciary duties that includes the duties of care and loyalty," the Delaware Supreme Court recently clarified the relationship of "good faith" to the duties of care and loyalty, noting that "the obligation to act in good faith does not establish an independent fiduciary duty that stands on the same footing as the duties of care and loyalty. Only the latter two duties, where violated, may directly result in liability, whereas a failure to act in good faith may do so, but indirectly. The second doctrinal consequence is that the fiduciary duty of loyalty is not limited to cases involving a financial or other cognizable fiduciary conflict of interest. It also encompasses cases where the fiduciary fails to act in good faith." *Stone v. Ritter,* 911 A.2d 362, 370 (Del. 2006). *See infra* notes 52-131, 372-432 and related text.

[14] "Once [directors] traveled down the road of partial disclosure . . . an obligation to provide the stockholders with an accurate, full, and fair characterization" attaches. *Arnold v. Soc'y for Sav. Bancorp, Inc.*, 650 A.2d 1270, 1280 (Del. 1994); *see also In re MONY Group S'holders Litig.*, 852 A.2d 9, 24-25 (Del. Ch. 2004) ("[O]nce [directors] take it upon themselves to disclose information, that information must not be misleading.").

directors in the disclosure context involve a contextually-specific application of the duties of care and loyalty.[15]

B. Applicable Law.

"The internal affairs doctrine is a conflict of laws principle which recognizes that only one State should have the authority to regulate a corporation's internal affairs,"[16] and "under the commerce clause a state has no interest in regulating the internal affairs of foreign corporations."[17] "Internal corporate affairs" are "those matters which are peculiar to the relationships among or between the corporation and its current officers, directors, and shareholders,"[18] and are to be distinguished from matters which are not unique to corporations:

> It is essential to distinguish between acts which can be performed by both corporations and individuals, and those activities which are peculiar to the corporate entity. Corporations and individuals alike enter into contracts, commit torts, and deal in personal and real property. Choice of law decisions relating to such corporate activities are usually determined after consideration of the facts of each transaction. The internal affairs doctrine has no applicability in these situations.[19]

The internal affairs doctrine in Texas mandates that courts apply the law of a corporation's state of incorporation in adjudications regarding director fiduciary duties.[20] Delaware also subscribes to the internal affairs doctrine.[21]

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15 *Malone v. Brincat*, 722 A.2d 5, 10 (Del 1998) ("[W]hen directors communicate with stockholders, they must recognize their duty of loyalty to do so with honesty and fairness"); *see infra* notes 389-413 and related text.

16 *Edgar v. MITE Corp.*, 457 U.S. 624, 645 (1982).

17 *McDermott, Inc. v. Lewis*, 531 A.2d 206, 217 (Del. 1987) (internal quotations omitted); Frederick Tung, *Before Competition: Origins of the Internal Affairs Doctrine*, 32 J. CORP. L. 33, 39 (Fall 2006).

18 *Edgar*, 457 U.S. at 645.

19 *McDermott*, 531 A.2d at 215 (citing *Edgar*, 457 U.S. at 645).

20 TBOC §§ 1.101-1.105; TBCA, art. 8.02; TMCLA art. 1302-1.03; *Hollis v. Hill*, 232 F.3d 460, 465 (5th Cir. 2000); *Gearhart Indus., Inc. v. Smith Int'l, Inc.*, 741 F.2d 707, 719 (5th Cir. 1984); *A. Copeland Enters., Inc. v. Guste*, 706 F. Supp. 1283, 1288 (W.D. Tex. 1989).

21 *See VantagePoint Venture Partners 1996 v. Examen, Inc.*, 871 A.2d 1108 (Del. 2005) (considering whether a class of preferred stock would be entitled to vote as a separate class on the approval of a merger agreement and ruled that Delaware law, rather than California law, governed and did not require the approval of the holders of the preferred stock voting separately as a class for approval of the merger. In reaching that conclusion, the Court held that the DGCL exclusively governs the internal corporate affairs of a Delaware corporation and that Section 2115 of the California Corporations Code, which requires a corporation with significant California contacts (sometimes referred to as a "quasi-California corporation") to comply with certain provisions of the California Corporations Code even if the corporation is incorporated in another state, such as Delaware, is unconstitutional and, as a result of Delaware rather than California law governing, the approval of the merger did not require the approval of the holders of the preferred stock voting separately as a class). *See infra* notes 168-178 and related text.

The California courts, however, tend to uphold California statutes against internal affairs doctrine challenges. *See Friese v. Superior Court of San Diego County*, 36 Cal. Rptr. 3d 558 (Cal. Ct. App. 2005), in which a California court allowed insider trading claims to be brought against a director of a California based Delaware corporation and wrote "while we agree that the duties officers and directors owe a corporation are in the first instance defined by the law of the state of incorporation, such duties are not the subject of California's corporate securities laws in general or [Corporate Securities Law] section 25502.5 in particular . . . . Because a substantial portion of California's marketplace includes transactions involving securities issued by foreign corporations, the corporate securities laws have been consistently applied to such transactions."

The Delaware Code subjects directors and officers of Delaware corporations to personal jurisdiction in the Delaware Court of Chancery over claims for violation of a duty in their capacities as directors or officers of Delaware corporations.[22] Texas does not have a comparable statute.

C. Fiduciary Duties in Texas Cases.

Texas has its own body of precedent with respect to director fiduciary duties. In *Gearhart Industries, Inc. v. Smith International*, the Fifth Circuit sharply criticized the parties' arguments based on Delaware cases and failure to cite Texas jurisprudence in their briefing on director fiduciary duties:

> We are both surprised and inconvenienced by the circumstances that, despite their multitudinous and voluminous briefs and exhibits, neither plaintiffs nor defendants seriously attempt to analyze officers' and directors' fiduciary duties or the business judgment rule under *Texas* law. This is a particularity so in

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[22] 10 *Del. C.* § 3114(a) and (b) provide (emphasis added):

> (a) Every nonresident of this State who after September 1, 1977, accepts election or appointment as a director, trustee or member of the governing body of a corporation organized under the laws of this State or who after June 30, 1978, serves in such capacity, and every resident of this State who so accepts election or appointment or serves in such capacity and thereafter removes residence from this State shall, by such acceptance or by such service, be deemed thereby to have consented to the appointment of the registered agent of such corporation (or, if there is none, the Secretary of State) as an agent upon whom service of process may be made in all civil actions or proceedings brought in this State, by or on behalf of, or against such corporation, in which such director, trustee or member is a necessary or proper party, or in any action or proceeding against such director, trustee or member *for violation of a duty in such capacity*, whether or not the person continues to serve as such director, trustee or member at the time suit is commenced. Such acceptance or service as such director, trustee or member shall be a signification of the consent of such director, trustee or member that any process when so served shall be of the same legal force and validity as if served upon such director, trustee or member within this State and such appointment of the registered agent (or, if there is none, the Secretary of State) shall be irrevocable.
>
> (b) Every nonresident of this State who after January 1, 2004, accepts election or appointment as an officer of a corporation organized under the laws of this State, or who after such date serves in such capacity, and every resident of this State who so accepts election or appointment or serves in such capacity and thereafter removes residence from this State shall, by such acceptance or by such service, be deemed thereby to have consented to the appointment of the registered agent of such corporation (or, if there is none, the Secretary of State) as an agent upon whom service of process may be made in all civil actions or proceedings brought in this State, by or on behalf of, or against such corporation, in which such officer is a necessary or proper party, or in any action or proceeding against such officer *for violation of a duty in such capacity*, whether or not the person continues to serve as such officer at the time suit is commenced. Such acceptance or service as such officer shall be a signification of the consent of such officer that any process when so served shall be of the same legal force and validity as if served upon such officer within this State and such appointment of the registered agent (or, if there is none, the Secretary of State) shall be irrevocable. As used in this section, the word "officer" means an officer of the corporation who (i) is or was the president, chief executive officer, chief operating officer, chief financial officer, chief legal officer, controller, treasurer or chief accounting officer of the corporation at any time during the course of conduct alleged in the action or proceeding to be wrongful, (ii) is or was identified in the corporation's public filings with the United States Securities and Exchange Commission because such person is or was 1 of the most highly compensated executive officers of the corporation at any time during the course of conduct alleged in the action or proceeding to be wrongful, or (iii) has, by written agreement with the corporation, consented to be identified as an officer for purposes of this section.

> view of the authorities cited in their discussions of the business judgment rule: Smith and Gearhart argue back and forth over the applicability of the plethora of out-of-state cases they cite, yet they ignore the fact that we are obligated to decide these aspects of this case under Texas law.[23]

The Fifth Circuit stated in *Gearhart* that under Texas law "[t]hree broad duties stem from the fiduciary status of corporate directors; namely the duties of obedience, loyalty, and due care," and commented that (i) the duty of obedience requires a director to avoid committing *ultra vires* acts, i.e., acts beyond the scope of the authority of the corporation as defined by its articles of incorporation or the laws of the state of incorporation, (ii) the duty of loyalty dictates that a director must act in good faith and must not allow his personal interests to prevail over the interests of the corporation, and (iii) the duty of due care requires that a director must handle his corporate duties with such care as an ordinarily prudent man would use under similar circumstances.[24] Good faith under *Gearhart* is an element of the duty of loyalty. *Gearhart* remains the seminal case for defining the fiduciary duties of directors in Texas, although there are subsequent cases that amplify *Gearhart* as they apply it in the context of lawsuits by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation ("***FDIC***") and the Resolution Trust Company ("***RTC***") arising out of failed financial institutions.[25] Many Texas fiduciary duty cases arise in the context of closely held corporations.[26]

1. Loyalty.

a. Good Faith.

The duty of loyalty in Texas is a duty that dictates that the director act in good faith and not allow his personal interest to prevail over that of the corporation.[27] Whether there exists a personal interest by the director will be a question of fact.[28] The good faith of a director will be determined on whether the director acted with an intent to confer a benefit to the corporation.[29] In Texas "good faith" has been held to mean "[a] state of mind consisting in (1) honesty of belief or purpose, (2) faithfulness to one's duty or obligation, ... or (4) absence of intent to defraud or to seek unconscionable advantage."[30]

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23 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 719 n.4.

24 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 719-21; *McCollum v. Dollar*, 213 S.W. 259, 260 (Tex. Comm'n App. 1919, holding approved); *see Landon v. S & H Mktg. Group, Inc.*, 82 S.W.3d 666, 672 (Tex. App.—Eastland 2002, no pet.) (quoting and repeating the summary of Texas fiduciary duty principles from *Gearhart*).

25 *Floyd v. Hefner*, No. H-03-5693, 2006 WL 2844245 (S.D. Tex. Sept. 29, 2006); *see FDIC v. Harrington*, 844 F. Supp. 300 (N.D. Tex. 1994).

26 *See generally Flanary v. Mills*, 150 S.W.3d 785 (Tex. App.—Austin 2004, pet. denied) (examining situation where uncle and nephew incorporated 50%/50% owned roofing business, but never issued stock certificates or had board or shareholder meetings; uncle used corporation's banking account as his own, told nephew business doing poorly and sent check to nephew for $7,500 as his share of proceeds of business for four years; the Court held uncle liable for breach of fiduciary duties that we would label loyalty and candor.)

27 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 719.

28 *Int'l Bankers Life Ins. Co. v. Holloway*, 368 S.W.2d 567, 578 (Tex. 1967).

29 *Int'l Bankers Life Ins. Co. v. Holloway*, 368 S.W.2d 567, 577 (Tex. 1967) (indicating that good faith conduct requires a showing that the directors had "an intent to confer a benefit to the corporation.").

30 *Johnson v. Jackson Walker, L.L.P.*, 247 S.W.3d 765, 772 (Tex. App.—Dallas 2008), quoting from BLACK'S LAW DICTIONARY 701 (7th ed. 1999).

b. Self-Dealing Transactions.

In general, a director will not be permitted to derive a personal profit or advantage at the expense of the corporation and must act solely with an eye to the best interest of the corporation, unhampered by any pecuniary interest of his own.[31] The Court in *Gearhart* summarized Texas law with respect to the question of whether a director is "interested" in the context of self-dealing transactions:

> A director is considered "interested" if he or she (1) makes a personal profit from a transaction by dealing with the corporation or usurps a corporate opportunity . . .; (2) buys or sells assets of the corporation . . . ; (3) transacts business in his director's capacity with a second corporation of which he is also a director or significantly financially associated . . . ; or (4) transacts business in his director's capacity with a family member.[32]

The Texas Corporate Statutes permit a corporation to renounce any interest in business opportunities presented to the corporation or one or more of its officers, directors or shareholders in its certificate of formation or by action of its board of directors.[33]

c. Oversight.

In Texas, an absence of good faith may also be found in situations where there is a severe failure of director oversight. In *FDIC v. Harrington*,[34] a Federal District Court applying Texas law held that there is an absence of good faith when a board "abdicates [its] responsibilities and fails to exercise any judgment."

2. Care.

a. Business Judgment Rule; Gross Negligence.

The duty of care in Texas requires the director to handle his duties with such care as an ordinarily prudent man would use under similar circumstances. In performing this obligation, the director must be diligent and informed and exercise honest and unbiased business judgment in pursuit of corporate interests.[35]

In general, the duty of care will be satisfied if the director's actions comport with the standard of the business judgment rule. The Fifth Circuit stated in *Gearhart* that, in spite of the requirement that a corporate director handle his duties with such care as an ordinarily prudent man would use under similar circumstances, Texas courts will not impose liability upon a

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31 *A. Copeland Enters. Inc. v. Guste*, 706 F. Supp. 1283, 1291 (W.D. Tex. 1989); *Milam v. Cooper Co.*, 258 S.W.2d 953 (Tex. Civ. App.—Waco 1953, writ ref'd n.r.e.); *see* Kendrick, *The Interested Director in Texas*, 21 Sw. L.J. 794 (1967).

32 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 719-20 (citations omitted); *see Landon v. S & H Mktg. Group, Inc.*, 82 S.W.3d 666, 672 (Tex. App.—Eastland 2002, no pet.) (citing and repeating the "independence" test articulated in *Gearhart*). *See also infra* notes 284-292 and related text.

33 TBCA art. 2.02(20), TBOC § 2.101(21); *see infra* note 282 and related text.

34 844 F. Supp. 300, 306 (N.D. Tex. 1994).

35 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 719; *McCollum v. Dollar*, 213 S.W. 259, 260 (Tex. Comm'n App. 1919, holding approved).

noninterested corporate director unless the challenged action is *ultra vires* or is tainted by fraud. In a footnote in the *Gearhart* decision, the Fifth Circuit stated:

> The business judgment rule is a defense to the duty of care. As such, the Texas business judgment rule precludes judicial interference with the business judgment of directors absent a showing of fraud or an *ultra vires* act. If such a showing is not made, then the good or bad faith of the directors is irrelevant.[36]

In applying the business judgment rule in Texas, the Court in *Gearhart* and courts in other recent cases have quoted from the early Texas decision of *Cates v. Sparkman*,[37] as setting the standard for judicial intervention in cases involving duty of care issues:

> [I]f the acts or things are or may be that which the majority of the company have a right to do, or if they have been done irregularly, negligently, or imprudently, or are within the exercise of their discretion and judgment in the development or prosecution of the enterprise in which their interests are involved, these would not constitute such a breach of duty, however unwise or inexpedient such acts might be, as would authorize interference by the courts at the suit of a shareholder.[38]

In *Gearhart* the Court commented that "[e]ven though *Cates* was decided in 1889, and despite the ordinary care standard announced in *McCollum v. Dollar, supra*, Texas courts to this day will not impose liability upon a noninterested corporate director unless the challenged action is *ultra vires* or is tainted by fraud."[39]

Neither *Gearhart* nor the earlier Texas cases on which it relied referenced "gross negligence" as a standard for director liability. If read literally, the business judgment rule articulated in the case would protect even grossly negligent conduct. Federal District Court decisions in FDIC and RTC initiated cases, however, have declined to interpret Texas law this broadly and have held that the Texas business judgment rule does not protect "any breach of the duty of care that amounts to gross negligence" or "directors who abdicate their responsibilities and fail to exercise any judgment."[40] These decisions "appear to be the product of the special treatment banks may receive under Texas law" and may not be followed to hold directors "liable for gross negligence under Texas law as it exists now" in other businesses.[41]

Gross negligence in Texas is defined as "that entire want of care which would raise the belief that the act or omission complained of was the result of a conscious indifference to the

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36 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 723, n.9.

37 *Cates v. Sparkman*, 11 S.W. 846, 849 (Tex. 1889).

38 *Id.*

39 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 721.

40 *FDIC v. Harrington*, 844 F. Supp. 300, 306 (N.D. Tex. 1994); *see also FDIC v. Schreiner*, 892 F. Supp. 869 (W.D. Tex. 1995); *FDIC v. Benson*, 867 F. Supp. 512 (S.D. Tex. 1994); *RTC v. Acton*, 844 F. Supp, 307, 314 (N.D. Tex. 1994); *RTC v. Norris*, 830 F. Supp. 351, 357-58 (S.D. Tex. 1993); *FDIC v. Brown*, 812 F. Supp. 722, 726 (S.D. Tex. 1992); *cf. RTC v. Miramon*, 22 F.3d 1357 (5th Cir. 1994) (following *Harrington* analysis of § 1821(K) of the Financial Institutions Reform, Recovery and Enforcement Act (*"FIRREA"*) which held that federal common law of director liability did not survive FIRREA and applied Texas' gross negligence standard for financial institution director liability cases under FIRREA).

41 *Floyd v. Hefner*, C.A. No. H-03-5693, 2006 WL 2844245 at *28 (S.D. Tex. 2006).

right or welfare of the person or persons to be affected by it."[42] In *Harrington*, the Court concluded "that a director's total abdication of duties falls within this definition of gross negligence."[43]

The business judgment rule in Texas does not necessarily protect a director with respect to transactions in which he is "interested." It simply means that the action will have to be challenged on duty of loyalty rather than duty of care grounds.[44]

b. **Reliance on Reports.**

Directors may "in good faith and with ordinary care, rely on information, opinions, reports or statements, including financial statements and other financial data," prepared by officers or employees of the corporation, counsel, accountants, investment bankers or "other persons as to matters the director reasonably believes are within the person's professional or expert competence."[45]

c. **Charter Limitations on Director Liability.**

The Texas Corporate Statutes allow a Texas corporation to provide in its certificate of formation limitations on (or partial limitation of) director liability for monetary damages in relation to the duty of care.[46] The liability of directors may not be so limited or eliminated, however, in connection with breaches of the duty of loyalty, acts not in good faith, intentional misconduct or knowing violations of law, obtaining improper benefits or acts for which liability is expressly provided by statute.[47]

3. Other (obedience).

The duty of obedience in Texas requires a director to avoid committing *ultra vires* acts, i.e., acts beyond the scope of the powers of the corporation as defined by its articles of incorporation and Texas law.[48] An *ultra vires* act may be voidable under Texas law, but the director will not be held personally liable for such act unless the act is in violation of a specific statute or against public policy.

The RTC's complaint in *RTC v. Norris*[49] asserted that the directors of a failed financial institution breached their fiduciary duty of obedience by failing to cause the institution to adequately respond to regulatory warnings: "The defendants committed *ultra vires* acts by ignoring warnings from [regulators], by failing to put into place proper review and lending

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42 *Burk Royalty Co. v. Walls*, 616 S.W.2d 911, 920 (Tex. 1981) (citing *Missouri Pac. Ry. v. Shuford*, 72 Tex. 165, 10 S.W. 408, 411 (1888)).

43 *Harrington*, 844 F. Supp. at 306, n.7.

44 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 723, n.9.

45 TBCA art. 2.41(D); TBOC § 3.102.

46 TMCLA art. 1302-7.06; TBOC § 7.001; *see infra* note 281 and related text.

47 TMCLA art. 1302-7.06; TBOC § 7.001.

48 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 719.

49 *RTC v. Norris*, 830 F. Supp. 351, 355 (S.D. Tex. 1993).

procedures, and by ratifying loans that did not comply with state and federal regulations and Commonwealth's Bylaws."[50] In rejecting this RTC argument, the Court wrote:

> The RTC does not cite, and the court has not found, any case in which a disinterested director has been found liable under Texas law for alleged *ultra vires* acts of employees, absent pleadings and proof that the director knew of or took part in the act, even where the act is illegal.
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> . . . .
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> Under the business judgment rule, Texas courts have refused to impose personal liability on corporate directors for illegal or *ultra vires* acts of corporate agents unless the directors either participated in the act or had actual knowledge of the act . . . .[51]

D. Fiduciary Duties in Delaware Cases.

1. Loyalty.

a. Conflicts of Interest.

In Delaware, the duty of loyalty mandates "that there shall be no conflict between duty and self-interest."[52] It demands that the best interests of the corporation and its stockholders take precedence over any personal interest or bias of a director that is not shared by stockholders generally.[53] The Delaware Court of Chancery has summarized the duty of loyalty as follows:

> Without intending to necessarily cover every case, it is possible to say broadly that the duty of loyalty is transgressed when a corporate fiduciary, whether director, officer or controlling shareholder, uses his or her corporate office or, in the case of a controlling shareholder, control over corporate machinery, to promote, advance or effectuate a transaction between the corporation and such person (or an entity in which the fiduciary has a substantial economic interest, directly or indirectly) and that transaction is not substantively fair to the corporation. That is, breach of loyalty cases inevitably involve conflicting economic or other interests, even if only in the somewhat diluted form present in every "entrenchment" case.[54]

Importantly, conflicts of interest do not per se result in a breach of the duty of loyalty. Rather, it is the manner in which an interested director handles a conflict and the processes invoked to ensure fairness to the corporation and its stockholders that will determine the

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50 *Id.*

51 *Id.*

52 *Guth v. Loft*, 5 A.2d 503, 510 (Del. 1939).

53 *Cede & Co. v. Technicolor, Inc.,* 634 A.2d 345, 361 (Del. 1993) (*"Technicolor I"*). *See infra* notes 276-292and related text.

54 *Solash v. Telex Corp.,* 1988 WL 3587 at *7 (Del. Ch. 1988). Some of the procedural safeguards typically invoked to assure fairness in transactions involving Board conflicts of interest are discussed in more detail *infra*, in connection with the entire fairness standard of review.

propriety of the director's conduct and the validity of the particular transaction. Moreover, the Delaware courts have emphasized that only material personal interests or influences will imbue a transaction with duty of loyalty implications.

The duty of loyalty may be implicated in connection with numerous types of corporate transactions, including, for example, the following: contracts between the corporation and directors or entities in which directors have a material interest; management buyouts; dealings by a parent corporation with a subsidiary; corporate acquisitions and reorganizations in which the interests of a controlling stockholder and the minority stockholders might diverge; usurpations of corporate opportunities; competition by directors or officers with the corporation; use of corporate office, property or information for purposes unrelated to the best interest of the corporation; insider trading; and actions that have the purpose or practical effect of perpetuating directors in office. In Delaware, a director can be found guilty of a breach of duty of loyalty by approving a transaction in which the director did not personally profit, but did approve a transaction that benefited the majority stockholder to the detriment of the minority stockholders.[55]

Federal laws can subject corporate directors and officers to additional exposure in conflict of interest situations.[56] Directors and officers have been convicted for "honest services fraud" under 18 U.S.C. § 1346 for entering into contracts on behalf of their employer with entities in which they held an interest without advising their employer of the interest.[57]

b. Good Faith.

Good faith is far from a new concept in Delaware fiduciary duty law.[58] Good faith long was viewed by the Delaware courts (and still is viewed by many commentators) as an integral component of the duties of care and loyalty. The concept of good faith is also a limitation on the ability of entities to rely on Delaware statutes.[59] In one of the early, landmark decisions analyzing the contours of the duty of loyalty, the Delaware Supreme Court observed that "no

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55 *Crescent/Mach I Partners, L.P. v. Twiner*, 846 A.2d 963, n.50 (Del. Ch. 2000); *Strassburger v. Earley*, 752 A.2d 557, 581 (Del. Ch. 2000).

56 *See infra* notes 229-274 and related text (regarding the effect of SOX on state law fiduciary duties).

57 18 U.S.C. § 1346 defines "scheme or artifice to defraud" under the U.S. mail and wire fraud statutes to include "a scheme or artifice to deprive another of the intangible right to receive honest services." 18 U.S.C. § 1346 (2008). *See* Frank C. Razzano and Kristin H. Jones, *Prosecution of Private Corporate Conduct – The Uncertainty Surrounding Honest Services Fraud*, 18 BUS. L. TODAY 37 (Jan.–Feb. 2009).

58 Leo Strine, Lawrence Hamermesh, R. Franklin Balotti and Jeffrey Gorris, *Loyalty's Core Demand: The Defining Role of Good Faith in Corporation Law*, Widener Law School Legal Studies Research Paper o. 09-13, Harvard Law & Economics Discussion Paper No. 630, *available at* http://ssrn.com/abstract=1349971.

59 In summarizing the Delaware doctrine of "independent legal significance" and that it is subject to the requirement of good faith, Delaware Vice Chancellor Leo E. Strine, Jr. wrote in *The Role of Delaware in the American Corporate Governance System, and Some Preliminary Musings on the Meltdown's Implications for Corporate Law*, Governance of the Modern Firm 2008, Molengraaff Institute for Private Law, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands (December 13, 2008):

> The [DGCL] provides transactional planners with multiple routes to accomplish identical ends. Under the doctrine of independent legal significance, a board of directors is permitted to effect a transaction through whatever means it chooses in *good faith*. Thus, if one method would require a stockholder vote, and another would not, the board may choose the less complicated and more certain transactional method. (Emphasis added).

See also infra notes 903 and 1163 and related text.

hard and fast rule can be formatted" for determining whether a director has acted in "good faith."[60] While that observation remains true today, the case law and applicable commentary provide useful guidance regarding some of the touchstone principles underlying the duty of good faith.[61]

The duty of good faith was recognized as a distinct directorial duty in *Cede & Co. v. Technicolor, Inc.*[62] The duty of good faith requires that directors act honestly, in the best interest of the corporation, and in a manner that is not knowingly unlawful or contrary to public policy. While the Court's review requires it to examine the Board's subjective motivation, the Court will utilize objective facts to infer such motivation. Like a duty of care analysis, such review likely will focus on the process by which the Board reached the decision under review. Consistent with earlier articulations of the level of conduct necessary to infer bad faith (or irrationality), more recent case law suggests that only fairly egregious conduct (such as a knowing and deliberate indifference to a potential risk of harm to the corporation) will rise to the level of "bad faith."[63]

"Waste" constitutes "bad faith," but director liability for waste requires proof that the directors approved an "exchange that is so one sided that no business person of ordinary, sound judgment could conclude that the corporation has received adequate consideration."[64] Waste is a derivative claim.[65]

The impetus for an increased focus on the duty of good faith is the availability of damages as a remedy against directors who are found to have acted in bad faith. DGCL § 102(b)(7) authorizes corporations to include in their certificates of incorporation a provision eliminating or limiting directors' liability for breaches of the fiduciary duty of care. However, DGCL § 102(b)(7) also expressly provides that directors cannot be protected from liability for either actions not taken in good faith or breaches of the duty of loyalty.[66] A finding of a lack of good faith has profound significance for directors not only because they may not be exculpated from liability for such conduct, but also because a prerequisite to eligibility for indemnification under DGCL § 145 of the DGCL is that the directors who were unsuccessful in their litigation nevertheless must demonstrate that they have acted "in good faith and in a manner the person

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60 *See Guth*, 5 A.2d at 510.

61 *See generally Stone v. Ritter*, 911 A.2d 362 (Del. 2006); *In re The Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litig*., 906 A.2d 27 (Del. 2006); John F. Grossbauer and Nancy N. Waterman, *The (No Longer) Overlooked Duty of Good Faith Under Delaware Law*, VIII Deal Points No. 2 of 6 (The Newsletter of the ABA Business Law Section Committee on Negotiated Acquisitions, No. 2, Summer 2003).

62 634 A.2d 345, 361 (Del. 1993) (*Technicolor I*).

63 *In re Disney*, 906 A.2d at 63.

64 *In re Citigroup Inc. S'holder Derivative Litig.*, C.A. No. 3338-CC, 2009 WL 448192 (Del. Ch. Feb. 24, 2009).

65 *Thornton v. Bernard Tech., Inc.*, C.A. No. 962-VCN, 2009 WL 426179 (Del. Ch. Feb. 20, 2009) ("When a director engages in self-dealing or commits waste, he takes from the corporate treasury and any recovery would flow directly back into the corporate treasury.").

66 Specifically, DGCL § 102(b)(7) authorizes the inclusion in a certificate of incorporation of:

> A provision eliminating or limiting the personal liability of a director to the corporation or its stockholders for monetary damages for breach of fiduciary duty as a director, provided that such provision shall not eliminate or limit the liability or a director: (i) For any breach of the director's duty of loyalty to the corporation or its stockholders; (ii) for acts or omissions not in good faith or which involve intentional misconduct or a knowing violation of law; (iii) under §174 of this title [dealing with the unlawful payment of dividends or unlawful stock purchase or redemption]; or (iv) for any transaction from which the director derived an improper personal benefit.

reasonably believed was in or not opposed to the best interests of the corporation."[67] Accordingly, a director who has breached the duty of good faith not only is exposed to personal liability, but also may not be able to seek indemnification from the corporation for any judgment obtained against her or for expenses incurred (unsuccessfully) litigating the issue of liability.[68] Thus, in cases involving decisions made by directors who are disinterested and independent with respect to a transaction (and, therefore, the duty of loyalty is not implicated), the duty of good faith still provides an avenue for asserting claims of personal liability against the directors. Moreover, these claims, if successful, create barriers to indemnification of amounts paid by directors in judgment or settlement.[69]

In *Stone v. Ritter*,[70] the Delaware Supreme Court held that "good faith" is not a separate fiduciary duty like the duties of care and loyalty, but rather is embedded in the duty of loyalty:

> [F]ailure to act in good faith results in two additional doctrinal consequences. First, although good faith may be described colloquially as part of a "triad" of fiduciary duties that includes the duties of care and loyalty, the obligation to act in good faith does not establish an independent fiduciary duty that stands on the same footing as the duties of care and loyalty. Only the latter two duties, where violated, may directly result in liability, whereas a failure to act in good faith may do so, but indirectly. The second doctrinal consequence is that the fiduciary duty of loyalty is not limited to cases involving a financial or other cognizable fiduciary conflict of interest.

c. Oversight/Caremark.

Directors also may be found to have violated the duty of loyalty when they fail to act in the face of a known duty to act[71] – i.e., they act in bad faith.[72] In an important Delaware Chancery Court decision on this issue, *In re Caremark International, Inc. Derivative Litigation*,[73] the settlement of a derivative action that involved claims that Caremark's Board breached its fiduciary duty to the company in connection with alleged violations by the company of anti-referral provisions of Federal Medicare and Medicaid statutes was approved. In so doing, the Court discussed the scope of a Board's duty to supervise or monitor corporate performance and stay informed about the business of the corporation as follows:

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67 DGCL §§ 145(a)-(b).

68 In contrast, it is at least theoretically possible that a director who has been found to have breached his or her duty of loyalty could be found to have acted in good faith and, therefore, be eligible for indemnification of expenses (and, in non-derivative cases, amounts paid in judgment or settlement) by the corporation. *See Blasius Indus., Inc. v. Atlas Corp.,* 564 A.2d 651, 663 (Del. Ch. 1988) (finding directors to have acted in good faith but nevertheless breached their duty of loyalty).

69 The availability of directors and officers liability insurance also may be brought into question by a finding of bad faith. Policies often contain exclusions that could be cited by carriers as a basis for denying coverage.

70 911 A.2d 362 (Del. 2006).

71 *See* Business Leaders Must Address Cybersecurity Risk attached as **Appendix C**.

72 In *Stone v. Ritter*, the Delaware Supreme Court held that "the requirement to act in good faith is a subsidiary element, i.e., a condition, of the fundamental duty of loyalty." *Id.* at 370 (internal quotations omitted).

73 698 A.2d 959 (Del. Ch. 1996); *see* Regina F. Burch, *Director Oversight and Monitoring: The Standard of Care and The Standard of Liability Post-Enron*, 6 WYO. L. REV. 482, 485 (2006).

> [I]t would . . . be a mistake to conclude . . . that corporate boards may satisfy their obligations to be reasonably informed concerning the corporation, without assuring themselves that information and reporting systems exist in the organization that are reasonably designed to provide to senior management and to the board itself timely, accurate information sufficient to allow management and the board, each within its scope, to reach informed judgments concerning both the corporation's compliance with law and its business performance.[74]

Stated affirmatively, "a director's obligation includes a duty to attempt in good faith to assure that a corporate information and reporting system, which the board concludes is adequate, exists, and that failure to do so under some circumstances may . . . render a director liable."[75] While *Caremark* recognizes a cause of action for uninformed inaction, the holding is subject to the following:

First, the Court held that "only a sustained or systematic failure of the board to exercise oversight — such as an utter failure to attempt to assure a reasonable information and reporting system exists — will establish the lack of good faith that is a necessary condition to liability."[76] It is thus not at all clear that a plaintiff could recover based on a single example of director inaction, or even a series of examples relating to a single subject.

Second, *Caremark* noted that "the level of detail that is appropriate for such an information system is a question of business judgment,"[77] which indicates that the presence of an existing information and reporting system will do much to cut off any derivative claim, because the adequacy of the system itself will be protected.

Third, *Caremark* considered it obvious that "no rationally designed information system . . . will remove the possibility" that losses could occur.[78] As a result, "[a]ny action seeking recovery for losses would logically entail a judicial determination of proximate cause."[79] This holding indicates that a loss to the corporation is not itself evidence of an inadequate information and reporting system. Instead, the Court will focus on the adequacy of the system overall and whether a causal link exists.[80]

The *Caremark* issue of a board's systematic failure to exercise oversight was revisited by the Seventh Circuit applying Illinois law in *In re Abbott Laboratories Derivative Shareholders*

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74 *In re Caremark Int'l Inc. Derivative Litig.*, 698 A.2d at 970.

75 *Id.*

76 *Id.* at 971.

77 *Id.* at 970.

78 *Id.*

79 *Id.* at 970 n.27.

80 *See generally* Eisenberg, *Corporate Governance The Board of Directors and Internal Control*, 19 CARDOZO L. REV. 237 (1997); Pitt, et al., *Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk: Director Duties to Uncover and Respond to Management Misconduct*, 1005 PLI/CORP. 301, 304 (1997); Gruner, *Director and Officer Liability for Defective Compliance Systems: Caremark and Beyond*, 995 PLI/CORP. 57, 64-70 (1997); Funk, *Recent Developments in Delaware Corporate Law*: *In re Caremark International Inc. Derivative Litigation: Director Behavior, Shareholder Protection, and Corporate Legal Compliance*, 22 DEL. J. CORP. L. 311 (1997).

Litigation.[81] *Abbott* involved a shareholders derivative suit against the health care corporation's directors, alleging breach of fiduciary duty and asserting that the directors were liable under state law for harms resulting from a consent decree between the corporation and the Food and Drug Administration ("*FDA*"). The consent decree had followed a six-year period during which the FDA had given numerous notices to the corporation of violations of FDA manufacturing regulations and imposed a $100 million fine, which resulted in a $168 million charge to earnings. In reversing a District Court dismissal of plaintiff's complaint for failure to adequately plead that demand upon the board of directors would be futile, the Seventh Circuit held that the complaints raised reasonable doubt as to whether the directors' actions were the product of a valid exercise of business judgment, thus excusing demand, and were sufficient to overcome the directors' exemption from liability contained in the certificate of incorporation, at least for purposes of defeating the plaintiffs' motion to dismiss.[82] In so holding, the Seventh Circuit noted that the complaint pled that the directors knew or should have known of the FDA noncompliance problems and demonstrated bad faith by ignoring them for six years and not disclosing them in the company's SEC periodic reports during this period. The Court relied upon Delaware case law and wrote:

> [T]he facts support a reasonable assumption that there was a "sustained and systematic failure of the board to exercise oversight," in this case intentional in that the directors knew of the violations of law, took no steps in an effort to prevent or remedy the situation, and that failure to take any action for such an inordinate amount of time resulted in substantial corporate losses, establishing a lack of good faith. We find that . . . the directors' decision to not act was not made in good faith and was contrary to the best interests of the company.[83]

The Seventh Circuit further held that the provision in the corporation's articles of incorporation limiting director liability[84] would not be sufficient to sustain a motion to dismiss. It stated that in a case such as this "[w]here the complaint sufficiently alleges a breach of fiduciary duties based on a failure of the directors to act in good faith, bad faith actions present a question of fact that cannot be determined at the pleading stage."[85] The Court intimated that had the case involved a

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81 325 F.3d 795 (7th Cir. 2003). The *Abbott* Court distinguished *Caremark* on the grounds that in the latter, there was no evidence indicating that the directors "conscientiously permitted a known violation of law by the corporation to occur," unlike evidence to the contrary in *Abbott*. *Id.* at 806 (quoting *Caremark*, 698 A.2d at 972). However, the *Abbott* Court nonetheless relied on *Caremark* language regarding the connection between a board's systemic failure of oversight and a lack of good faith. *Abbott*, 325 F.3d at 808-09.

82 In *Connolly v. Gasmire*, a Texas court in a derivative action involving a Delaware corporation declined to follow *Abbott* as the Court found no Delaware case in which *Abbott* had been followed. 257 S.W.3d 831, 851 (Tex. App.—Dallas 2008, no pet. h.).

83 *Abbott*, 325 F.3d at 809.

84 Abbott's certificate of incorporation included the following provision limiting director liability:

> A director of the corporation shall not be personally liable to the corporation or its shareholders for monetary damages for breach of fiduciary duty as a director, except for liability (i) for any breach of the director's duty of loyalty to the corporation or its shareholders, (ii) for acts or omissions not in good faith or that involve intentional misconduct or a knowing violation of law, (iii) under Section 8.65 of the Illinois Business Corporation Act, or (iv) for any transaction from which the director derived an improper personal benefit . . . .

Id. at 810.

85 *Id.* at 811.

simple allegation of breach of the duty of care and not bad faith, the liability limitation clause might have led to a different result.[86]

In *Stone v. Ritter*[87] the Delaware Supreme Court affirmed *Caremark* as the standard for assessing director oversight responsibility. *Stone v. Ritter* was a "classic *Caremark* claim" arising out of a bank paying $50 million in fines and penalties to resolve government and regulatory investigations pertaining principally to the failure of bank employees to file Suspicious Activity Reports ("*SARs*") as required by the Bank Secrecy Act ("*BSA*") and various anti money laundering regulations. The Chancery Court dismissed the plaintiffs' derivative complaint which alleged that "the defendants had utterly failed to implement any sort of statutorily required monitoring, reporting or information controls that would have enabled them to learn of problems requiring their attention." In affirming the Chancery Court, the Delaware Supreme Court commented, "[i]n this appeal, the plaintiffs acknowledge that the directors neither 'knew [n]or should have known that violations of law were occurring,' i.e., that there were no 'red flags' before the directors" and held "[c]onsistent with our opinion in *In re Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litigation*,[88] . . . that *Caremark* articulates the necessary conditions for assessing director oversight liability and . . . that the *Caremark* standard was properly applied to evaluate the derivative complaint in this case."

The Supreme Court of Delaware explained the doctrinal basis for its holding as follows and, in so doing, held that "good faith" is not a separate fiduciary duty:

> As evidenced by the language quoted above, the *Caremark* standard for so-called "oversight" liability draws heavily upon the concept of director failure to act in good faith. That is consistent with the definition(s) of bad faith recently approved by this Court in its recent *Disney* decision, where we held that a failure to act in good faith requires conduct that is qualitatively different from, and more culpable than, the conduct giving rise to a violation of the fiduciary duty of care (i.e., gross negligence). In *Disney*, we identified the following examples of conduct that would establish a failure to act in good faith:
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> > A failure to act in good faith may be shown, for instance, where the fiduciary intentionally acts with a purpose other than that of advancing the best interests of the corporation, where the fiduciary acts with the intent to violate applicable positive law, or where the fiduciary intentionally fails to act in the face of a known duty to act, demonstrating a conscious disregard for his duties. There may be other examples of bad faith yet to be proven or alleged, but these three are the most salient.
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> The third of these examples describes, and is fully consistent with, the lack of good faith conduct that the *Caremark* Court held was a "necessary condition" for director oversight liability, i.e., "a sustained or systematic failure of the board

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86 *See id.* at 810.

87 911 A.2d 362, 365 (Del. 2006).

88 *See In re The Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litigation*, 906 A.2d 27, 63 (Del. 2006).

to exercise oversight – such as an utter failure to attempt to assure a reasonable information and reporting system exists . . . .” Indeed, our opinion in *Disney* cited *Caremark* with approval for that proposition. Accordingly, the Court of Chancery applied the correct standard in assessing whether demand was excused in this case where failure to exercise oversight was the basis or theory of the plaintiffs’ claim for relief.

It is important, in this context, to clarify a doctrinal issue that is critical to understanding fiduciary liability under *Caremark* as we construe that case. The phraseology used in *Caremark* and that we employ here – describing the lack of good faith as a “necessary condition to liability” – is deliberate. The purpose of that formulation is to communicate that a failure to act in good faith is not conduct that results, *ipso facto*, in the direct imposition of fiduciary liability. The failure to act in good faith may result in liability because the requirement to act in good faith “is a subsidiary element[,]” i.e., a condition, “of the fundamental duty of loyalty.” It follows that because a showing of bad faith conduct, in the sense described in *Disney* and *Caremark*, is essential to establish director oversight liability, the fiduciary duty violated by that conduct is the duty of loyalty.

This view of a failure to act in good faith results in two additional doctrinal consequences. First, although good faith may be described colloquially as part of a “triad” of fiduciary duties that includes the duties of care and loyalty, the obligation to act in good faith does not establish an independent fiduciary duty that stands on the same footing as the duties of care and loyalty. Only the latter two duties, where violated, may directly result in liability, whereas a failure to act in good faith may do so, but indirectly. The second doctrinal consequence is that the fiduciary duty of loyalty is not limited to cases involving a financial or other cognizable fiduciary conflict of interest. It also encompasses cases where the fiduciary fails to act in good faith. As the Court of Chancery aptly put it in *Guttman*, “[a] director cannot act loyally towards the corporation unless she acts in the good faith belief that her actions are in the corporation’s best interest.”

We hold that *Caremark* articulates the necessary conditions predicate for director oversight liability: (a) the directors utterly failed to implement any reporting or information system or controls; or (b) having implemented such a system or controls, consciously failed to monitor or oversee its operations thus disabling themselves from being informed of risks or problems requiring their attention. In either case, imposition of liability requires a showing that the directors knew that they were not discharging their fiduciary obligations. Where directors fail to act in the face of a known duty to act, thereby demonstrating a conscious disregard for their responsibilities, they breach their duty of loyalty by failing to discharge that fiduciary obligation in good faith.[89]

Stone v. Ritter was a “demand-excused” case in which the plaintiffs did not demand that the directors commence the derivative action because allegedly the directors breached their

[89] 911 A.2d at 369-70.

oversight duty and, as a result, faced a "substantial likelihood of liability" as a result of their "utter failure" to act in good faith to put into place policies and procedures to ensure compliance with regulatory obligations. The Court of Chancery found that the plaintiffs did not plead the existence of "red flags" – "facts showing that the board ever was aware that company's internal controls were inadequate, that these inadequacies would result in illegal activity, and that the board chose to do nothing about problems it allegedly knew existed."[90] In dismissing the derivative complaint, the Court of Chancery concluded:

> This case is not about a board's failure to carefully consider a material corporate decision that was presented to the board. This is a case where information was not reaching the board because of ineffective internal controls.... With the benefit of hindsight, it is beyond question that AmSouth's internal controls with respect to the Bank Secrecy Act and anti-money laundering regulations compliance were inadequate. Neither party disputes that the lack of internal controls resulted in a huge fine--$50 million, alleged to be the largest ever of its kind. The fact of those losses, however, is not alone enough for a court to conclude that a majority of the corporation's board of directors is disqualified from considering demand that AmSouth bring suit against those responsible.[91]

The adequacy of the plaintiffs' assertion that demand was excused turned on whether the complaint alleged facts sufficient to show that the defendant directors were potentially personally liable for the failure of non-director bank employees to file the required Suspicious Activity Reports. In affirming the Chancery Court, the Delaware Supreme Court wrote:

> For the plaintiffs' derivative complaint to withstand a motion to dismiss, "only a sustained or systematic failure of the board to exercise oversight—such as an utter failure to attempt to assure a reasonable information and reporting system exists—will establish the lack of good faith that is a necessary condition to liability." As the *Caremark* decision noted:
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> > Such a test of liability – lack of good faith as evidenced by sustained or systematic failure of a director to exercise reasonable oversight – is quite high. But, a demanding test of liability in the oversight context is probably beneficial to corporate shareholders as a class, as it is in the board decision context, since it makes board service by qualified persons more likely, while continuing to act as a stimulus to *good faith performance of duty* by such directors.
>
> The KPMG Report – which the plaintiffs explicitly incorporated by reference into their derivative complaint – refutes the assertion that the directors "never took the necessary steps . . . to ensure that a reasonable BSA compliance and reporting system existed." KPMG's findings reflect that the Board received and approved relevant policies and procedures, delegated to certain employees

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90 *Id.* at 370.

91 *Id.* at 370-71.

> and departments the responsibility for filing SARs and monitoring compliance, and exercised oversight by relying on periodic reports from them. Although there ultimately may have been failures by employees to report deficiencies to the Board, there is no basis for an oversight claim seeking to hold the directors personally liable for such failures by the employees.
>
> With the benefit of hindsight, the plaintiffs' complaint seeks to equate a bad outcome with bad faith. The lacuna in the plaintiffs' argument is a failure to recognize that the directors' good faith exercise of oversight responsibility may not invariably prevent employees from violating criminal laws, or from causing the corporation to incur significant financial liability, or both, as occurred in *Graham, Caremark* and this very case. In the absence of red flags, good faith in the context of oversight must be measured by the directors' actions "to assure a reasonable information and reporting system exists" and not by second-guessing after the occurrence of employee conduct that results in an unintended adverse outcome. Accordingly, we hold that the Court of Chancery properly applied *Caremark* and dismissed the plaintiffs' derivative complaint for failure to excuse demand by alleging particularized facts that created reason to doubt whether the directors had acted in good faith in exercising their oversight responsibilities.[92]

In *American International Group, Inc. Consolidated Derivative Litigation; AIG, Inc. v. Greenberg*, Vice Chancellor Strine denied a motion to dismiss *Caremark* claims against former Chairman of American International Group, Inc. ("*AIG*") Maurice "Hank" Greenberg, three other directors (who were also executive officers part of Greenberg's "*Inner Circle*") and other AIG directors for harm AIG suffered when it was revealed that AIG's financial statements overstated the value of AIG by billions of dollars and that AIG had engaged in schemes to evade taxes and rig insurance markets.[93] The Court emphasized that the claims were not based on one instance of fraud, but rather a pervasive scheme of extraordinary illegal misconduct at the direction and under the control of defendant Greenberg and his Inner Circle, and wrote: "Our Supreme Court has recognized that directors can be liable where they 'consciously failed to monitor or oversee [the company's internal controls] thus disabling themselves from being informed of risks or problems requiring their attention.'"[94] Recognizing that this standard requires scienter, the Court found pled facts that supported an inference that two of the defendant directors were conscious of the fact that they were not doing their jobs.

Breach of fiduciary duty claims were also not dismissed against directors alleged to have used insider information to profit at the expense of innocent buyers of stock, with the Court writing: "Many of the worst acts of fiduciary misconduct have involved frauds that personally benefited insiders as an indirect effect of directly inflating the corporation's stock price by the artificial means of cooking the books."[95]

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92 *Id.* at 372-73.

93 965 A.2d 763 (Del. Ch. 2009).

94 *Id.* at 799 (citation omitted).

95 *Id.* at 813.

Shortly thereafter, in *In re Citigroup Inc. Shareholder Derivative Litigation*, Chancellor Chandler distinguished *AIG* and dismissed *Caremark* claims[96] brought against current and former directors of Citigroup for failing to properly monitor and manage the risks that Citigroup faced concerning problems in the subprime lending market.[97] Plaintiffs claimed that there were extensive "red flags" that should have put defendants on notice about problems "that were brewing in the real estate and credit markets," and that defendants ignored the warnings and sacrificed the long term viability of Citigroup for short term profits.[98] The plaintiffs also claimed that the director defendants and certain other defendants were liable for waste for: (i) allowing Citigroup to purchase $2.7 billion in subprime loans; (ii) authorizing and not suspending the Company's share repurchase program which allegedly resulted in the Company buying its own shares at artificially inflated prices; (iii) approving a multi-million dollar payment and benefit package for Citigroup's former CEO; and (iv) allowing the Company to invest in "structured investment vehicles" ("*SIVs*") that were unable to pay off maturing debt.

In analyzing the plaintiffs' theory of director liability under the teachings of *Caremark*, the Chancellor found that the plaintiffs' claims were in essence that the defendants failed to monitor the Company's "business risk" with respect to Citigroup's exposure to the subprime mortgage market. While the plaintiffs supported their *Caremark* claims by arguing that the Board should have been especially conscious of the "red flags" because a majority of the Citigroup directors served on the Board during Citigroup's involvement with the Enron scandals and were members of the Board's Audit and Risk Management ("*ARM*") Committee and, therefore, considered "financial experts," the Chancellor viewed the claims differently:

> Plaintiffs' theory of how the director defendants will face personal liability is a bit of a twist on the traditional *Caremark* claim. In a typical *Caremark* case, plaintiffs argue that the defendants are liable for damages that arise from a failure to properly monitor or oversee employee misconduct or violations of law. For example, in *Caremark* the board allegedly failed to monitor employee actions in violation of the federal Anti-Referral Payments Law; in *Stone*, the directors were charged with a failure of oversight that resulted in liability for the company because of employee violations of the federal Bank Secrecy Act.
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> In contrast, plaintiffs' *Caremark* claims are based on defendants' alleged failure to properly monitor Citigroup's *business risk*, specifically its exposure to the subprime mortgage market. In their answering brief, plaintiffs allege that the

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96 Plaintiffs had not made demand on the Board, alleging that it would have been futile since the directors were defendants in the action and faced substantial liability if the action succeeded. Chancellor Chandler disagreed that demand was excused. He started his analysis by referring to the test articulated by the Delaware Supreme Court in *Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A.2d 805 (Del. 1984), for demand futility where plaintiffs must provide particularized factual allegations that raise a reasonable doubt that the directors are disinterested and that the challenged transaction was otherwise the product of a valid exercise of business judgment, but found that the plaintiffs were complaining about board "inaction" and as a result, the *Aronson* test did not apply. Instead, in order to show demand futility in this situation, the applicable standard is from *Rales v. Blasband*, 634 A. 2d 927 (Del. 1993), which requires that a plaintiff must allege particularized facts that "create a reasonable doubt that, as of the time the complaint is filed, the board of directors could have properly exercised its independent and disinterested business judgment in responding to the demand."

97 964 A.2d 106 (Del. Ch. 2009).

98 *Id.* at 111.

> director defendants are personally liable under *Caremark* for failing to "make a good faith attempt to follow the procedures put in place or fail[ing] to assure that adequate and proper corporate information and reporting systems existed that would enable them to be fully informed regarding Citigroup's risk to the subprime mortgage market." Plaintiffs point to so-called "red flags" that should have put defendants on notice of the problems in the subprime mortgage market and further allege that the board should have been especially conscious of these red flags because a majority of the directors (1) served on the Citigroup board during its previous Enron related conduct and (2) were members of the ARM Committee and considered financial experts.
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> Although these claims are framed by plaintiffs as *Caremark* claims, plaintiffs' theory essentially amounts to a claim that the director defendants should be personally liable to the Company because they failed to fully recognize the risk posed by subprime securities. When one looks past the lofty allegations of duties of oversight and red flags used to dress up these claims, what is left appears to be plaintiff shareholders attempting to hold director defendants personally liable for making (or allowing to be made) business decisions that, in hindsight, turned out poorly for the Company.[99]

The Court commented that the doctrines of the fiduciary duty of care and the business judgment rule have been developed to address those situations, which placed the burden on the plaintiffs not only to show gross negligence, but also to rebut the business judgment rule's presumption that the directors acted in an informed basis, in good faith and in the honest belief that the action was taken in the best interests of the company.

Since Citigroup had a DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision in its certificate of incorporation[100] and the plaintiffs had not alleged that the directors were interested in the transaction, the plaintiffs had to allege with particularity that the directors acted in bad faith. The Court said that a plaintiff can "plead bad faith by alleging with particularity that a director *knowingly* violated a fiduciary duty or failed to act in violation of a *known* duty to act, demonstrating a *conscious* disregard for her duties."[101] In addressing whether the director consciously disregarded an obligation to be reasonably informed about the business and the risks or consciously disregard the duty to monitor and oversee the business, the Court wrote:

> The presumption of the business judgment rule, the protection of an exculpatory § 102(b)(7) provision, and the difficulty of proving a Caremark claim together function to place an extremely high burden on a plaintiff to state a claim for personal director liability for failure to see the extent of a company's business risk.
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> To the extent the Court allows shareholder plaintiffs to succeed on a theory that a director is liable for a failure to monitor business risk, the Court risks

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99 *Id.* at 123-24.

100 *See supra* notes 66-67 and related text.

101 *Citigroup*, 964 A.2d at 125.

> undermining the well settled policy of Delaware law by inviting Courts to perform a hindsight evaluation of the reasonableness or prudence of directors' business decisions. Risk has been defined as the chance that a return on an investment will be different that expected. The essence of the business judgment of managers and directors is deciding how the company will evaluate the trade-off between risk and return. Businesses—and particularly financial institutions—make returns by taking on risk; a company or investor that is willing to take on more risk can earn a higher return. Thus, in almost any business transaction, the parties go into the deal with the knowledge that, even if they have evaluated the situation correctly, the return could be different than they expected.
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> It is almost impossible for a court, in hindsight, to determine whether the directors of a company properly evaluated risk and thus made the "right" business decision. In any investment there is a chance that returns will turn out lower than expected, and generally a smaller chance that they will be far lower than expected. When investments turn out poorly, it is possible that the decision-maker evaluated the deal correctly but got "unlucky" in that a huge loss—the probability of which was very small—actually happened. It is also possible that the decision-maker improperly evaluated the risk posed by an investment and that the company suffered large losses as a result.
>
> Business decision-makers must operate in the real world, with imperfect information, limited resources, and an uncertain future. To impose liability on directors for making a "wrong" business decision would cripple their ability to earn returns for investors by taking business risks. Indeed, this kind of judicial second guessing is what the business judgment rule was designed to prevent, and even if a complaint is framed under a *Caremark* theory, this Court will not abandon such bedrock principles of Delaware fiduciary duty law. With these considerations and the difficult standard required to show director oversight liability in mind, I turn to an evaluation of the allegations in the Complaint.[102]

In light of the "extremely high burden" placed on plaintiffs, the Court concluded that plaintiffs' conclusory allegations (and thus their failure to plead particularized facts) were insufficient to state a *Caremark* claim thereby excusing demand. To the contrary, Citigroup had procedures and controls in place that were designed to monitor risk, including the ARM Committee, and the plaintiffs did not contest these standards. Warning signs are not evidence that the directors consciously disregarded their duties or otherwise acted in bad faith, although they may be evidence that the directors made bad business decisions:

> The allegations in the Complaint amount essentially to a claim that Citigroup suffered large losses and that there were certain warning signs that could or should have put defendants on notice of the business risks related to Citigroup's investments in subprime assets. Plaintiffs then conclude that because defendants failed to prevent the Company's losses associated with certain business risks, they must have consciously ignored these warning signs or

[102] *Id.* at 125-26.

> knowingly failed to monitor the Company's risk in accordance with their fiduciary duties. Such conclusory allegations, however, are not sufficient to state a claim for failure of oversight that would give rise to a substantial likelihood of personal liability, which would require particularized factual allegations demonstrating bad faith by the director defendants.[103]

The Court compared *Citigroup* with the *American International Group, Inc. Consolidated Derivative Litigation*[104] where, unlike the allegations against the Citigroup directors, the defendant directors in the *AIG* case were charged with failure to exercise reasonable oversight over pervasive *fraudulent* and *criminal* conduct:

> This Court's recent decision in *American International Group, Inc. Consolidated Derivative Litigation* demonstrates the stark contrast between the allegations here and allegations that are sufficient to survive a motion to dismiss. In *AIG*, the Court faced a motion to dismiss a complaint that included "well-pled allegations of pervasive, diverse, and substantial financial fraud involving managers at the highest levels of AIG." In concluding that the complaint stated a claim for relief under Rule 12(b)(6), the Court held that the factual allegations in the complaint were sufficient to support an inference that AIG executives running those divisions knew of and approved much of the wrongdoing. The Court reasoned that huge fraudulent schemes were unlikely to be perpetrated without the knowledge of the executive in charge of that division of the company. Unlike the allegations in this case, the defendants in *AIG* allegedly failed to exercise reasonable oversight over pervasive *fraudulent* and *criminal* conduct. Indeed, the Court in *AIG* even stated that the complaint there supported the assertion that top AIG officials were leading a "criminal organization" and that "[t]he diversity, pervasiveness, and materiality of the alleged financial wrongdoing at AIG is extraordinary."
>
> Contrast the *AIG* claims with the claims in this case. Here, plaintiffs argue that the Complaint supports the reasonable conclusion that the director defendants acted in bad faith by failing to see the warning signs of a deterioration in the subprime mortgage market and failing to cause Citigroup to change its investment policy to limit its exposure to the subprime market. Director oversight duties are designed to ensure reasonable reporting and information systems exist that would allow directors to know about and prevent wrongdoing that could cause losses for the Company. There are significant differences between failing to oversee employee fraudulent or criminal conduct and failing to recognize the extent of a Company's business risk. Directors should, indeed must under Delaware law, ensure that reasonable information and reporting systems exist that would put them on notice of fraudulent or criminal conduct within the company. Such oversight programs allow directors to intervene and prevent frauds or other wrongdoing that could expose the company to risk of loss as a result of such conduct. While it may be tempting to say that directors have the same duties to

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103 *Id.* at 126-27.

104 *See supra* note 93 and related text.

> monitor and oversee business risk, imposing *Caremark*-type duties on directors to monitor business risk is fundamentally different. Citigroup was in the business of taking on and managing investment and other business risks. To impose oversight liability on directors for failure to monitor "excessive" risk would involve courts in conducting hindsight evaluations of decisions at the heart of the business judgment of directors. Oversight duties under Delaware law are not designed to subject directors, even expert directors, to *personal liability* for failure to predict the future and to properly evaluate business risk.[105]

The reasoning for the foregoing statement of Delaware law was explained by means of the following query by the Court in footnote 78:

> Query: if the Court were to adopt plaintiffs' theory of the case-that the defendants are personally liable for their failure to see the problems in the subprime mortgage market and Citigroup's exposure to them-then could not a plaintiff succeed on a theory that a director was personally liable for failure to predict the extent of the subprime mortgage crisis and profit from it, even if the company was not exposed to losses from the subprime mortgage market? If directors are going to be held liable for losses for failing to accurately predict market events, then why not hold them liable for failing to profit by predicting market events that, in hindsight, the director should have seen because of certain red (or green?) flags? If one expects director prescience in one direction, why not the other?[106]

The Court observed that the plaintiffs were asking it to engage in the exact kind of judicial second guessing that the business judgment rule proscribes. Especially in a case with staggering losses, it would be tempting to examine why the decision was wrong, but the presumption of the business judgment rule against an objective review of business decisions by judges is no less applicable when losses to the company are large.

The Court also dismissed plaintiffs' allegations that the directors and officers failed to properly disclose Citigroup's exposure to subprime assets, holding that demand was not excused.[107] The Court, however, did not dismiss claims that the directors were liable to the

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105 *Citigroup*, 964 A.2d at 130-31.

106 *Id.* at 131 n. 78.

107 Plaintiffs argued demand futility regarding their disclosure claims based on the "substantial likelihood of liability" standard which would prevent the defendant directors from exercising independent and disinterested business judgment in reviewing a demand. Due to the DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision in Citigroup's charter, such disclosure violations would need to have been done in bad faith, knowingly or intentionally. The Court reviewed these claims and found them wanting in the particularity required by Rule 23.1. For example, it was not demonstrated that the directors knew that there were misstatements or omissions in the financial statements, or that they acted in bad faith by not informing themselves adequately.

The Court explained why the allegations against the ARM Committee were insufficiently detailed for claims involving allegedly faulty financial statements to survive:

> Under our law, to establish liability for misstatements when the board is not seeking shareholder action, shareholder plaintiffs must show that the misstatement was made knowingly or in bad faith.

Citigroup, 964 A.2d at 135. In addition, even so-called financial experts on the ARM Committee were entitled to rely in good faith on reports and statements and opinions, pursuant to DGCL § 141(e), from the corporation's officers and employees who are responsible for preparing the company's financial statements.

corporation for waste in approving a multimillion dollar payment and benefit package to Citigroup's CEO upon his retirement.[108]

d. Candor.

Where directors approve an SEC report that materially misrepresents the nature of benefits provided by a corporation to its controlling shareholder, Chancellor Chandler explained in 2007 that the directors can breach their fiduciary duties of candor and good faith, which are subsets of the duty of loyalty, when they allow their companies to issue deceptive or incomplete communications to their stockholders:

> When a Delaware corporation communicates with its shareholders, even in the absence of a request for shareholder action, shareholders are entitled to honest communication from directors, given with complete candor and in good faith. Communications that depart from this expectation, particularly where it can be shown that the directors involved issued their communication with the knowledge that it was deceptive or incomplete, violate the fiduciary duties that protect shareholders. Such violations are sufficient to subject directors to liability in a derivative claim.

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[108] Plaintiffs argued that demand was futile for their waste claims, not because a majority of the directors were not disinterested and independent, because the "challenged transaction was other than the product of a valid exercise of business judgment." *Citigroup*, 964 A.2d at 136. In addition to the difficulty of satisfying the second prong of *Aronson*, the claim of waste under Delaware law required plaintiffs to plead particularized facts that lead to the inference that the directors approved an "exchange that is so one sided that no business person of ordinary, sound judgment could conclude that the corporation has received adequate consideration." *Id.* The Court noted that there is "an outer limit" to the discretion of the Board in setting compensation, at "which point a decision of the directors on executive compensation is so disproportionately large as to be unconscionable and constitute waste." *Id.* at 138. If waste is found, it is a non-exculpated violation, as waste constitutes bad faith. The Court explained why the compensation package for the departing CEO, who allegedly was at least partially responsible for Citigroup's staggering losses, had been adequately pleaded as a waste claim:

> > According to plaintiffs' allegations, the November 4, 2007 letter agreement provides that Prince will receive $68 million upon his departure from Citigroup, including bonus, salary, and accumulated stockholdings. Additionally, the letter agreement provides that Prince will receive from Citigroup an office, an administrative assistant, and a car and driver for the lesser of five years or until he commences full time employment with another employer. Plaintiffs allege that this compensation package constituted waste and met the "so one sided" standard because, in part, the Company paid the multi-million dollar compensation package to a departing CEO whose failures as CEO were allegedly responsible, in part, for billions of dollars of losses at Citigroup. In exchange for the multi-million dollar benefits and perquisites package provided for in the letter agreement, the letter agreement contemplated that Prince would sign a non-compete agreement, a non-disparagement agreement, a non-solicitation agreement, and a release of claims against the Company. Even considering the text of the letter agreement, I am left with very little information regarding (1) how much additional compensation Prince actually received as a result of the letter agreement and (2) the real value, if any, of the various promises given by Prince. Without more information and taking, as I am required, plaintiffs' well pleaded allegations as true, there is a reasonable doubt as to whether the letter agreement meets the admittedly stringent "so one sided" standard or whether the letter agreement awarded compensation that is beyond the "outer limit" described by the Delaware Supreme Court. Accordingly, the Complaint has adequately alleged, pursuant to Rule 23.1, that demand is excused with regard to the waste claim based on the board's approval of Prince's compensation under the letter agreement.
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> *Id.*

> Although directors have a responsibility to communicate with complete candor in all shareholder communications, those that are issued with respect to a request for shareholder action are especially critical. Where, as here, the directors sought shareholder approval of an amendment to a stock option plan that could potentially enrich themselves and their patron, their concern for complete and honest disclosure should make Caesar appear positively casual about his wife's infidelity.[109]

In another case later in 2007, Chancellor Chandler further explained the contours of the duty of candor:

> Generally, directors have a duty to disclose all material information in their possession to shareholders when seeking shareholder approval for some corporate action. This "duty of disclosure" is not a separate and distinct fiduciary duty, but it clearly does impose requirements on a corporation's board. Those requirements, however, are not boundless. Rather, directors need only disclose information that is material, and information is material only "if there is a substantial likelihood that a reasonable stockholder would consider it important in deciding how to vote." It is not sufficient that information might prove helpful; to be material, it must "significantly alter the total mix of information made available." The burden of demonstrating a disclosure violation and of establishing the materiality of requested information lies with the plaintiffs.[110]

In 2009 in *Gantler v. Stephens*, the Delaware Supreme Court addressed duty of candor issues in the context of a proxy statement for a stockholder vote on a going private proposal in which common stock held by small stockholders would be converted by an amendment to the certificate of incorporation into non-voting preferred stock.[111] With respect to the plaintiffs' claims that the proxy statement for the reclassification failed to disclose the circumstances of one bidder's withdrawal and insufficient deliberations by the Board before deciding to reject another's bid, the Court wrote:

> It is well-settled law that "directors of Delaware corporations [have] a fiduciary duty to disclose fully and fairly all material information within the board's control when it seeks shareholder action." That duty "attaches to proxy statements and any other disclosures in contemplation of stockholder action." The essential inquiry here is whether the alleged omission or misrepresentation is material. The burden of establishing materiality rests with the plaintiff, who must demonstrate "a substantial likelihood that the disclosure of the omitted fact would have been viewed by the reasonable investor as having significantly altered the 'total mix' of information made available."

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109 *In re infoUSA, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 953 A.2d 963 (Del. Ch. 2007); *see infra* notes 413 and 946 and related text.

110 *In re CheckFree Corp.*, No. 3193-CC, 2007 WL 3262188 at *2 (Del. Ch. Nov. 1, 2007). *See infra* notes 201, 389-413, 528, 892-907, 930-953 and related text.

111 965 A.2d 695 (Del. 2009).

In the Reclassification Proxy, the Board disclosed that "[a]fter careful deliberations, the board determined in its business judgment that the [rejected merger] proposal was not in the best interest of the Company or our shareholders and rejected the [merger] proposal." Although boards are "not required to disclose all available information[,] . . ." "once [they] travel[] down the road of partial disclosure of . . . [prior bids] us[ing] . . . vague language. . . , they ha[ve] an obligation to provide the stockholders with an accurate, full, and fair characterization of those historic events."

By stating that they "careful[ly] deliberat[ed]," the Board was representing to the shareholders that it had considered the Sales Process on its objective merits and had determined that the Reclassification would better serve the Company than a merger. * * * [This] disclosure was materially misleading.

The Reclassification Proxy specifically represented that the [company] officers and directors "ha[d] a conflict of interest with respect to the [Reclassification] because he or she is in a position to structure it in a way that benefits his or her interests differently from the interests of unaffiliated shareholders." Given the defendant fiduciaries' admitted conflict of interest, a reasonable shareholder would likely find significant—indeed, reassuring—a representation by a conflicted Board that the Reclassification was superior to a potential merger which, after "careful deliberations," the Board had "carefully considered" and rejected. In such circumstances, it cannot be concluded as a matter of law, that disclosing that there was little or no deliberation would not alter the total mix of information provided to the shareholders.

* * *

We are mindful of the case law holding that a corporate board is not obligated to disclose in a proxy statement the details of merger negotiations that have "gone south," since such information "would be [n]either viably practical [n]or material to shareholders in the meaningful way intended by . . . case law." Even so, a board cannot properly claim in a proxy statement that it had carefully deliberated and decided that its preferred transaction better served the corporation than the alternative, if in fact the Board rejected the alternative transaction without serious consideration.[112]

Also in 2009, in *Pfeffer v. Redstone* in a shareholder breach of fiduciary duty class action against a corporation's Board and controlling shareholder after the corporation divested itself of its controlling interest in a subsidiary by means of a special cash dividend followed by an offer to parent company stockholders to exchange their parent stock for subsidiary stock,[113] the Delaware

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112 *Id.* at 710-11.

113 The Court found the exchange offer to be purely voluntary and non-coercive, and not to require entire fairness review even though it was with the controlling stockholder. Further, since there was no representation that the exchange ratio was fair, there was no duty to disclose the methodology for determining the exchange ratio, as would have been necessary to ensure a balanced presentation if there had been any disclosure to the effect that the exchange ratio was fair. As the exchange offer was non-coercive and voluntary, the parent had no duty to offer a fair price. The prospectus disclosed that the Boards of parent and subsidiary were not making any recommendation regarding whether

Supreme Court explained that it was not a breach of the duty of candor to fail to disclose in the exchange offer prospectus an internal cash flow analysis which showed that the subsidiary would have cash flow shortfalls after the transactions, but which had been prepared by a lower level employee and never given to the Board:

> For the Viacom Directors to have either misstated or failed to disclose the cash flow analysis in the Prospectus, those directors must have had reasonable access to that Blockbuster information. "To state a claim for breach by omission of any duty to disclose, a plaintiff must plead facts identifying (1) material, (2) reasonably available (3) information that (4) was omitted from the proxy materials." "[O]mitted information is *material* if a reasonable stockholder would consider it important in deciding whether to tender his shares or would find that the information has altered the 'total mix' of information available." The Viacom Directors must fully and fairly disclose all material information within its control when seeking shareholder action. They are not excused from disclosing material facts simply because the Prospectus disclosed risk factors attending the tender offer. If the Viacom Directors did not know or have reason to know the allegedly missing facts, however, then logically the directors could not disclose them.[114]

Later in 2009 in *Berger v. Pubco Corp.*,[115] the Delaware Supreme Court addressed the nature and scope of the remedy available to minority stockholders when a controlling stockholder breaches its duty of disclosure in connection with a short form merger pursuant to DGCL § 253. The 90% stockholder of Pubco (a non-publicly traded Delaware corporation) formed a wholly-owned subsidiary, transferred his Pubco shares to the subsidiary and effected a short form merger under DGCL§ 253 in which Pubco's minority stockholders were cashed out. Prior to the merger, Pubco sent a written notice to its stockholders stating that the 90% stockholder intended to effect a short form merger and that the stockholders would be cashed out. The notice included a very short description of Pubco, but failed to include any information regarding its plans, prospects or operations, lumped all of its financial statements together and failed to provide any information about how the cashout price was determined. An outdated version of the Delaware appraisal statute was included with the notice. Plaintiff brought a class action lawsuit on behalf of all of Pubco's minority stockholders to recover the difference between the cashout price and the fair value of the shares based on defendants' failure to provide stockholders with all material information.

In *Pubco* the Supreme Court agreed with the Court of Chancery that there were disclosure duty failures and that the optimal remedy for disclosure violations in this context is a "quasi-appraisal" action to recover the difference between "fair value" and the merger price. Unlike the Court of Chancery, however, the Supreme Court held that stockholders (i) would be treated automatically as members of the class and continue as members of the class unless and until they opt out after receiving the remedial supplemental disclosure and the notice of class

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stockholders should participate in the exchange offer and were not making any prediction of the prices at which the respective shares would trade after the exchange offer expired.

114 *Pfeffer v. Redstone*, 965 A.2d 676, 686-87 (Del. 2009).

115 976 A.2d. 132, 2008 WL 1976529 (Del. 2009).

action informing them of their opt-out right, and (ii) would not be required to escrow a portion of the merger proceeds that they already received.

In determining that minority stockholders would not have to opt in, the Supreme Court focused on the respective burdens of the parties. According to the Court, an opt-in requirement would potentially burden stockholders seeking appraisal recovery, who would bear the risk of forfeiture of their appraisal rights, whereas an opt-out requirement would avoid any such risk. To the company, on the other hand, neither option is more burdensome than the other. Under either alternative, "the company will know at a relatively early stage which shareholders are (and are not) members of the class."

The Supreme Court recognized that removing the escrow requirement would provide the stockholders with the dual benefit of retaining merger proceeds while at the same time litigating to recover a higher amount – a benefit they would not have in an actual appraisal. The Court reasoned:

> Minority shareholders who fail to observe the appraisal statute's technical requirements risk forfeiting their statutory entitlement to recover the fair value of their shares. In fairness, majority stockholders that deprive their minority shareholders of material information should forfeit their statutory right to retain the merger proceeds payable to shareholders who, if fully informed, would have elected appraisal.[116]

Also in 2009 in *Dubroff v. Wren Holdings, LLC*,[117] the Court of Chancery found that the plaintiffs stated a claim for breach of the fiduciary duty of disclosure in connection with the notice sent to the stockholders pursuant to DGCL § 228 for a recapitalization transaction approved by the written consent of the defendants in which the defendants converted the subordinated debt they held into convertible preferred stock, thereby increasing their ownership of the company's stock from approximately 56% to 80%, while the remaining stockholders were greatly diluted. Under DGCL § 228(e) "[p]rompt notice of the taking of the corporate action without a meeting by less than unanimous written consent shall be given to those stockholders … who have not consented in writing." After the completion of the recapitalization, the nonconsenting stockholders received a notice, which provided, in part: "[the company] has recapitalized by converting its outstanding subordinated debt into shares of several new series of convertible preferred stock, and by declaring and implementing a one-four-twenty [sic] reverse stock split on all outstanding shares of common stock of the Company." The notice did not, however, inform the stockholders that the defendants were the primary recipients of the new convertible preferred stock; nor did it inform the stockholders of the pricing of the conversion of the defendants' debt into convertible preferred stock. The plaintiffs argued that they were injured by this lack of disclosure because had the notice contained such information, they could have made a claim for rescissory relief.

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[116] The Court qualified its opinion by acknowledging that where a "technical and non-prejudicial" violation of DGCL § 253 occurs (*e.g.*, where stockholders receive an incomplete copy of the appraisal statute with their notice of merger), a "quasi-appraisal" remedy with opt-in and escrow requirements might arguably be supportable.

[117] C.A. No. 3940-VCN (Del. Ch. May 22, 2009).

The Chancery Court recognized the Delaware case law had not addressed whether notice under DGCL § 228(e) requires a full disclosure akin to that required when stockholder approval is being solicited. The Court left that inquiry for another time, however, finding that regardless of the precise scope of required disclosure, the plaintiffs have stated a claim for breach of fiduciary duty. The Court reasoned that if the requirements under DGCL § 228(e) were akin to a disclosure seeking a stockholder vote (*i.e.*, to disclose all material information), the plaintiffs had pled facts sufficient to establish that the Board materially misled shareholders. If, on the other hand, the disclosure standard is less fulsome in this context, the Court could reasonably infer that the Board deliberately omitted material information with the goal of misleading the plaintiffs and other stockholders about the defendants' material financial interest in and benefit conferred by the recapitalization. Under Delaware law, whenever directors communicate publicly or directly with stockholders about corporate matters, they must do so honestly. Thus, the Court determined that regardless of the scope of disclosure required pursuant to DGCL § 228(e), the plaintiffs had sufficiently pled a disclosure violation.

Later in 2009 in *NACCO Industries, Inc. v. Applica Incorporated*,[118] NACCO (the acquirer under a merger agreement) brought claims against Applica (the target company) for breach of the merger agreement's "no-shop" and "prompt notice" provisions for assistance it gave to hedge funds managed by Herbert Management Corporation (collectively "*Harbinger*"), which made a topping bid after the merger agreement with NACCO was executed. NACCO also sued Harbinger for common law fraud and tortious interference with contract, alleging that while NACCO and Applica were negotiating a merger agreement, Applica insiders provided confidential information to principals at the Harbinger hedge funds, which were then considering their own bid for Applica. During this period, Harbinger amassed a substantial stake in Applica (which ultimately reached 40%), but reported on its Schedule 13D filings that its purchases were for "investment," thereby disclaiming any intent to control the company. After NACCO signed the merger agreement, communications between Harbinger and Applica management about a topping bid continued. Eventually, Harbinger amended its Schedule 13D disclosures and made a topping bid for Applica, which then terminated the NACCO merger agreement. After a bidding contest with NACCO, Harbinger succeeded in acquiring the company.

The Vice Chancellor also upheld NACCO's common law fraud claims against Harbinger based on the alleged inaccuracy of Harbinger's Schedule 13D disclosures about its plans regarding Applica. The Vice Chancellor dismissed Harbinger's contention that all claims related to Schedule 13D filings belong in federal court, holding instead that a "Delaware entity engaged in fraud"—even if in an SEC filing required by the 1934 Act—"should expect that it can be held to account in the Delaware courts." The Vice Chancellor noted that while the federal courts have exclusive jurisdiction over violations of the 1934 Act, the Delaware Supreme Court has held that statutory remedies under the 1934 Act are "intended to coexist with claims based on state law and not preempt them." The Vice Chancellor emphasized that NACCO was not seeking state law enforcement of federal disclosure requirements, but rather had alleged that Harbinger's statements in its Schedule 13D and 13G filings were fraudulent under state law without regard to whether those statements complied with federal law. The Court then ruled that NACCO had adequately pleaded that Harbinger's disclosure of a mere "investment" intent was false or misleading, squarely rejecting the argument that "one need not disclose any intent other than an

[118] C.A. No. 2541-VCL (Dec. 22, 2009). *See infra* note 805 and related text.

investment intent until one actually makes a bid." In this respect, the *NACCO* decision highlights the importance of accurate Schedule 13D disclosures by greater-than-5% beneficial owners that are seeking or may seek to acquire a public company and raises the possibility of monetary liability to a competing bidder if faulty Schedule 13D disclosures are seen as providing an unfair advantage in the competition to acquire the company.

Duty of candor allegations accompany many challenges to business combination transactions in which shareholder proxies are solicited for approval of the transaction. Sometimes the challenges are successful enough to lead the Chancery Court to order the postponement of meeting of shareholders until corrective disclosures are made in proxy materials.[119] In other instances, the omissions complained of are found to be immaterial.[120]

2. Care.

a. Business Judgment Rule; Informed Action; Gross Negligence.

The duty of care in Delaware requires a director to perform his duties with such care as an ordinarily prudent man would use in similar circumstances. Subject to numerous limitations, Delaware has a business judgment rule "that a court will not substitute its judgment for that of the board if the latter's decision can be 'attributed to any rational business purpose'."[121]

The availability of the business judgment rule does not mean, however, that directors can act on an uninformed basis. Directors have an obligation to inform themselves of all material information reasonably available to them before making a business decision and, having so informed themselves, to act with the requisite care in making such decision.[122] Directors are not required, however, "to read in haec verba every contract or legal document,"[123] or to "know all particulars of the legal documents [they] authorize[ ] for execution."[124]

Although a director must act diligently and with the level of due care appropriate to the particular situation, the Delaware courts have held that action (or inaction) will constitute a breach of a director's fiduciary duty of care only if the director's conduct rises to the level of

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119 *See, e.g., Maric Capital Master Fund, Ltd., v. Plato Learning, Inc*., C.A. 5402-VCS (Del. Ch. May 13, 2010) (merger enjoined until corrective disclosures, including correction of statement that management compensation arrangements were not negotiated prior to signing the merger agreement when, although there may not have been any agreement, the buyer communicated to the CEO that it liked to keep management after its acquisitions and outlined its typical compensation package); *In re Art Technology Group, Inc. Shareholders Litigation* (Del. Ch., Dec. 20, 2010) (bench ruling enjoining special meeting of stockholders to vote on merger based on target company's failure to disclose in its proxy statement the fees that its financial advisor had received from the buyer during the preceding two years in unrelated transactions). *See also infra* notes 892-917, 930-939, 940-947, 948-954 and related text.

120 *See*, *e.g.*, *infra* note 492 and related text.

121 *Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petrol. Co.*, 493 A.2d 946, 954 (quoting *Sinclair Oil Corp. v. Levien*, 280 A.2d 717, 720 (Del. 1971)). *See infra* notes 457-491 and related text.

122 *See Cede & Co. v. Technicolor, Inc.*, 634 A.2d 345, 367 (Del. 1993) (*Technicolor I*); *Smith v. Van Gorkom*, 488 A.2d 858, 872 (Del. 1985).

123 *Van Gorkom*, 488 A.2d at 883 n.25.

124 *Moran v. Household Int'l, Inc.,* 490 A.2d 1059, 1078 (Del. Ch.), *aff'd*, 500 A.2d 1346 (Del. 1985).

gross negligence.[125] "Delaware's current understanding of gross negligence is conduct that constitutes reckless indifference or actions that are without the bounds of reason."[126]

Compliance with the duty of care requires active diligence. Accordingly, directors should attend board meetings regularly; they should take time to review, digest, and evaluate all materials and other information provided to them; they should take reasonable steps to assure that all material information bearing on a decision has been considered by the directors or by those upon whom the directors will rely; they should actively participate in board deliberations, ask appropriate questions, and discuss each proposal's strengths and weaknesses; they should seek out the advice of legal counsel, financial advisors, and other professionals, as needed; they should, where appropriate, reasonably rely upon information, reports, and opinions provided by officers, experts or board committees; and they should take sufficient time (as may be dictated by the circumstances) to reflect on decisions before making them. Action by unanimous written consent ordinarily does not provide any opportunity for, or record of, careful Board deliberations.[127]

b. Business Judgment Rule Not Applicable When Board Conflicted.

In *Gantler v. Stephens*, the Delaware Supreme Court held that the business judgment rule was not applicable to the Board's decision to approve a going private stock reclassification proposal in which by amendment to the certificate of incorporation common stock held by smaller stockholders was converted into non-voting preferred stock because the directors were conflicted.[128] The complaint (which the Court accepted as true because the decision was on defendants' motion to dismiss) alleged that the director defendants improperly rejected a value-maximizing merger bid and terminated the sales process to preserve personal benefits, including retaining their positions and pay as directors, as well as valuable outside business opportunities. The complaint further alleged that the Board failed to deliberate before deciding to reject the bid and to terminate the sales process, yet repeatedly disregarded its financial advisor's advice.

The Court noted that "[a] board's decision not to pursue a merger opportunity is normally reviewed within the traditional business judgment framework," but:

> [T]he business judgment presumption is two pronged. First, did the Board reach its decision in the good faith pursuit of a legitimate corporate interest? Second, did the Board do so advisedly? For the Board's decision here to be entitled to the business judgment presumption, both questions must be answered affirmatively.
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125 *See Van Gorkom*, 488 A.2d at 873.

126 *McPadden v. Sidhu*, C.A. No. 3310-CC, 2008 WL 4017052 (Del. Ch. Aug. 29, 2008).

127 *Official Comm. of Unsecured Creditors of Integrated Health Serv., Inc. v. Elkins*, C.A. No. 20228, 2004 WL 1949290 at *14 (Del. Ch. Aug. 24, 2004) (discussing how Compensation Committee forgiveness of a loan to the CEO by written consent without any evidence of director deliberation or reliance upon a compensation expert raised a Vice Chancellor's "concern as to whether it acted with knowing or deliberate indifference.").

128 965 A.2d 695 (Del. 2009).

> Here, the plaintiffs allege that the Director Defendants had a disqualifying self-interest because they were financially motivated to maintain the status quo. A claim of this kind must be viewed with caution, because to argue that directors have an entrenchment motive solely because they could lose their positions following an acquisition is, to an extent, tautological. By its very nature, a board
>
> decision to reject a merger proposal could always enable a plaintiff to assert that a majority of the directors had an entrenchment motive. For that reason, the plaintiffs must plead, in addition to a motive to retain corporate control, other facts sufficient to state a cognizable claim that the Director Defendants acted disloyally.[129]

The Delaware Supreme Court found that the plaintiffs had pled facts sufficient to establish disloyalty of at least three (*i.e.*, a majority) of the remaining directors, which sufficed to rebut the business judgment presumption. With respect to the CEO, the Court noted that in addition to losing his long held positions, the plaintiffs alleged a duty of loyalty violation when they pled that the CEO never responded to the due diligence request which had caused one bidder to withdraw its bid and that this bidder had explicitly stated in its bid letter that the incumbent Board would be terminated if it acquired the company. The Court held that it may be inferred that the CEO's unexplained failure to respond promptly to the due diligence request was motivated by his personal financial interest, as opposed to the interests of the shareholders, and that same inference can be drawn from his attempt to "sabotage" another bidder's due diligence request in a similar manner.

Another director was the president of a heating and air conditioning company that provided heating and air conditioning services to the bank and he may have feared that if the company were sold his firm would lose the bank as a client, which to him would be economically significant. A third director was a principal in a small law firm that frequently provided legal services to the company and was also the sole owner of a real estate title company that provided title services in nearly all of the Bank's real estate transactions. In summary, the Delaware Supreme Court concluded the plaintiffs had alleged facts sufficient to establish, for purposes of a motion to dismiss, that a majority of the Board acted disloyally and that a cognizable claim of disloyalty rebuts the business judgment presumption and is subject to entire fairness review.

The Delaware Supreme Court in *Gantler* set forth two reasons for rejecting the Chancery Court's dismissal of the case on the ground that a disinterested majority of the shareholders had "ratified" the reclassification by voting to approve it:

> First, because a shareholder vote was required to amend the certificate of incorporation, that approving vote could not also operate to "ratify" the challenged conduct of the interested directors. Second, the adjudicated cognizable claim that the Reclassification Proxy contained a material misrepresentation, eliminates an essential predicate for applying the doctrine, namely, that the shareholder vote was fully informed.

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[129] *Id.* at 706-07.

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> [T]he scope of the shareholder ratification doctrine must be limited to its so-called "classic" form; that is, to circumstances where a fully informed shareholder vote approves director action that does *not* legally require shareholder approval in order to become legally effective. Moreover, the only director action or conduct that can be ratified is that which the shareholders are specifically asked to approve. With one exception, the "cleansing" effect of such a ratifying shareholder vote is to subject the challenged director action to business judgment review, as opposed to "extinguishing" the claim altogether (*i.e.*, obviating all judicial review of the challenged action).[130]

c. Inaction.

In many cases, of course, the directors' decision may be not to take any action. To the extent that decision is challenged, the focus will be on the process by which the decision not to act was made. Where the failure to oversee or to act is so severe as to evidence a lack of good faith, the failure may be found to be a breach of the duty of loyalty.[131]

d. Reliance on Reports and Records.

The DGCL provides two important statutory protections to directors relating to the duty of care. The first statutory protection is DGCL § 141(e) which provides statutory protection to directors who rely in good faith upon corporate records or reports in connection with their efforts to be fully informed, and reads as follows:

> A member of the board of directors, or a member of any committee designated by the board of directors, shall, in the performance of such member's duties, be fully protected in relying in good faith upon the records of the corporation and upon such information, opinions, reports or statements presented to the corporation by any of the corporation's officers or employees, or committees of the board of directors, or by any other person as to matters the member reasonably believes are within such other person's professional or expert competence and who has been selected with reasonable care by or on behalf of the corporation.[132]

Members of a Board's Audit and Risk Management Committee are entitled to rely in good faith on reports and statements and opinions, pursuant to DGCL § 141(e), from the corporation's officers and employees who are responsible for preparing the company's financial statements.[133] Significantly, as set forth above, DGCL § 141(e) provides protection to directors only if they acted in good faith.

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130 *Id.* at 712-13; *see infra* notes 1125-1131 and related text.

131 *See Stone v. Ritter,* 911 A.2d 362, 370 (Del. 2006) (holding that "the requirement to act in good faith is a subsidiary element, i.e., a condition, of the fundamental duty of loyalty."); *see supra* notes 72-108 and related text.

132 DGCL § 141(e).

133 *In re Citigroup Inc. S'holder Derivative Litig.*, 964 A.2d 106 (Del. Ch. 2009).

e. Limitation on Director Liability.

The second statutory protection is DGCL § 102(b)(7), which allows a Delaware corporation to provide in its certificate of incorporation limitations on (or partial elimination of) director liability for monetary damages in relation to the duty of care.[134] The liability of directors may not be so limited or eliminated, however, in connection with breaches of the duty of loyalty, the failure to act in good faith, intentional misconduct, knowing violations of law, obtaining improper personal benefits, or paying dividends or approving stock repurchases in violation of DGCL § 174.[135]

E. Officer Fiduciary Duties.

Under both Texas and Delaware law, a corporate officer owes fiduciary duties of care, good faith and loyalty to the corporation, and may be sued in a corporate derivative action just as a director may be.[136] In Texas, "a corporate officer owes a fiduciary duty to the shareholders collectively, i.e., the corporation, but he does not occupy a fiduciary relationship with an individual shareholder unless some contract or special relationship exists between them in addition to the corporate relationship," and "a corporate shareholder has no individual cause of action for personal damages caused solely by a wrong done to the corporation."[137] In *Gantler v. Stephens*, the Delaware Supreme Court held "that officers of Delaware corporations, like directors, owe fiduciary duties of care and loyalty, and that the fiduciary duties of officers are the same as those of directors."[138]

For an officer to be held liable for a breach of fiduciary duty, "it will have to be concluded for each of the alleged breaches that [the officer] had the discretionary authority in a relevant functional area and the ability to cause or prevent a complained-of-action."[139]

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134 *See infra* notes 278-281 and related text.

135 DGCL § 102(b)(7); *see also Zirn v. VLI Corp*., 621 A.2d 773, 783 (Del. 1993) (DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision in corporation's certificate did not shield directors from liability where disclosure claims involving breach of the duty of loyalty were asserted).

136 *Faour v. Faour*, 789 S.W.2d 620, 621 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 1990, writ denied); *Zapata Corp. v. Maldonado*, 430 A.2d 779 (Del. 1981); *see Lifshutz v. Lifshutz*, 199 S.W.3d 9, 18 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2006, no pet.) ("Corporate officers owe fiduciary duties to the corporations they serve. [citation omitted]. A corporate fiduciary is under a duty not to usurp corporate opportunities for personal gain, and equity will hold him accountable to the corporation for his profits if he does so."); *Cotton v. Weatherford Bancshares, Inc.*, 187 S.W.3d 687, 698 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2006) ("While corporate officers owe fiduciary duties to the corporation they serve, they do not generally owe fiduciary duties to individual shareholders unless a contract or confidential relationship exists between them in addition to the corporate relationship."); *see* Lyman Johnson & Dennis Garvis, *Are Corporate Officers Advised About Fiduciary Duties?*, 64 BUS. LAW. 1105 (August 2009).

137 *Redmon v. Griffith*, 202 S.W.3d 225, 234 (Tex. App. [12th] 2006).

138 965 A.2d 695 (Del. 2009). In *Gantler v. Stephens* (an opinion on a motion to dismiss for failure to state a cause of action) allegations that the CEO and Treasurer had breached their fiduciary duty of loyalty by failing to timely provide due diligence materials to two prospective buyers of the company as authorized by the Board (which led the bidders to withdraw their bids) at a time that the officers were supporting their competing stock reclassification proposal (which the Board ultimately approved over a merger proposal from an unaffiliated third party) were found sufficient to state a claim for breach of the fiduciary duty of loyalty.

139 *Pereira v. Cogan*, 294 B.R. 449, 511 (S.D.N.Y. 2003), *reversed on other grounds and remanded*, *Pereira v. Farace*, 413 F.3d 330 (2d Cir. 2005); *see* WILLIAM MEAD FLETCHER ET AL., *FLETCHER CYCLOPEDIA OF THE LAW OF PRIVATE CORPORATIONS*, § 846 (2002) ("The Revised Model Business Corporation Act provides that a non-director officer with discretionary authority is governed by the same standards of conduct as a director.").

Derivative claims against officers for failure to exercise due care in carrying out their responsibilities as assigned by the Board are uncommon.

An individual is entitled to seek the best possible employment arrangements for himself before he becomes a fiduciary, but once the individual becomes an officer or director, his ability to pursue his individual self-interest becomes restricted. *In re The Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litigation*,[140] which resulted from the failed marriage between Disney and its former President Michael Ovitz, is instructive as to the duties of an officer.[141] Ovitz was elected president of Disney on October 1, 1995 prior to finalizing his employment contract, which was executed on December 12, 1995, and he became a director in January 1996. Ovitz's compensation package was lucrative, including a $40 million termination payment for a no-fault separation. Ovitz' tenure as an officer was mutually unsatisfying, and a year later he was terminated on a no-fault basis. Derivative litigation ensued against Ovitz and the directors approving his employment and separation arrangements.

The Delaware Supreme Court affirmed the Chancery Court rulings that (i) as to claims based on Ovitz entering into his employment agreement with Disney, officers and directors become fiduciaries only when they are officially installed and receive the formal investiture of authority that accompanies such office or directorship, and before becoming a fiduciary, Ovitz had the right to seek the best employment agreement possible for himself and (ii) as to claims based on actions after he became an officer: (a) an officer may negotiate his or her own employment agreement as long as the process involves negotiations performed in an adversarial and arms-length manner, (b) Ovitz made the decision that a faithful fiduciary would make by abstaining from attendance at a Compensation Committee meeting [of which he was an ex officio member] where a substantial part of his own compensation was to be discussed and decided upon, (c) Ovitz did not breach any fiduciary duties by executing and performing his employment agreement after he became an officer since no material change was made in it from the form negotiated and approved prior to his becoming an officer, and (d) Ovitz did not breach any fiduciary duty in receiving no-fault termination payments because he played no part in the determination that he would be terminated or that his termination would not be for cause.[142]

A corporate officer is an agent of the corporation.[143] If an officer commits a tort while acting for the corporation, under the law of agency, the officer is liable personally for his actions.[144] The corporation may also be liable under *respondeat superior*.

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140 906 A.2d 27 (Del. 2006).

141 *See infra* notes 372-384 and related text (discussing *Disney* with respect to director duties when approving executive officer compensation).

142 *See generally Disney*, 906 A.2d 27.

143 *Joseph Greenspon's Sons Iron & Steel Co. v. Pecos Valley Gas Co.*, 156 A. 350, 351-52 (Del. Ch. 193l); *Hollaway v. Skinner*, 898 S.W.2d 793, 795 (Tex. 1995). *See* Lyman Johnson, *Having the Fiduciary Duty Talk: Model Advice for Corporate Officers (and Other Senior Agents)*:

> In thirty-four states there are both statutory and common law sources for officer fiduciary duties. The remaining sixteen states [including Delaware and Texas] have only common law. The primary common law source is the law of agency—officers being agents—and the recent *Restatement (Third) of Agency* ("*Restatement*") is the most authoritative and thorough source of agency law principles. * * *
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> [T]he *Restatement* states explicitly that an agent's duty of loyalty is a "fiduciary duty." Interestingly, however, the *Restatement* describes the agent's duties of care, competence, and diligence

F. Preferred Stock Rights and Duties.

1. Nature of Preferred Stock.

Preferred stock is stock which has certain rights and preferences over other classes and series of stock as set forth in the certificate of incorporation, typically by a certificate of designation filed with the Secretary of State to establish the rights of the class or series. The rights, powers, privileges and preferences of preferred stock are contractual in nature and are governed by the express provisions of the certificate of incorporation[145] of the issuer.[146] The preferential rights, powers or privileges must be "expressly and clearly stated" and "will not be presumed or implied."[147] When construing preferred stock provisions, standard rules of contract interpretation are applied to determine the intent of the parties.[148] The certificate of incorporation is read as a whole and, to the extent possible, in a manner that permits a

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> as "performance" duties, deliberately avoiding the descriptor of "fiduciary," while noting, however, that other sources do refer to such duties as fiduciary in nature. Also, the *Restatement* establishes as the standard applicable to the duties of care, competence, and diligence that level of conduct "normally exercised by agents in similar circumstances."
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> Finally, the *Restatement* states that a "general or broad" advance release of an agent from the agent's "general fiduciary obligation to the principal [i.e., the duty of loyalty] is not likely to be enforceable." As to the duties of care, competence, and diligence, however, the *Restatement* states that a "contract may, in appropriate circumstances, raise or lower the standard" applicable to those duties and that such duties can be "contractually shaped," but it does not indicate whether they can be eliminated altogether.

63 Bus. LAW 147, 148-151 (Nov. 2007).

144 In affirming a Bankruptcy Court holding that a corporate officer personally committed common law fraud in order to obtain a subcontract for the corporation and thus, was personally liable for the debt under Texas common law, which holds a corporate agent personally liable for his misrepresentations made on behalf of the corporation, the Fifth Circuit wrote:

> Texas courts have routinely found that "a corporate officer may not escape liability where he had direct, personal participation in the wrongdoing, as to be the 'guiding spirit behind the wrongful conduct or the central figure in the challenged corporate activity.'" In this case, [the officer], as a corporate agent, may be held "individually liable for fraudulent or tortuous acts committed while in the service of [his] corporation."

In re Morrison, 555 F.3d 473, 481 (5th Cir. 2009) (citations omitted).

See Dana M. Muir & Cindy A. Schipani, *The Intersection of State Corporation Law and Employee Compensation Programs: Is it Curtains for Veil Piercing?*, 1996 U. ILL. L. REV. 1059, 1078-79 (1996).

145 When filed with the Secretary of State, a certificate of designation amends the certificate of incorporation and, as a result, the rights of the preferred stockholders become part of the certificate of incorporation. TBCA art. 2.13; TBOC § 21.156; DGCL § 151(g). Thus, a reference by the court to the certificate of incorporation also refers to the certificate of designation, which has been integrated into that certificate. *Elliott Associates, L.P. v. Avatex Corp.*, 715 A.2d 843, 854 n. 3 (Del. 1998).

146 *Elliott Assocs., L.P. v. Avatex Corp.*, 715 A.2d 843, 854 n. 46 (Del. 1998); *Wood v. Coastal States Gas Corp.*, 401 A.2d 932, 937 (Del. 1979); *Jedwab v. MGM Grand Hotels, Inc.*, 509 A.2d 584, 593 (Del. Ch. 1986).

147 *Elliott Associates, L.P. v. Avatex Corp.*, 715 A.2d 843, 852-53 (Del. 1998).

148 *Kaiser Alum. Corp. v. Matheson*, 681 A.2d 392, 395 (Del. 1996). *See also ThoughtWorks, Inc. v. SV Investment Partners, LLC*, 902 A.2d 745 (Del. Ch. 2006); *Citadel Holding Corp. v. Roven*, 603 A.2d 818, 822 (Del. 1992).

reconciliation of all of its provisions.[149] The implied contractual duty of good faith and fair dealing is applicable to preferred stock.[150]

2. Generally No Special Fiduciary Duty to Preferred Stock.

A preferred stockholder's preferential rights generally are protected only contractually, whereas the rights that are shared by both preferred stockholders and common stockholders have the benefit of director fiduciary duties.[151] Preferred stockholders are entitled to share the benefits of the fiduciary duties of care and loyalty.[152] One commentator has noted that the only situation in which courts regularly apply fiduciary standards in evaluating preferred stockholders' rights is when their equity stake in the corporation is threatened by corporate control transactions involving interested directors or a controlling stockholder and, even then, only in limited circumstances.[153] Where the interests of preferred and common shareholders conflict, one court held that the presumption of sound business judgment will be upheld if the board of directors can attribute their action to any rational business purpose.[154]

3. Conflicting Interests of Common and Preferred in M&A Transaction.

A corporation's common and preferred stockholders may have conflicting interests, particularly if its financial condition deteriorates as in the context of a recapitalization or sale of the business.[155] For example, *Equity-Linked Investors, L.P. v. Adams*[156] involved a conflict between the interests of the common stockholders and those of the preferred stockholders of Genta Corporation. Genta was on the "lip of insolvency" and in liquidation likely would have been worth substantially less than the $30,000,000 liquidation preference held by the preferred stock. Rather than preserving what capital remained for distribution to the preferred stock in an

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149 *Warner Communications, Inc. v. Chris-Craft Indus., Inc.*, 583 A.2d 962, 967 (Del Ch. 1989), *aff'd*, 567 A.2d 419 (Del 1989). *See also Sonitrol Holding Co. V. Marceau Investissements*, 607 A.2d 1177, 1184 (Del. 1992).

150 *Quadrangle Offshore (Cayman) LLC v. Kenetech Corporation*, 1999 WL 893575 (Del. Ch.), aff'd 751 A. 2d 878 (Del. Supr. 2000) ("As with all contracts, however, the rights and obligations expressed in the certificate [of designation] are protected by an implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing.. . . [which] plays a narrow but necessary role, prohibiting opportunistic conduct that defeats the purpose of the agreement and runs counter to the justified expectations of the other party.").

151 *Jedwab v. MGM Grand Hotels, Inc.*, 509 A.2d 584, 594 (Del. Ch. 1986).

152 *Jackson Nat'l Life Insur. v. Kennedy,* 741 A. 2d 377, 387-389 (Del. Ch. 1999).

153 Lawrence E. Mitchell, *The Puzzling Paradox Of Preferred Stock (And Why We Should Care About It)*, 51 BUS. LAW. 443 (Feb. 1996); *see Baron v. Allied Artists Pictures Corp.*, 337 A.2d 653 (Del. Ch. 1975) (preferential rights are contractual and are to be strictly construed, but the right of the preferred stockholders to receive cumulative dividends is to be viewed through the prism of fiduciary duties); *but see Security National Bank v. Peters, Writer & Christenson, Inc.*, 569 P.2d 875 (Colo. Ct. App. 1977) (holding under Colorado law that the Board breached its fiduciary duties to the preferred shareholders and committed constructive fraud by refusing to sell some securities issued by a third party and held by the corporation in order to use the proceeds to fund the issuer's redemption obligation in respect of its preferred stock, even where the refusal to sell the securities was based upon the Board's belief that the securities would appreciate in value to the benefit of the corporation's common shareholders).

154 Where the preferred shareholders of T.I.M.E.-DC, Inc. objected to the spin-off of a corporate subsidiary to the common shareholders of T.I.M.E.-DC, the Court strictly construed the wording of the certificate of incorporation, which did not prohibit the spin off, and also held that the spin-off did not violate any fiduciary duty to preferred shareholders. *Robinson v. T.I.M.E.-DC, Inc.*, 566 F. Supp. 1077 (N.D. Tex. 1983); citing *Sinclair Oil Corporation v. Levien,* 280 A.2d 717, 720 (Del. 1971).

155 Mark A. Morton, *First Principles for Addressing the Competing Interests of Common and Preferred Stockholders in an M&A Transaction* (Sept. 2009).

156 705 A.2d 1040 (Del. Ch. 1997),

immediate liquidation, the Genta Board pursued means to keep the enterprise in operation based in part on a belief that it had several promising technologies in the research stage that, if brought to market, could be extremely valuable. The Chancery Court held that, although the "board action was taken for the benefit largely of the common stock" and the holders of the preferred stock disapproved, it did not constitute a breach of duty to the preferred. The Court based its decision in part on the fact that the special protections afforded to the preferred were contractual in nature. The Court held that where the "foreseeable financial effects of a board decision may importantly fall upon creditors as well as holders of common stock, as where the corporation is in the vicinity of insolvency, an independent board may consider impacts upon all corporate constituencies in exercising its good faith business judgment for benefit of the corporation." The Court essentially allowed the Genta Board to focus on maximizing the corporation's long-term wealth creating capacity even where the business judgment of another Board might have led Genta to liquidate. The Court emphasized, among other things, that the Genta Board (i) was independent; (ii) acted in good faith; (iii) was well-informed regarding the available alternatives to the financial restructuring plan it undertook; and (iv) acted in a manner reasonably related to its business plan. The Court also noted that Genta "would have been" insolvent if the liquidation preference of the preferred stock had been treated as a liability, which indicates that the Court did not consider the liquidation preference of the preferred stock as debt.[157]

Board ties to one class of stock can result in judicial scrutiny. For example, in *In re Trados Incorporated Shareholder Litigation*,[158] the plaintiff alleged that, in determining to pursue a merger and in approving a merger pursuant to which the preferred stockholders and management would receive all of the merger consideration and the common stockholders would receive nothing, the Trados Board breached its duty of loyalty by improperly favoring the interests of the preferred stockholders. The plaintiff, a common stockholder, contended that a majority of the Board was interested or lacked independence when approving the merger and that the conflicted directors improperly favored the interests of the preferred stockholders. Based on the plaintiff's allegations that a majority of the directors had employment or ownership relationships with the preferred stockholders and depended on the preferred stockholders for their livelihood, the Court held that the plaintiff sufficiently rebutted the presumption of the business judgment rule (and therefore the burden would shift to the defendants to demonstrate the entire fairness of the transaction) and denied the motion to dismiss. The Chancery Court explained its decision as follows:

> Plaintiff contends that this transaction was undertaken at the behest of certain preferred stockholders that desired a transaction that would trigger their large liquidation preference and allow them to exit their investment in Trados. Plaintiff alleges that the Trados board favored the interests of the preferred stockholders, either at the expense of the common stockholders or without properly considering the effect of the merger on the common stockholders. Specifically, plaintiff alleges that the four directors designated by preferred

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157 *Quadrangle Offshore (Cayman) LLC v. Kenetech Corporation*, 1999 WL 893575 (Del. Ch.), aff'd 751 A. 2d 878 (Del. Supr. 2000) ("As with all contracts, however, the rights and obligations expressed in the certificate [of designation] are protected by an implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing.. . . [which] plays a narrow but necessary role, prohibiting opportunistic conduct that defeats the purpose of the agreement and runs counter to the justified expectations of the other party.").

158 2009 Del. Ch. LEXIS 128 (Del. Ch. 2009).

stockholders had other relationships with preferred stockholders and were incapable of exercising disinterested and independent business judgment. Plaintiff further alleges that the two Trados directors who were also employees of the Company received material personal benefits as a result of the merger and were therefore also incapable of exercising disinterested and independent business judgment.

* * *

As explained below, plaintiff has alleged facts sufficient, at this preliminary stage, to demonstrate that at least a majority of the members of Trados' seven member board were unable to exercise independent and disinterested business judgment in deciding whether to approve the merger. Accordingly, I decline to dismiss the breach of fiduciary duty claims arising out of the board's approval of the merger.

* * *

Count I of the Complaint asserts a claim that the director defendants breached their fiduciary duty of loyalty to Trados' common stockholders by approving the merger. Plaintiff alleges that there was no need to sell Trados at the time because the Company was well-financed, profitable, and beating revenue projections. Further, plaintiff contends, "in approving the Merger, the Director Defendants never considered the interest of the common stockholders in continuing Trados as a going concern, even though they were obliged to give priority to that interest over the preferred stockholders' interest in exiting their investment."

Directors of Delaware corporations are protected in their decision-making by the business judgment rule, which "is a presumption that in making a business decision the directors of a corporation acted on an informed basis, in good faith and in the honest belief that the action taken was in the best interests of the company." The rule reflects and promotes the role of the board of directors as the proper body to manage the business and affairs of the corporation.

The party challenging the directors' decision bears the burden of rebutting the presumption of the rule. If the presumption of the rule is not rebutted, then the Court will not second-guess the business decisions of the board. If the presumption of the rule is rebutted, then the burden of proving entire fairness shifts to the director defendants. A plaintiff can survive a motion to dismiss under Rule 12(b)(6) by pleading facts from which a reasonable inference can be drawn that a majority of the board was interested or lacked independence with respect to the relevant decision.

A director is interested in a transaction if "he or she will receive a personal financial benefit from a transaction that is not equally shared by the stockholders" or if "a corporate decision will have a materially detrimental impact on a director,

but not on the corporation and the stockholders." The receipt of any benefit is not sufficient to cause a director to be interested in a transaction. Rather, the benefit received by the director and not shared with stockholders must be "of a sufficiently material importance, in the context of the director's economic circumstances, as to have made it improbable that the director could perform her fiduciary duties … without being influenced by her overriding personal interest…."

"Independence means that a director's decision is based on the corporate merits of the subject before the board rather than extraneous considerations or influences." At this stage, a lack of independence can be shown by pleading facts that support a reasonable inference that the director is beholden to a controlling person or "so under their influence that their discretion would be sterilized."

Plaintiff's theory of the case is based on the proposition that, for purposes of the merger, the preferred stockholders' interests diverged from the interests of the common stockholders. Plaintiff contends that the merger took place at the behest of certain preferred stockholders, who wanted to exit their investment. Defendants contend that plaintiff ignores the "obvious alignment" of the interest of the preferred and common stockholders in obtaining the highest price available for the company. Defendants assert that because the preferred stockholders would not receive their entire liquidation preference in the merger, they would benefit if a higher price were obtained for the Company. Even accepting this proposition as true, however, it is not the case that the interests of the preferred and common stockholders were aligned with respect to the decision of whether to pursue a sale of the company or continue to operate the Company without pursuing a transaction at the time.

The merger triggered the $57.9 million liquidation preference of the preferred stockholders, and the preferred stockholders received approximately $52 million dollars as a result of the merger. In contrast, the common stockholders received nothing as a result of the merger, and lost the ability to ever receive anything of value in the future for their ownership interest in Trados. It would not stretch reason to say that this is the worst possible outcome for the common stockholders. The common stockholders would certainly be no worse off had the merger not occurred.

Taking, as I must, the well-pleaded facts in the Complaint in the light most favorable to plaintiff, it is reasonable to infer that the common stockholders would have been able to receive some consideration for their Trados shares at some point in the future had the merger not occurred. This inference is supported by plaintiffs allegations that the Company's performance had significantly improved and that the Company had secured additional capital through debt financing. Thus, it is reasonable to infer from the factual allegations in the Complaint that the interests of the preferred and common stockholders were not aligned with respect to the decision to pursue a transaction that would trigger the liquidation

preference of the preferred and result in no consideration for the common stockholders.

Generally, the rights and preferences of preferred stock are contractual in nature. This Court has held that directors owe fiduciary duties to preferred stockholders as well as common stockholders where the right claimed by the preferred "is not to a preference as against the common stock but rather a right shared equally with the common." Where this is not the case, however, "generally it will be the duty of the board, where discretionary judgment is to be exercised, to prefer the interests of common stock—as the good faith judgment of the board sees them to be—to the interests created by the special rights, preferences, *etc.*, of preferred stock, where there is a conflict." Thus, in circumstances where the interests of the common stockholders diverge from those of the preferred stockholders, it is *possible* that a director could breach her duty by improperly favoring the interests of the preferred stockholders over those of the common stockholders. As explained above, the factual allegations in the Complaint support a reasonable inference that the interests of the preferred and common stockholders diverged with respect to the decision of whether to pursue the merger. Given this reasonable inference, plaintiff can avoid dismissal if the Complaint contains well-pleaded facts that demonstrate that the director defendants were interested or lacked independence with respect to this decision.

Plaintiff has alleged facts that support a reasonable inference that … the four board designees of preferred stockholders, were interested in the decision to pursue the merger with SDL, which had the effect of triggering the large liquidation preference of the preferred stockholders and resulted in no consideration to the common stockholders for their common shares. Each of these four directors was designated to the Trados board by a holder of a significant number of preferred shares. While this, alone, may not be enough to rebut the presumption of the business judgment rule, plaintiff has alleged more. Plaintiff has alleged that … each had an ownership or employment relationship with an entity that owned Trados preferred stock. … Plaintiff further alleges that each of these directors was dependent on the preferred stockholders for their livelihood. As detailed above, each of these entities owned a significant number of Trados' preferred shares, and together these entities owned approximately 51% of Trados' outstanding preferred stock. The allegations of the ownership and other relationships of each of … to preferred stockholders, combined with the fact that each was a board designee of one of these entities, is sufficient, under the plaintiff-friendly pleading standard on a motion to dismiss, to rebut the business judgment presumption with respect to the decision to approve the merger with SDL.

Similarly, in *Oliver v. Boston University*,[159] the Chancery Court found that the plaintiffs established a breach of the Board's duty of loyalty and required the defendant directors to demonstrate the entire fairness of the Board's allocation of merger consideration between holders

[159] C.A. No. 16570, 2006 WL 1064169 (Del. Ch. Apr. 14, 2006). *See infra* notes 579-580 and related text.

of common and preferred stock. In *Oliver*, the Board was comprised of individuals tied to the preferred stock who treated the merger allocation negotiations with a "surprising degree of informality." Although representatives of all the preferred stockholders were involved in the negotiations, the Board took no steps (such as permitting a representative of the minority common stockholders to participate in negotiations on their behalf) "to ensure fairness to the minority common shareholders." For that reason, the Court held that the defendants failed to carry their burden to demonstrate the fairness of the transaction to the holders of common stock.

The Board's duty of loyalty may be implicated if a majority of the directors own common stock and approve a transaction favoring the common stock over the preferred stock. In *Sullivan Money Mgmt., Inc. v. FLS Holdings, Inc.*,[160] the Court found that the plaintiffs established a claim for breach of the Board's duty of loyalty when no independent agency or advisor was appointed to represent the interests of the preferred stockholders during merger negotiations. The plaintiffs alleged that the directors owned large amounts of common stock, that the interests of the common stockholders were in conflict with the interests of the preferred stock in effectuating the merger, and that the defendant directors failed to employ an independent representative to protect the interests of the preferred stock. Under those circumstances, the Court found that the burden shifted to the defendant directors to demonstrate the fairness of the transaction to the holders of preferred stock.

In each of these cases, the Court focused on the inherent conflict of a majority of the Board and the absence of appropriate procedural protections for the stockholders exposed to the potential abuses that may arise out of such conflict. These decisions suggest the use of a special committee of independent directors, a majority of minority stockholder vote, allowing a representative of the minority interest to participate directly in the negotiations concerning allocation, or other procedures to insulate the transaction from the Board conflict).

Where a Board is dominated by representatives of the preferred stock and the merger consideration is only adequate to cover part of the amount the charter provides the holders of preferred are entitled to and leaves nothing for the common stock, the Board may be sued for breach of fiduciary duty and the buyer may also be sued for aiding and abetting the Board's alleged violation of its fiduciary duties. In *Morgan v. Cash*,[161] a former common shareholder of Voyence, Inc. sued EMC Corporation (the acquirer of Voyence) for aiding and abetting alleged breaches of fiduciary duties by the former Voyence Board and also sued the Board for breaching its fiduciary duties. The plaintiff alleged that EMC used promises of continued employment and exploited conflicts of interest between the Voyence directors (all of whom held preferred stock or were designees of holders of preferred stock) and common stockholders to gain Voyence management's support for a low cash merger price, which resulted in the preferred stock taking a discount from the price to which it was entitled under its terms and the holders of common stock receiving nothing. Because none of the consideration from the sale was distributed to Voyence's common shareholders, plaintiff argued that EMC was complicit in the Board's failure to maximize stockholder value in the sale of the Voyence. The Chancery Court granted EMC's motion to be dismissed from the shareholder litigation. The Court determined that allegations of modest employment packages offered to two directors, standing alone, did not suggest that the

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160 Del. Ch., C.A. No. 12731 (Nov. 20, 1992), *aff'd*, 628 A.2d 84 (Del. 1993).

161 C.A. No. 5053-VCS (Del. Ch. July 16, 2010).

Voyence board accepted a low merger price in exchange for improper personal benefits, and the fact that Voyence directors received consideration from the sale of the corporation, and common shareholders did not, was not enough to sustain a claim of collusion between EMC and the Voyence directors. In so holding, Vice Chancellor Strine wrote:

> This case involves a dispute between Mary Morgan, a former common stockholder of a small software company, Voyence, Inc., and Voyence's acquiror, EMC Corporation. Morgan complains that the Voyence directors breached their fiduciary duties by failing to take reasonable steps to maximize stockholder value in a sale of the corporation. As a result of that alleged failure, says Morgan, the Voyence directors approved a cash merger that distributed consideration only to Voyence's preferred stockholders, and not to the common stockholders. Morgan alleges that the Voyence directors — each of whom held preferred stock or were designees of preferred stockholders — accepted a low offer from EMC in order to benefit themselves at the expense of Voyence's common stockholders. The capital structure of Voyence provided that the common stockholders would only receive merger consideration after the preferred stockholders received their full liquidation preference. Because the consideration offered by EMC was not sufficient to provide the preferred stockholders with their full liquidation preference, EMC's merger with Voyence extinguished the common stockholders' position without them receiving a dime.
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> Along with a breach of fiduciary duty claim against Voyence's erstwhile directors, Morgan has also brought a claim against EMC for aiding and abetting the Voyence board's alleged breach. Morgan alleges two ways in which EMC was complicit in the Voyence board's breach of fiduciary duty in connection with the merger: (1) EMC attempted to buy off the Voyence management's support for its offer by promising them employment with the post-merger entity; and (2) EMC exploited conflicts of interest between the Voyence's directors, who all held preferred stock or were appointees of preferred stockholders, and Voyence's common stockholders.
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> Because reasonable inferences drawn from the facts alleged in Morgan's complaint cannot sustain either of those two theories, I grant EMC's motion and dismiss Morgan's aiding and abetting claim for two reasons. First, other than the unremarkable fact that EMC offered Voyence's management modest compensation packages to stay on after the merger, Morgan's complaint points to no other facts suggesting that there was an unseemly quid pro quo between EMC and the Voyence directors, whereby the Voyence board accepted a low merger price in exchange for improper personal benefits.
>
> Second, as to the theory that EMC exploited conflicts within Voyence's board for its benefit and to the detriment of the Voyence shareholders, Morgan has only alleged that EMC knew that Voyence's directors were all preferred stockholders or designees of preferred stockholders. No other facts suggesting collusion between EMC and the Voyence directors are found in the complaint.

Indeed, the complaint repeatedly acknowledges that EMC and Voyence negotiated at arm's length over the deal.

As an arms length bidder, EMC had no duty to pay more than market value simply because only by paying an above-market price would proceeds be available to Voyence's common stockholders. A bidder is entitled to negotiate price, and the bare allegation that the bidder paid consideration that did not result in payments to the target's common stockholders provides, in itself, no rational basis to infer that the bidder was complicitous in a breach of fiduciary duty.[162]

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[162] In dismissing the claim that the buyer aided and abetted the conflicted Board's breach of duty, the court distinguished two prior Delaware cases:

> Morgan's second argument is that EMC exploited conflicts of interest within the Voyence board to the detriment of Voyence's common stockholders. Morgan primarily relies upon two cases — this court's decisions in *Gilbert v. El Paso Co.* [490 A.2d 1050 (Del. Ch. 1984), *aff'd* 575 A.2d 1131 (Del. 1990)] and *Zirn v. VLI Corp.* [1989 WL 79963 (Del. Ch. July 17, 1989)] — as support for its argument that EMC exploited conflicts of interest within the Voyence board and therefore participated in a breach of fiduciary duty. In *Gilbert*, this court refused to dismiss an aiding and abetting claim against a tender offeror, where the offeror approached the target's management and negotiated the terms of a friendly takeover when it became clear that the tender offeror would acquire control of the company. The court found that the complaint adequately alleged that, "in the face of inevitable defeat, [the target's directors] abandoned their resistance [to a reduced tender offer] in order to fashion a better deal for themselves at the expense [of the target's stockholders who had already tendered their shares]." Based on those allegations, the court stated that "because the valuable concession [of more favorable tender offer terms], which greatly [affected the target's] shareholders who had already tendered their shares, was extracted in exchange for other terms which clearly benefitted only [the target's] management and not its shareholders, it cannot be said, as a matter of law, that [the acquiror] was merely engaged in arm's-length negotiations." The result was similar in *Zirn*, where this court refused to dismiss an aiding and abetting claim against a tender offeror because the complaint adequately alleged that the acquiror was aware that the target's directors were exposed to potential fiduciary duty liability, and that the acquiror used that potential liability as leverage in negotiations to secure an outcome benefiting the acquiror and the target's directors at the expense of the target's stockholders.
>
> But *Gilbert* and *Zirn* differ materially from this case because, in both of those cases, the complaint alleged facts suggesting how and why the acquiror actually used its knowledge of the target board's conflicts to collude with the target board at the expense of the target's shareholders. That is, the term "exploit" as used in this context connotes the "unjust" or "improper" use of someone else for profit. Thus, "exploit" refers to a situation, as in *Gilbert* and *Zirn*, where a bidder gets a fiduciary to trade away his trust for personal advantage as a means to further the bidder's aims.
>
> Here, Morgan's complaint is silent. First, there are no facts in the complaint indicating why accepting a lower offer was clearly in the Voyence directors' self-interest, much less that it was known by EMC. Morgan has not pled any facts that give reason to infer that EMC would have expected the Voyence directors to have been anything other than delighted to take a higher bid from HP or any other potential bidder because a higher bid would have allowed them to capture their full liquidation preference.
>
> Second, Morgan has not pled any facts showing that EMC actually attempted to exploit the Voyence board's alleged conflicts. * * * All Morgan alleges is that EMC was aware that the Voyence directors were designees of preferred stockholders and therefore potentially conflicted, and that EMC's alleged awareness alone is adequate basis for an aiding and abetting claim. But, Morgan's own complaint makes it clear that EMC and Voyence were bargaining at arm's-length by alleging that: (1) EMC was a "tough negotiator" who drove a "hard[] bargain;" (2) Voyence planned to leverage a bid from HP into an increased offer price from EMC; and (3) Voyence rejected EMC's initial offer and demanded more money. * * *
>
> To hold that a claim for aiding and abetting against a bidder is stated simply because a bidder knows that the target board owns a material amount of preferred stock, knows that the target's value is in a range where a deal might result in no consideration to the common stockholder, and that the bidder nonetheless insists on a price below the level that yields a payment to the common stockholders would set a dangerous and irresponsible precedent. The reality is that there are entities whose value is less than the value to which its preferred stockholders and bondholders are due in a sale. If our law makes it a

> Here, the complaint pleads no basis to believe that EMC knew that Voyence was worth materially more than EMC paid or any factual basis that Voyence was in fact worth materially more than EMC paid; indeed, the complaint's facts suggest that several other logical buyers had been contacted about the chance to buy Voyence and never made an offer. It is not a status crime under Delaware law to buy an entity for a price that does not result in a payment to the selling entity's common stockholders. But that is in essence all that the plaintiffs allege that EMC did wrong. Therefore, Morgan's aiding and abetting claim against EMC is dismissed, leaving her to proceed with her claims against Voyence's directors, which are not addressed in this opinion.

4. Voting Rights of Preferred Stock.

The voting rights of holders of preferred stock are set forth in a corporation's certificate of incorporation and in the DCL or TBOC, as the case may be.[163] A certificate of incorporation may either authorize special voting preferences or it may deny all voting rights to the holders of preferred stock. [164] If there is no special provision in the certificate of incorporation regarding the voting rights of preferred stockholders, all stockholders are entitled to one vote per share as a single class with no preferential voting rights for any holders of preferred stock.[165] Both Delaware and Texas law require a separate class vote if there is an amendment to the certificate of incorporation which (i) increases or decreases the aggregate number of authorized shares of the class or series; (ii) changes the designations, preferences or rights (including voting rights) of the class or series; or (iii) creates new classes or series of shares.[166] This class vote requirement is not applicable to the creation and issuance of a new series of preferred shares pursuant to

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> presumptive wrong for a bidder to deal with a board dominated by preferred stockholder representatives, then value-maximizing transactions will be deterred. It is hardly unusual for corporate boards to be comprised of representatives of preferred stockholders, who often bargain for representational rights when they put their capital up in risky situations. Notably, those capital investments often end up benefiting common stockholders by helping corporations weather tough times. What Morgan asks is that this court hold that the mere fact that a bidder knowingly enters into a merger with a target board dominated by preferred holders at a price that does not yield a return to common stockholders creates an inference that the bidder knowingly assisted in fiduciary misconduct by the target board. That is not and should not be our law, particularly when the plaintiff cannot even plead facts suggesting that the bidder was paying materially less, or in this case even anything at all less than, fair market value.

163 The rights and preferences of preferred stock and other classes of stock are set forth in a certificate of designations. When a certificate of designations is filed with the Secretary of State, it has the effect of amending the certificate of incorporation and, as a result, the rights of the preferred stockholders become part of the certificate of incorporation. TBOC § 21.156; DGCL § 151(g).

164 TBOC §§ 21.152, 21.153, 21.154 and 21,155; DGCL § 151(a) provides that "Every corporation may issue 1 or more classes of stock, or 1 or more series of stock within any class thereof, any or all of which classes may be of stock with par value or stock without par value and which classes or series may have such voting powers, full or limited, or no voting powers, and such designations, preferences and relative, participating, optional or other special rights, and qualifications, limitations or restrictions thereof, as shall be stated and expressed in the certificate of incorporation…"

165 TBOC §§ 21.363, 21.364, 21.365 and 21,366; DGCL § 212(a).

166 TBOC § 21.364(d); DGCL § 242(b)(2). Under TBOC § 21.155, the Board may establish new series of shares of any class if expressly authorized by the certificate of formation, and if the certificate of formation does not "expressly restrict the board of directors from increasing or decreasing the number of unissued shares of a series…the board of directors may increase or decrease the number of shares" with the exception of decreasing the number of shares below the number of shares that are currently issued at the time of the decrease.

Board authorization under blank check preferred stock provisions in a certificate of incorporation, unless the certificate of incorporation specifically otherwise requires.[167]

Under Delaware law, holders of preferred stock are not entitled to vote as a class on a merger, even though the merger effects an amendment to the certificate of incorporation that would have to be approved by a class vote if the amendment were effected directly by an amendment to the certificate of incorporation, unless the certificate of incorporation expressly requires a class vote to approve a merger.[168] DGCL § 242(b)(2) provides generally with respect to amendments to certificates of incorporation that the "holders of the outstanding shares of a class shall be entitled to vote as a class upon a proposed amendment, whether or not entitled to vote thereon by the certificate of incorporation, if the amendment would . . . alter or change the powers, preferences, or special rights of the shares of such class so as to affect them adversely." In *Warner Communications Inc. v. Chris-Craft Indus., Inc.*,[169] the provision of the Warner certificate of incorporation at issue required a two-thirds class vote of the preferred stock to amend, alter or repeal any provision of the certificate of incorporation if such action adversely affected the preferences, rights, powers or privileges of the preferred stock. Warner merged with a Time subsidiary and was the surviving corporation. In the merger, the Warner preferred stock was converted into Time preferred stock and the Warner certificate of incorporation was amended to delete the terms of the preferred stock. The Chancery Court rejected the argument that holders of the preferred stock were entitled to a class vote on the merger, reasoning that any adverse effect on the preferred stock was caused not by an amendment of the terms of the stock, but solely by the conversion of the stock into a new security in the merger pursuant to DGCL § 251. The Chancery Court also reasoned that the language of the class vote provision at issue was similar to DGCL § 242 and did not expressly apply to mergers.[170] In contrast, in *Elliott*

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167 TBOC § 21.364; DGCL §§ 151 and 242.

168 In *VantagePoint Venture Partners 1996 v. Examen, Inc.*, 871 A.2d 1108 (Del. 2005) the Delaware Supreme Court considered whether a class of preferred stock would be entitled to vote as a separate class on the approval of a merger agreement and ruled that Delaware law, rather than California law, governed and did not require the approval of the holders of the preferred stock voting separately as a class for approval of the merger. In reaching that conclusion, the Court held that the DGCL exclusively governs the internal corporate affairs of a Delaware corporation and that Section 2115 of the California Corporations Code, which requires a corporation with significant California contacts (sometimes referred to as a "quasi-California corporation") to comply with certain provisions of the California Corporations Code even if the corporation is incorporated in another state, such as Delaware, is unconstitutional and, as a result of Delaware rather than California law governing, the approval of the merger did not require the approval of the holders of the preferred stock voting separately as a class).

Section 2115 of the California Corporations Code provides that, irrespective of the state of incorporation, the articles of incorporation of a foreign corporation are deemed amended to conform to California law if (i) more than 50% of its business (as defined) was derived from California during its last fiscal year and (ii) more than 50% of its outstanding voting securities are held by persons with California addresses. Section 1201 of the California Corporations Code requires that the principal terms of a merger be approved by the outstanding shares of each class.

Under Examen's certificate of incorporation and Delaware law, a proposed merger of Examen with an unrelated corporation required only the affirmative vote of the holders of a majority of the outstanding shares of common stock and preferred stock, voting together as a single class. The holders of Examen's preferred stock did not have enough votes to block the merger if their shares were voted as a single class with the common stock. Thus they sued in Delaware to block the merger based on the class vote requirements of the California statute.

169 583 A.2d 962 (Del. Ch. 1989), *aff'd*, 567 A.2d 419 (Del 1989).

170 *See Sullivan Money Mgmt., Inc. v. FLS Holdings, Inc.*, Del. Ch., C.A. No. 12731, 1992 WL 345453 (Nov. 20, 1992), *aff'd*, 628 A.2d 84 (Del. 1993) (where the certificate of incorporation required a class vote of the preferred stockholders for the corporation to "change, by amendment to the Certificate of incorporation . . . or otherwise," the terms and provisions of the preferred stock, the Court held that "or otherwise" cannot be interpreted to mean merger in the context of a reverse triangular merger in which the preferred stock was converted into cash but the corporation survived); *see also Matulich v. Aegis Communications Group, Inc.*, 942 A.2d 596 (Del. 2008) (where certificate of designation of

Assocs., L.P. v. Avatex Corp.[171] the certificate of incorporation provision expressly gave preferred stockholders a class vote on the "amendment, alteration or repeal, whether by merger, consolidation or otherwise" of provisions of the certificate of incorporation so as to adversely affect the rights of the preferred stock, and preferred stock was converted into common stock of the surviving corporation of a merger. The Court in *Elliott*, for purposes of its opinion, assumed that the preferred stock was adversely affected, distinguished *Warner* because the charter contained the "whether by merger, consolidation or otherwise" language, and held that the preferred stock had a right to a class vote on the merger because the adverse effect was caused by the repeal of the charter and the stock conversion. The Court in *Elliott* commented that the "path for future drafters to follow in articulating class vote provisions is clear": "When a certificate (like the Warner certificate or the Series A provisions here) grants only the right to vote on an amendment, alteration or repeal, the preferred have no class vote in a merger. When a certificate (like the First Series Preferred certificate here) adds the terms 'whether by merger, consolidation or otherwise' and a merger results in an amendment, alteration or repeal that causes an adverse effect on the preferred, there would be a class vote."[172]

Under Texas law and unless the charter otherwise provides, approval of a merger or other fundamental business transaction requires the affirmative vote of the holders of two-thirds of (i) all of the corporation's outstanding shares entitled to vote voting as a single class and (ii) each class entitled to vote as a class or series thereon.[173] Separate voting by a class or series of shares of a corporation is required by TBOC § 21.458 (and was required by TBCA art. 5.03.E) for approval of a plan of merger only if (a) the charter so provides or (b) the plan of merger contains a provision that if contained in an amendment to the charter would require approval by that class or series under TBOC § 21.364 (or previously under TBCA art. 4.03), which generally require class voting on amendments to the certificate of formation, which change the designations, preferences, limitations or relative rights or a class or series or otherwise affect the class or series in specified respects.[174] A merger in which all of a corporation's stock is converted into cash

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preferred stock provided that holders of the preferred stock had no voting rights but had the right of approval and consent prior to any merger, the holders of the preferred stock did not have any statutory right to vote on a merger, but had only a distinguishable contractual right to approve of and consent to mergers; thus since plaintiff's preferred stock was not entitled to vote on the merger, the holder of over 90% of the stock entitled to vote on the merger could approve a short form merger under DGCL § 253 and does not have to establish the entire fairness of the merger).

171 715 A.2d 843 (Del. 1998).

172 *Id.* at 855. *See Benchmark Capital Partners IV, L.P. v. Vague*, 2002 Del. Ch. LEXIS 90, at *25 (Del. Ch. July 15, 2002) ("[A court's function in ascertaining the rights of preferred stockholders] is essentially one of contract interpretation."), *aff'd sub nom. Benchmark Capital Partners IV, L.P. v. Juniper Fin. Corp.*, 822 A.2d 396 (Del. 2003); and *Watchmark Corp. v. ARGO Global Capital, LLC, et al*, C.A. 711-N, 2004 WL 3029914 (Del. Ch. Nov. 4, 2004) ("Duties owed to preferred stockholders are 'primarily . . . contractual in nature,' involving the 'rights and obligations created contractually by the certificate of designation.' If fiduciary duties are owed to preferred stockholders, it is only in limited circumstances. Whether a given claim asserted by preferred stockholders is governed by contractual or fiduciary duty principles, then, depends on whether the dispute arises from rights and obligations created by contract or from 'a right or obligation that is not by virtue of a preference but is shared equally with the common.'").

173 TBOC § 21.457; TBCA art. 5.03(F).

174 TBOC § 21.364 provides:

> Sec. 21.364. VOTE REQUIRED TO APPROVE FUNDAMENTAL ACTION. (a) In this section, a "fundamental action" means:
>
> (1) an amendment of a certificate of formation, including an amendment required for cancellation of an event requiring winding up in accordance with Section 11.152(b);
>
> (2) a voluntary winding up under Chapter 11;
>
> (3) a revocation of a voluntary decision to wind up under Section 11.151;

(4) a cancellation of an event requiring winding up under Section 11.152(a); or

(5) a reinstatement under Section 11.202.

(b) Except as otherwise provided by this code or the certificate of formation of a corporation in accordance with Section 21.365, the vote required for approval of a fundamental action by the shareholders is the affirmative vote of the holders of at least two-thirds of the outstanding shares entitled to vote on the fundamental action.

(c) If a class or series of shares is entitled to vote as a class or series on a fundamental action, the vote required for approval of the action by the shareholders is the affirmative vote of the holders of at least two-thirds of the outstanding shares in each class or series of shares entitled to vote on the action as a class or series and at least two-thirds of the outstanding shares otherwise entitled to vote on the action. Shares entitled to vote as a class or series shall be entitled to vote only as a class or series unless otherwise entitled to vote on each matter submitted to the shareholders generally or otherwise provided by the certificate of formation.

(d) Unless an amendment to the certificate of formation is undertaken by the board of directors under Section 21.155, separate voting by a class or series of shares of a corporation is required for approval of an amendment to the certificate of formation that would result in:

(1) the increase or decrease of the aggregate number of authorized shares of the class or series;

(2) the increase or decrease of the par value of the shares of the class or series, including changing shares with par value into shares without par value or changing shares without par value into shares with par value;

(3) effecting an exchange, reclassification, or cancellation of all or part of the shares of the class or series;

(4) effecting an exchange or creating a right of exchange of all or part of the shares of another class or series into the shares of the class or series;

(5) the change of the designations, preferences, limitations, or relative rights of the shares of the class or series;

(6) the change of the shares of the class or series, with or without par value, into the same or a different number of shares, with or without par value, of the same class or series or another class or series;

(7) the creation of a new class or series of shares with rights and preferences equal, prior, or superior to the shares of the class or series;

(8) increasing the rights and preferences of a class or series with rights and preferences equal, prior, or superior to the shares of the class or series;

(9) increasing the rights and preferences of a class or series with rights or preferences later or inferior to the shares of the class or series in such a manner that the rights or preferences will be equal, prior, or superior to the shares of the class or series;

(10) dividing the shares of the class into series and setting and determining the designation of the series and the variations in the relative rights and preferences between the shares of the series;

(11) the limitation or denial of existing preemptive rights or cumulative voting rights of the shares of the class or series;

(12) canceling or otherwise affecting the dividends on the shares of the class or series that have accrued but have not been declared; or

(13) the inclusion or deletion from the certificate of formation of provisions required or permitted to be included in the certificate of formation of a close corporation under Subchapter O.

(e) The vote required under Subsection (d) by a class or series of shares of a corporation is required notwithstanding that shares of that class or series do not otherwise have a right to vote under the certificate of formation.

(f) Unless otherwise provided by the certificate of formation, if the holders of the outstanding shares of a class that is divided into series are entitled to vote as a class on a proposed amendment that would affect equally all series of the class, other than a series in which no shares are outstanding or a series that is not affected by the amendment, the holders of the separate series are not entitled to separate class votes.

(g) Unless otherwise provided by the certificate of formation, a proposed amendment to the certificate of formation that would solely effect changes in the designations, preferences, limitations, or relative rights, including voting rights, of one or more series of shares of the corporation that have been

would affect all shareholders and, thus, would require approval of (i) all of the outstanding shares entitled to vote on the merger and (ii) a separate vote of each class or series.[175] Unless a corporation's charter provides otherwise, the foregoing Texas merger approval requirements (but not the charter amendment requirements) are subject to exceptions for (a) mergers in which the corporation will be the sole survivor and the ownership and voting rights of the shareholders are not substantially impaired,[176] (b) mergers affected to create a holding company,[177] and (c) short form mergers.[178]

G. Derivative Actions.

1. Delaware and Texas Authorize Derivative Actions.

The fiduciary duties of directors and officers are owed to the corporation they serve and not to any individual shareholders.[179] Thus, a cause of action against a director or officer for breach of fiduciary duty would be vested in, and brought by or in the right of, the corporation.[180] Since the cause of action belongs to the corporation and the power to manage the business and affairs of a corporation generally resides in its Board,[181] a disinterested Board would have the power to determine whether to bring or dismiss a breach of fiduciary duty claim for the corporation.[182]

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established under the authority granted to the board of directors in the certificate of formation in accordance with Section 21.155 does not require the approval of the holders of the outstanding shares of a class or series other than the affected series if, after giving effect to the amendment:

(1) the preferences, limitations, or relative rights of the affected series may be set and determined by the board of directors with respect to the establishment of a new series of shares under the authority granted to the board of directors in the certificate of formation in accordance with Section 21.155; or

(2) any new series established as a result of a reclassification of the affected series are within the preferences, limitations, and relative rights that are described by Subdivision (1).

175 *Id.*

176 TBOC § 21.459(a); TBCA art. 5.03(G).

177 TBOC §§ 10.005, 21.459(b); TBCA art. 5.03(H)–5.03(K).

178 TBOC §§ 10.006, 21.459(b); TBCA art. 5.16(A)–5.16(F).

179 *See supra* note 138 and related text, and *infra* notes 299-301 and related text.

180 *Redmon v. Griffith*, 202 S.W.3d 225, 233-234 (Tex. App. [12th] 2006); *Somers v. Crane*, 295 S.W.3d 5, 11-12 (Tex. App. [1st] 2009) ("[B]ecause of the abundant authority stating that a director's or officer's fiduciary duty runs only to the corporation, not to individual shareholders, we decline to recognize the existence of a fiduciary relationship owed directly by a director to a shareholder in the context of a cash-out merger. Accordingly, we hold that the Class cannot bring a cause of action directly against appellees for breach of fiduciary duty."); *A. Copeland Enters., Inc. v. Guste*, 706 F. Supp. 1283, 1288 (W.D. Tex. 1989) ("Claims concerning breach of a corporate director's fiduciary duties can only be brought by a shareholder in a derivative suit because a director's duties run to the corporation, not to the shareholder in his own right.").

181 DGCL § 141(a); *Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A.2d 805, 811 (Del. 1984).

182 *See Wingate v. Hajdik*, 795 S.W.2d 717, 719 (Tex. 1990) ("Ordinarily, the cause of action for injury to the property of a corporation, or the impairment or destruction of its business, is vested in the corporation, as distinguished from its stockholders . . . ."); *Pace v. Jordan*, 999 S.W.2d 615, 622 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1999, pet. denied) (noting that "[a] corporation's directors, not its shareholders, have the right to control litigation of corporate causes of action").

Both Delaware[183] and Texas[184] law authorize an action brought in the right of the corporation by a shareholder against directors or officers for breach of fiduciary duty.[185] Such an action is called a "derivative action." In deference to the power of the Board, a shareholder would ordinarily be expected to demand that the Board commence the action before commencing a derivative action.[186] An independent and disinterested Board could then decide whether commencing the action would be in the best interest of the corporation[187] and, if it concludes that the action would not be in the best interest of the corporation, could decide to have the action dismissed.[188] Delaware and Texas differ in cases in which making such a

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183 DEL. CT. OF CHANCERY R. 23.1. In *Tooley v. Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette, Inc.*, the Delaware Supreme Court set forth the analytical framework for ascertaining whether a cause of action is direct or derivative and held that this determination can be made by answering two questions: "[W]ho suffered the alleged harm . . . and who would receive the benefit of any recovery or other remedy . . . ?" 845 A.2d 1031, 1033 (Del. 2004). The Delaware Supreme Court elaborated on this analysis in *Feldman v. Cutaia*:

> If the corporation alone, rather than the individual stockholder, suffered the alleged harm, the corporation alone is entitled to recover, and the claim in question is derivative. Conversely, if the stockholder suffered harm independent of any injury to the corporation that would entitle him to an individualized recovery, the cause of action is direct.

951 A.2d 727 (Del. 2008).

Claims that a Board breached its fiduciary duties by authorizing the sale of convertible notes so cheaply that waste of corporate assets resulted are derivative. *Binks v. DSL.net, Inc.*, C.A. No. 2823-VCN (April 29, 2010).

184 TBCA art. 5.14; TBOC §§ 21.551-21.563.

185 TBCA art. 5.14; TBOC §§ 21.551-21.563.

186 DEL. CT. OF CHANCERY R. 23.1; TBCA art. 5.14(C); TBOC § 21.553.

187 *See infra* notes 248-264

188 TBCA art. 5.14(F); TBOC § 21.558, which provides:

> Section 21.558. Dismissal of Derivative Proceeding. (a) A court shall dismiss a derivative proceeding on a motion by the corporation if the person or group of persons described by Section 21.554 determines in good faith, after conducting a reasonable inquiry and based on factors the person or group considers appropriate under the circumstances, that continuation of the derivative proceeding is not in the best interests of the corporation.
>
> (b) In determining whether the requirements of Subsection (a) have been met, the burden of proof shall be on:
>
> (1) the plaintiff shareholder if:
>
> (A) the majority of the board of directors consists of independent and disinterested directors at the time the determination is made;
>
> (B) the determination is made by a panel of one or more independent and disinterested persons appointed under Section 21.554(a)(3); or
>
> (C) the corporation presents prima facie evidence that demonstrates that the directors appointed under Section 21.554(a)(2) are independent and disinterested; or
>
> (2) the corporation in any other circumstance.

TBOC § 21.554 provides an alternative for dismissal of derivative action upon determination by an independent and disinterested person appointed by the court, which can be helpful in the event that the requisite independent and disinterested directors are not available, as follows:

> Section 21.554. Determination by Directors or Independent Persons. (a) A determination of how to proceed on allegations made in a demand or petition relating to a derivative proceeding must be made by an affirmative vote of the majority of:
>
> (1) the independent and disinterested directors of the corporation present at a meeting of the board of directors of the corporation at which interested directors are not present at the time of the vote if the independent and disinterested directors constitute a quorum of the board of directors;
>
> (2) a committee consisting of two or more independent and disinterested directors appointed by an affirmative vote of the majority of one or more independent and disinterested directors present at a meeting of the board of directors, regardless of whether the independent and disinterested directors constitute a quorum of the board of directors; or

demand upon the Board is likely to have little or no effect, generally because a majority of the Board lacks independence or is otherwise interested in the actions being disputed.[189]

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(3) a panel of one or more independent and disinterested persons appointed by the court on a motion by the corporation listing the names of the persons to be appointed and stating that, to the best of the corporation's knowledge, the persons to be appointed are disinterested and qualified to make the determinations contemplated by Section 21.558.

(b) The court shall appoint a panel under Subsection (a)(3) if the court finds that the persons recommended by the corporation are independent and disinterested and are otherwise qualified with respect to expertise, experience, independent judgment, and other factors considered appropriate by the court under the circumstances to make the determinations. A person appointed by the court to a panel under this section may not be held liable to the corporation or the corporation's shareholders for an action taken or omission made by the person in that capacity, except for an act or omission constituting fraud or willful misconduct.

The proceedings and discovery are stayed under the Texas Corporate Statutes while the decision is being made whether to pursue or dismiss the action. TBOC § 21.555 provides:

Section 21.555. Stay of Proceeding. (a) If the domestic or foreign corporation that is the subject of a derivative proceeding commences an inquiry into the allegations made in a demand or petition and the person or group of persons described by Section 21.554 is conducting an active review of the allegations in good faith, the court shall stay a derivative proceeding until the review is completed and a determination is made by the person or group regarding what further action, if any, should be taken.

(b) To obtain a stay, the domestic or foreign corporation shall provide the court with a written statement agreeing to advise the court and the shareholder making the demand of the determination promptly on the completion of the review of the matter. A stay, on application, may be reviewed every 60 days for the continued necessity of the stay.

(c) If the review and determination made by the person or group is not completed before the 61st day after the stay is ordered by the court, the stay may be renewed for one or more additional 60-day periods if the domestic or foreign corporation provides the court and the shareholder with a written statement of the status of the review and the reasons why a continued extension of the stay is necessary.

In the event that a decision is made to seek dismissal of the proceeding, discovery is limited by the Texas Corporate Statutes to whether (i) the person making the decision to dismiss was independent and disinterested; (ii) the good faith of the inquiry and review, and (ii) the reasonableness of the procedures. TBCA art.5.14; TBOC § 21.556.

See infra notes 248-264 (discussing the meaning of "independent" and "disinterested" in the context of director action to dismiss a shareholder derivative action). *See Johnson v. Jackson Walker, L.L.P.*, 247 S.W.3d 765 (Tex. App.—Dallas 2008).

189 While Delaware does not distinguish between public and private entities in respect of derivative claims, the Texas Corporate Statutes provide that their demand and dismissal provisions are not applicable to "closely held corporations" (defined as those with less than 35 shareholders and no public market). TBOC § 21.563 provides:

Section 21.563. Closely Held Corporation. (a) In this section, "closely held corporation" means a corporation that has:

(1) fewer than 35 shareholders; and

(2) no shares listed on a national securities exchange or regularly quoted in an over-the-counter market by one or more members of a national securities association.

(b) Sections 21.552-21.559 do not apply to a closely held corporation.

(c) If justice requires:

(1) a derivative proceeding brought by a shareholder of a closely held corporation may be treated by a court as a direct action brought by the shareholder for the shareholder's own benefit; and

(2) a recovery in a direct or derivative proceeding by a shareholder may be paid directly to the plaintiff or to the corporation if necessary to protect the interests of creditors or other shareholders of the corporation.

TBCA art. 5.14 is substantively identical to TBOC § 21.563.

Even though the demand and related dismissal provisions of the Texas Corporate Statutes are not by their terms applicable to closely held corporations, a corporation could nevertheless argue that a similar result could be obtained by virtue of the inherent power of an independent and disinterested Board to determine whether a corporation should pursue any litigation. *See supra* notes 10, 181-182 and related text.

2. Delaware Derivative Actions.

In Delaware, "in order to cause the corporation to pursue litigation, a shareholder must either (1) make a pre-suit demand by presenting the allegations to the corporation's directors, requesting that they bring suit, and showing that they wrongfully refused to do so, or (2) plead facts showing that demand upon the board would have been futile."[190] If the "plaintiff does not make a pre-suit demand on the board of directors, the complaint must plead with particularity facts showing that a demand on the board would have been futile."[191] This "demand requirement is not to insulate defendants from liability; rather, the demand requirement and the strict requirements of factual particularity under Rule 23.1 'exist[] to preserve the primacy of board decisionmaking regarding legal claims belonging to the corporation.'"[192]

Under the test articulated by the Delaware Supreme Court in *Aronson v. Lewis*, "to show demand futility, plaintiffs must provide particularized factual allegations that raise a reasonable doubt that '(1) the directors are disinterested and independent [or] (2) the challenged transaction was otherwise the product of a valid exercise of business judgment.'"[193] Chancellor Chandler explained when demand will not be required in Delaware in *In re Tyson Foods, Inc. Consolidated Shareholder Litigation*:

> The first hurdle facing any derivative complaint is [Delaware Chancery] Rule 23.1, which requires that the complaint "allege with particularity the efforts, if any, made by the plaintiff to obtain the action the plaintiff desires from the directors . . . and the reasons for the plaintiff's failure to obtain the action or for not making the effort." Rule 23.1 stands for the proposition in Delaware corporate law that the business and affairs of a corporation, absent exceptional circumstances, are to be managed by its board of directors. To this end, Rule 23.1 requires that a plaintiff who asserts that demand would be futile must "comply with stringent requirements of factual particularity that differ substantially from the permissive notice pleadings" normally governed by Rule 8(a). Vague or conclusory allegations do not suffice to upset the presumption of a director's capacity to consider demand. As famously explained in *Aronson v. Lewis*, plaintiffs may establish that demand was futile by showing that there is a reason to doubt either (a) the distinterestedness and independence of a majority of the board upon whom demand would be made, or (b) the possibility that the transaction could have been an exercise of business judgment.
>
> There are two ways that a plaintiff can show that a director is unable to act objectively with respect to a pre-suit demand. Most obviously, a plaintiff can assert facts that demonstrate that a given director is personally interested in the outcome of litigation, in that the director will personally benefit or suffer as a result of the lawsuit in a manner that differs from shareholders generally. A plaintiff may also challenge a director's independence by alleging facts

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190 *In re Citigroup Inc. S'holder Derivative Litig.*, 964 A.2d 106, 120 (Del. Ch. 2009).

191 *Id.*

192 *Id.*

193 473 A.2d 805, 814 (Del. 1984).

illustrating that a given director is dominated through a "close personal or familial relationship or through force of will," or is so beholden to an interested director that his or her "discretion would be sterilized." Plaintiffs must show that the beholden director receives a benefit "upon which the director is so dependent or is of such subjective material importance that its threatened loss might create a reason to question whether the director is able to consider the corporate merits of the challenged transaction objectively." [194]

The Chancellor further elaborated on demand futility in *Ryan v. Gifford*, as follows:

> Defendants state that plaintiff has failed to make demand or prove demand futility. That is, defendants contend that the complaint lacks particularized facts that either establish that a majority of directors face a "substantial likelihood" of personal liability for the wrongdoing alleged in the complaint or render a majority of the board incapable of acting in an independent and disinterested fashion regarding demand.
>
> When a shareholder seeks to maintain a derivative action on behalf of a corporation, Delaware law requires that shareholder to first make demand on that corporation's board of directors, giving the board the opportunity to examine the alleged grievance and related facts and to determine whether pursuing the action is in the best interest of the corporation. This demand requirement works "to curb a myriad of individual shareholders from bringing potentially frivolous lawsuits on behalf of the corporation, which may tie up the corporation's governors in constant litigation and diminish the board's authority to govern the affairs of the corporation."
>
> This Court has recognized, however, that in some cases demand would prove futile. Where the board's actions cause the shareholders' complaint, "a question is rightfully raised over whether the board will pursue these claims with 100% allegiance to the corporation, since doing so may require that the board sue *itself* on behalf of the corporation." Thus, in an effort to balance the interest of preventing "strike suits motivated by the hope of creating settlement leverage through the prospect of expensive and time-consuming litigation discovery [with the interest of encouraging] suits reflecting a reasonable apprehension of actionable director malfeasance that the sitting board cannot be expected to objectively pursue on the corporation's behalf," Delaware law recognizes two instances where a plaintiff is excused from making demand. Failure to make demand may be excused if a plaintiff can raise a reason to doubt that: (1) a majority of the board is disinterested or independent or (2) the challenged acts were the product of the board's valid exercise of business judgment.
>
> The analysis differs, however, where the challenged decision is not a decision of the board in place at the time the complaint is filed. * * * Accordingly, where the challenged transaction was not a decision of the board

[194] 919 A.2d 563 (Del. Ch. 2007) (citations omitted).

> upon which plaintiff must seek demand, plaintiff must "create a reasonable doubt that, as of the time the complaint is filed, the board of directors could have properly exercised its independent and disinterested business judgment in responding to a demand."
>
> * * * Where at least one half or more of the board in place at the time the complaint was filed approved the underlying challenged transactions, which approval may be imputed to the entire board for purposes of proving demand futility, [demand may be excused].[195]

Where plaintiffs do not challenge a specific decision of the Board and instead complain of Board inaction, there is no challenged action, and the traditional *Aronson v. Lewis* analysis does not apply.[196] In an inaction case, "to show demand futility where the subject of the derivative suit is not a business decision of the Board, the plaintiff must allege particularized facts that 'create a reasonable doubt that, as of the time the complaint is filed, the board of directors could have properly exercised its independent and disinterested business judgment in responding to a demand.'"[197]

Demand futility is not shown solely because all of the directors are defendants in the derivative action and the directors would be deciding to sue themselves.[198] "Rather, demand will be excused based on a possibility of personal director liability only in the rare case when a plaintiff is able to show director conduct that is 'so egregious on its face that board approval cannot meet the test of business judgment, and a substantial likelihood of director liability therefore exists.'"[199]

In Delaware, a derivative plaintiff must have been a stockholder continuously from the time of the transaction in question through the completion of the lawsuit.[200] Stockholders who obtained their shares in a merger lack derivative standing to challenge pre-merger actions.[201]

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195 918 A.2d 341, 351-53 (Del. Ch. 2007) (citations omitted); *see also London v. Tyrrell*, C.A. No. 3321-CC, 2008 WL 2505435 (Del. Ch. June 24, 2008) (excusing demand in case where options were allegedly granted with exercise prices below the fair market value of the shares on the date of grant because projections given to valuation firm omitted revenues from anticipated contracts that were in projections furnished to issuer's lender because the defendant directors stood on both sides of the challenged transaction – they both granted and received options).

196 *Rales v. Blasband*, 634 A.2d 927, 933-34 (Del. 1993); *In re Citigroup Inc. S'holder Derivative Litig.*, 964 A.2d 106 (Del. Ch. 2009).

197 *Citigroup*, 964 A.2d at 120.

198 *In re Affiliated Computer Servs., Inc. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 2821-VCL, 2009 WL 296078 (Del. Ch. Feb. 6, 2009); *Citigroup*, 964 A.2d 106.

199 *Citigroup*, 964 A.2d at 121 (quoting *Aronson*, 473 A.2d 805, 815 (Del. 1984)).

200 *Id.* at 359; DGCL § 327 (2010).

201 *Cf. La. Mun. Police Employees' Ret. Sys. v. Crawford*, Civil Action No. 2635-N, 2007 WL 582510 (Del. Ch. February 13, 2007) and *Express Scripts, Inc. v. Crawford*, 918 A.2d 1172 (Del. Ch. 2007) (delaying a stockholders meeting to vote on the proposed Caremark Rx/CVS merger from February 20, 2007 to March 9, 2007 to allow disclosures that (i) Caremark had three times discussed a possible transaction with Express Scripts even though after its agreement with CVS, Caremark was arguing that antitrust concerns even precluded talking to this higher bidder, and (ii) any merger of Caremark could cause other plaintiffs to lose standing to sue Caremark Rx directors for breach of fiduciary duty in respect of alleged options backdating; *but cf. In re CheckFree Corp.*, No. 3193-CC, 2007 WL 3262188, at *4 (Del. Ch. Nov. 1, 2007) (denying a claim that management failed to disclose the effect of a merger on a pending derivative action and that the merger would likely extinguish the claim and free one of the directors from liability, holding that

3. Delaware Double Derivative Actions.

In *Lambrecht v. O'Neal*,[202] the Delaware Supreme Court in an *en banc opinion* answered a certified question of law submitted by the U. S. District Court for the Southern District of New York regarding the standing requirements for maintaining a "double derivative" suit under Delaware law. The essence of a "double derivative" suit were summarized by Justice Jacobs in *Lambrecht v. O'Neal* as follows:

> Before beginning our substantive analysis of the legal question presented, it is necessary first to portray the broader doctrinal context within which the question arises. That, in turn, requires us to treat two legally distinct subjects which, in this particular case, happen to converge factually and generate the issue presented. Those two topics are: (1) the nature of a double derivative action and (2) the standing of a plaintiff shareholder to maintain a derivative action on behalf of a corporation that is later acquired in a merger that eliminates the plaintiff's shareholdings in the acquired corporation. Our preliminary discussion of the legal background, although lengthier than we would prefer, will shorten and simplify the substantive legal analysis.
>
> (1) Nature of a Double Derivative Action
>
> Any discussion of a double derivative action must be with reference to the baseline "standard" derivative action. To illustrate, in a standard derivative action, a shareholder brings a lawsuit asserting a claim belonging to a corporate entity in which the shareholder owns shares ("corporation A"). A double derivative action, in contrast, involves two entities: corporation A (the corporation whose claim is being asserted), and corporation B, which owns or controls corporation A. We have previously observed that:
>
> > The stockholder derivative suit is an important and unique feature of corporate governance. In such a suit, a stockholder asserts a cause of action belonging to the corporation…. In a double derivative suit, such as the present case, a stockholder of a parent corporation seeks recovery for a cause of action belonging to a subsidiary corporation…. Because directors are empowered to manage, or direct the management of, the business and affairs of the corporation, 8 Del. C. § 141(a), the right of a stockholder to prosecute a derivative suit is limited to situations where the stockholder has demanded that the directors pursue the corporate claim and they have wrongfully refused to do so or where demand is excused because the directors are incapable of making an impartial decision regarding such litigation.

"directors need not [give legal advice and] tell shareholders that a merger will extinguish pending derivative claims"). Though such information may be helpful in an abstract sense, the Court found it unlikely the disclosure would "alter the total mix of information available." *Id.*

202 3 A.3d 277 (Del. Aug. 27, 2010).

Thus, by its nature a double derivative suit is one brought by a shareholder of a parent corporation to enforce a claim belonging to a subsidiary that is either wholly owned or majority controlled. Normally, such a claim is one that only the parent corporation, acting through its board of directors, is empowered to enforce. Cases may arise, however, where the parent corporation's board is shown to be incapable of making an impartial business judgment regarding whether to assert the subsidiary's claim. In those cases a shareholder of the parent will be permitted to enforce that claim on the parent corporation's behalf, that is, double derivatively.

Double derivative actions generally fall into two distinct categories. The first are lawsuits that are brought originally as double-derivative actions on behalf of a parent corporation that has a pre-existing, wholly owned subsidiary at the time of the alleged wrongful conduct at the subsidiary level. In this category, no intervening merger takes place. The second category involves cases, such as this, where the action is brought originally as a standard derivative action on behalf of a corporation that thereafter is acquired by another corporation in an intervening stock-for-stock merger. We distinguish these two categories because they create different standing (and pre-suit demand) issues.

In the first category—cases where the wholly-owned subsidiary pre-existed the alleged wrongdoing and where no intervening merger took place—corporation A is already a subsidiary of corporation B at the time of the alleged wrongdoing at corporation A. In those cases, only the parent corporation owns the subsidiary's stock at the time of the alleged wrongdoing, and the plaintiff owns stock only in the parent. Therefore, a Rule 23.1 demand could only be made—and a derivative action could only be brought—at the parent, not the subsidiary, level.

* * *

The second category involves actions brought derivatively on behalf of a corporation that was originally a stand-alone entity but where, as a result of being acquired in a later stock-for-stock merger, (1) the acquired corporation became a wholly-owned subsidiary of the acquiring corporation and (2) the shareholders of the (pre-merger) entity became shareholders of the acquiring corporation. * * * What materially differentiates the second category from the first is that in this second category, as a matter of law the merger operates to divest the original shareholder plaintiff of standing to maintain the standard derivative action brought originally on behalf of the acquired corporation. That result, in turn, creates issues relating to whether—and, if so, in what circumstances—the original stockholder plaintiff, as a newly incarnated shareholder of the acquirer-parent corporation can have standing to assert the (now wholly-owned) subsidiary's claim double-derivatively. That brings us to the second subject of this preliminary sketch of the current legal roadmap: standing.

(2) Standing To Sue Double Derivatively

The standing issue is a consequence of the doctrine articulated in *Lewis v. Anderson*.[203] There, a standard derivative action was brought in the Court of Chancery on behalf of Conoco Inc. (Old Conoco) charging its directors with breaches of fiduciary duty. Thereafter, and while that action was pending, E.I. duPont de Nemours, Inc. (DuPont) acquired Old Conoco in a stock-for-stock merger. As a result, Old Conoco disappeared and the surviving corporation—a wholly owned subsidiary of DuPont—was renamed Conoco, Inc. (New Conoco). After the merger, the defendants moved to dismiss the derivative action, arguing that the plaintiff had lost his standing to maintain it because as a matter of law the derivative claim became the property of New Conoco, which post-merger was the only party with standing to assert the claim. The Court of Chancery dismissed the action, and this Court affirmed. The reasoning which supports that outcome is critical to understanding how the standing issue arises in the double derivative context.

The *Anderson* court, citing earlier Delaware decisions, held that for a shareholder to have standing to maintain a derivative action, the plaintiff "must not only be a stockholder at the time of the alleged wrong and at the time of commencement of suit but…must also maintain shareholder status throughout the litigation." These two imperatives are referred to, respectively, as the "contemporaneous ownership" and the "continuous ownership" requirements. The contemporaneous ownership requirement is imposed by statute; while the continuous ownership requirement is a creature of common law. *Lewis v. Anderson* holds that where the corporation on whose behalf a derivative action is pending is later acquired in a merger that deprives the derivative plaintiff of his shares, the derivative claim—originally belonging to the acquired corporation—is transferred to and becomes an asset of the acquiring corporation as a matter of statutory law. Because as a consequence the original derivative shareholder plaintiff can no longer satisfy the continuous ownership requirement, the plaintiff loses standing to maintain the derivative action. And, because the claim is now (post merger) the property of the acquiring corporation, that corporation is now the only party with standing to enforce the claim, either by substituting itself as the plaintiff or by authorizing the original plaintiff to continue prosecuting the suit on the acquiring company's behalf.

That rationale generates the question presented here, which may be stated thusly: where a shareholder has lost standing to maintain a standard derivative action by reason of an acquisition of the corporation in a stock-for-stock merger, may that shareholder, in his new capacity as a shareholder of the acquiring corporation, assert the claim double derivatively and, if so, what requirements must the plaintiff satisfy? That issue did not arise in *Lewis v. Anderson* because the plaintiff there did not sue double derivatively, but the issue did arise in *Rales v. Blasband*, which involved facts similar (although not identical) to those presented here.

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[203] 477 A.2d 1040 (Del. 1984).

* * *

> In *Rales* we held that the traditional *Aronson v. Lewis* demand excusal test would not be employed in considering whether a demand on the parent board was required in a double derivative action. Rather, a different test (the "*Rales* test") would apply, which is whether the particularized factual allegations of the complaint create a reasonable doubt that the parent's board of directors could properly have exercised its independent and disinterested business judgment in responding to a demand. This Court further held that in a double derivative action the *Rales* test would apply as of the time the complaint was filed, as distinguished from the time of the alleged wrongdoing.

* * *

> The foregoing legal background shows that Delaware case law clearly endorses the double derivative action as a post-merger remedy. It also shows that to date this Court has determined some, but not all, of the procedural requirements that must be satisfied for a shareholder to proceed double derivatively. The question certified to us by the Southern District, to which we now turn, asks us to address whether the procedural requirements advocated by the defendants are mandated by Delaware law.

The underlying actions in *Lambrecht* began as standard derivative lawsuits, filed on behalf of Merrill Lynch & Co., Inc., to recover for purported breaches of fiduciary duties by Merrill Lynch officers and directors prior to its acquisition by Bank of America Corporation's in a stock-for-stock merger. Following the merger, BofA and Merrill Lynch moved to dismiss the two pending derivative actions on the ground that the plaintiffs, who were no longer stockholders of Merrill Lynch by virtue of the merger, had lost their standing to assert derivative claims on behalf of Merrill Lynch. The Southern District Court of New York granted the motions but, in dismissing the actions without prejudice, allowed the plaintiffs to replead their claims as "double derivative" actions (i.e., actions to enforce a claim of Merrill Lynch through BofA). The defendants again moved to dismiss plaintiffs' claims for lack of standing, arguing that in order to have standing to sue double derivatively, the plaintiffs had to be able to demonstrate that: (i) they were (and remain) stockholders of BofA *both* after the merger and also at the time of the alleged fiduciary misconduct prior to the merger; and (ii) BofA itself was a stockholder of Merrill Lynch at the time of the alleged fiduciary misconduct prior to the merger. Following oral argument, the Southern District certified the following question to the Delaware Supreme Court:

> Whether plaintiffs in a double derivative action under Delaware law, who were pre-merger shareholders in the acquired company and who are current shareholders, by virtue of a stock-for-stock merger, in the post-merger parent company, must also demonstrate that, at the time of the alleged wrongdoing at the acquired company, (a) they owned stock in the acquiring company, and (b) the acquiring company owned stock in the acquired company.

The Delaware Supreme Court ultimately concluded that the certified question must be answered in the negative.[204]

In determining whether the procedural requirements proposed by the defendants in *Lambrecht* were mandated under Delaware law, the Supreme Court first examined defendants' conceptual argument, which was premised on "a model of a double derivative action as being two separate derivative lawsuits, stacked on top of the other." According to the defendants, a double derivative action should be "viewed as two lawsuits in one," consisting of both a standard derivative action by the parent corporation (through a stockholder of the parent corporation), asserting a claim on the subsidiary's behalf, and a second derivative action asserting the same claim derivatively on the parent corporation's behalf as the new owner of the subsidiary. The Supreme Court noted that under the defendants' model, all the procedural requirements for bringing each derivative action would need to be satisfied.

The Supreme Court found that defendants' conceptual model of a double derivative action as two separate derivative lawsuits was flawed for several reasons. First, the additional procedural requirements under the defendants' model "would render double derivative lawsuits virtually impossible to bring," in contradiction of Delaware precedent affirming the validity of such actions "in cases where standing to maintain a standard derivative action is extinguished as a result of an intervening merger."

Second, the defendants' model would require that BofA owned Merrill Lynch stock at the time of the alleged fiduciary misconduct prior to the merger, which erroneously presumes that to enforce Merrill Lynch's pre-merger claim, BofA must proceed derivatively. As a result of the merger, Merrill Lynch's pre-merger claim transfers to and becomes the property of BofA as a matter of statutory law. Accordingly, "[a]s the sole owner of Merrill Lynch, BofA is not required to proceed derivatively; it may enforce that claim by the direct exercise of its 100 percent control."

Third, the defendants' model would require that the original derivative plaintiffs owned BofA shares at the time of the alleged fiduciary misconduct, which misapplies the contemporaneous requirement contained in DGCL § 327. Because plaintiffs are enforcing BofA's post-merger right (as the new owner of Merrill Lynch) to prosecute Merrill Lynch's pre-merger claim and BofA is not required to have owned shares of Merrill Lynch at the time of the alleged fiduciary misconduct, plaintiffs are also not required to have owned BofA shares at that point in time. Thus, in this particular case, "it suffices that the plaintiffs own shares of BofA at the time they seek to proceed double derivatively on its behalf."

Finally, the Supreme Court concluded that a "post-merger double derivative action is not a *de facto* continuation of the pre-merger derivative action" but instead "a new, distinct action in which standing to sue double derivatively rests on a different temporal and factual basis—namely, the failure of the BofA board, post-merger, to enforce the pre-merger claim of its wholly-owned subsidiary."

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[204] In so ruling, the Supreme Court overruled the Court of Chancery's decision in *Saito v. McCall*, 2004 WL 3029876 (Del. Ch. Dec. 20, 2004), to the extent it is inconsistent with the Supreme Court's reasoning and conclusions set forth in its opinion in *Lambrecht v. O'Neal*.

4. Texas Derivative Actions.

In Texas, a shareholder[205] may not institute or maintain a derivative proceeding unless he (i) was a shareholder at the time of the act or omission complained of (or became a shareholder by operation of law from such a shareholder) and (ii) fairly and adequately represents the interests of the corporation in enforcing the right of the corporation.[206] Further, the plaintiff must remain a qualified shareholder throughout the derivative proceedings.[207]

A shareholder bringing a derivative suit on behalf of a Texas corporation *must* file a written demand in order to maintain the suit, and no showing of futility can excuse this requirement.[208] Moreover, a 90-day waiting period is required from the delivery of the demand notice until the commencement of a suit.[209] This waiting period can only be avoided if the

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205 "Shareholder" is defined in TBOC §§ 1.002 and 21.551(2) to include the record owner and a beneficial owner whose shares are held by a voting trust or nominee to the extent of rights granted by a nominee statement on file with the corporation.

206 TBOC § 21.552 provides:

> Sec. 21.552. STANDING TO BRING PROCEEDING. (a) A shareholder may not institute or maintain a derivative proceeding unless:
>
> (1) the shareholder:
>
> (A) was a shareholder of the corporation at the time of the act or omission complained of; or
>
> (B) became a shareholder by operation of law from a person that was a shareholder at the time of the act or omission complained of; and
>
> (2) the shareholder fairly and adequately represents the interests of the corporation in enforcing the right of the corporation.
>
> (b) To the extent a shareholder of a corporation has standing to institute or maintain a derivative proceeding on behalf of the corporation immediately before a merger, Subchapter J or Chapter 10 may not be construed to limit or terminate the shareholder's standing after the merger.

207 *Somers v. Crane*, 295 S.W.3d 5 (Tex. App. [1st] 2009); *Zauber v. Murray Sav. Ass'n*, 591 S.W.2d 932, 935 (Tex. Civ. App. – Dallas 1979), writ ref'd per curiam, 601 S.W.2d 940 (Tex. 1980). *See infra* notes 212-214 and related text.

208 TBCA art. 514(C)(1); TBOC § 21.553(a) (2007). The Texas Corporate Statutes apply to corporations formed under the laws of a jurisdiction other than Texas (a "*foreign corporation*") transacting business in Texas. TBOC §§ 21.001(2), (7); TBCA art. 1.02(A)(14). In a derivative proceeding brought in Texas in the right of a foreign corporation, the requirement that the shareholder make written demand is governed by the laws of the jurisdiction where the foreign corporation is incorporated. TBOC § 21.562(a); TBCA art. 5.14(K). Even though the substantive law of the jurisdiction where the foreign corporation is incorporated applies, Texas procedural law governs matters of remedy and procedure. *Connolly v. Gasmire*, 257 S.W.3d 831 (Tex. App.—Dallas 2008, no pet. h.).

Under Texas procedural law, a party is generally required to file a special exception to challenge a defective pleading. *See* TEX. R. CIV. P. 90, 91 (providing the means for a party to specifically except to an adverse party's pleadings, and providing that a special exception shall point out the pleading excepted to and, with particularity, the defect or insufficiency in the allegations of the pleading). The purpose of special exceptions is to furnish a party with a medium by which to force clarification of an adverse party's pleadings when they are not clear or sufficiently specific. *Id.*

When a trial court sustains a party's special exceptions, the trial court must give the pleader an opportunity to amend his pleadings before dismissing the case. When a petition fails to satisfy the requirements for demand futility under the laws of a foreign jurisdiction, the proper remedy under Texas procedural law is to sustain the special exceptions and allow the plaintiff an opportunity to amend the petition, even if dismissal is the proper remedy under the laws of the foreign jurisdiction. *Id.*

209 TBCA art. 5.14(C)(2); TBOC § 21.553 (2007). TBOC § 21.553 provides:

> Section 21.553. Demand. (a) A shareholder may not institute a derivative proceeding until the 91st day after the date a written demand is filed with the corporation stating with particularity the act, omission, or other matter that is the subject of the claim or challenge and requesting that the corporation take suitable action.
>
> (b) The waiting period required by Subsection (a) before a derivative proceeding may be instituted is not required if:

shareholder is earlier notified that the Board has rejected their demand, or if "irreparable harm to the corporation is being suffered or would result by waiting for the expiration of the 90-day period."[210]

The written demand must meet a stringent set of particularity requirements in order to satisfy the Texas Corporate Statutes.[211] Though much of the analysis done by the courts to

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> (1) the shareholder has been previously notified that the demand has been rejected by the corporation;
>
> (2) the corporation is suffering irreparable injury; or
>
> (3) irreparable injury to the corporation would result by waiting for the expiration of the 90-day period.

210 TBCA art. 5.14(C)(2); TBOC § 21.553(b).

211 In *In re Schmitz*, 285 S.W.3d 451 (Tex. 2009), the Texas Supreme Court rejected a shareholder challenge to a merger and held that merely alleging (a) the availability of a superior offer price and (b) the Board's duty to "'fully and fairly consider all potential offers' and 'disclose to shareholders all of [their] analysis,'" without further analysis of the proposed transactions and explanation of the Board's failure to fulfill their duties, is not sufficient to meet article 5.14's particularity requirement. In so holding, the Texas Supreme Court wrote:

> The contours of the demand requirement in Texas law have always been somewhat unclear, in part because shareholder derivative suits have been relatively rare.
>
> * * *
>
> In 1997, the Legislature extensively revised the Texas Business Corporation Act "to provide Texas with modern and flexible business laws which should make Texas a more attractive jurisdiction in which to incorporate." Included were changes to article 5.14 to conform Texas derivative actions to the Model Business Corporation Act. Article 5.14(C) now provides that "[n]o shareholder may commence a derivative proceeding until . . . a written demand is filed with the corporation setting forth with particularity the act, omission, or other matter that is the subject of the claim or challenge and requesting that the corporation take suitable action." Unlike Texas law for a century before, the new provision requires presuit demand in all cases; a shareholder can no longer avoid a demand by proving it would have been futile.
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> * * *
>
> Article 5.14 does not expressly state that a presuit demand must list the name of a shareholder. But because parts of the article and most of its purposes would be defeated otherwise, we hold that a demand cannot be made anonymously.
>
> The statute here provides that "[n]o shareholder may commence a derivative proceeding until … a written demand is filed." It expressly limits standing to shareholders who owned stock "at the time of the act or omission complained of." It requires that the demand state "the subject of the claim or challenge" that forms the basis of the suit. And it tolls limitations for 90 days after a written demand is filed. Given the interrelation between the demand and the subsequent suit, it is hard to see how or why the demand could be made by anyone other than the shareholder who will file the suit.
>
> Of course, requiring the demand to come from the putative plaintiff is not the same as requiring that it state the plaintiff's name. But for several reasons we believe it must.
>
> First, article 5.14 presumes that a corporation knows the identity of the shareholder making the demand. The article prohibits filing suit until 90 days after the demand "unless the shareholder has earlier been notified that the demand has been rejected." The tolling provision suspends limitations for the shorter of 90 days or "30 days after the corporation advises the shareholder that the demand has been rejected." For a corporation to "notify" or "advise" the shareholder of rejection, it must know who the shareholder is.
>
> Second, the identity of the shareholder may play an important role in how the corporation responds to a demand. "The identity of the complaining shareholder may shed light on the veracity or significance of the facts alleged in the demand letter, and the Board might properly take a different course of action depending on the shareholder's identity." In other words, a demand from Warren Buffett may have different implications than one from Jimmy Buffett.
>
> Third, a corporation cannot be expected to incur the time and expense involved in fully investigating a demand without verifying that it comes from a valid source. Article 5.14 sets out a procedure for independent and disinterested directors to conduct an investigation and decide whether the

evaluate potential "irreparable harm" may be similar to the analysis required for demand futility claims in Delaware, the fact that the Texas Corporate Statutes focus on the harm to the corporation, rather than the apparent futility of demand, presents a slightly different set of issues than are normally addressed in cases involving Delaware corporations.

5. Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.

Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 23.1 also provides that a plaintiff may bring a shareholder derivative suit if the requirements for Federal Court jurisdiction are satisfied and the following additional two requirements are met: (1) the plaintiff must have owned shares in the corporation at the time of the disputed transaction; and (2) the plaintiff must allege with particularity the efforts, if any, made by the plaintiff to obtain the action the plaintiff desires from the directors.[212] Case law further requires that the plaintiff remain a shareholder throughout the

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> derivative claim is in the best interests of the corporation. If they determine in good faith that it is not, the court must dismiss the suit over the plaintiff's objection. It would be hard to imagine requiring these procedures, especially in cases like this one involving an imminent corporation merger, at the instance of someone who could in no event file suit.
>
> Finally, we are concerned with the potential for abuse if demands can be sent without identifying any shareholder. The letter here was on the letterhead of a California law firm whose principal prosecuted hundreds of stockholder derivative actions, and later pleaded guilty to paying kickbacks to shareholders recruited for that purpose.
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> * * *
>
> The only complaint and demand for action listed in this letter was that the Board stop the Hoshizaki merger "in light of a superior offer … at $23 per share." The demand gives no reason why the Hoshikazi offer was inferior other than what one can imply from the $1 difference in price. All other things being equal, shareholders should of course prefer $1 more rather than $1 less. But in comparing competing offers for a merger, all other things are rarely equal.
>
> A large number of variables may affect the inherent value of competing offers for corporate stock. A cash offer may prove more or less valuable than an offer of stock currently valued at the same amount. Competing bidders may be more or less capable of funding the offers they tender, or completing the transaction without anti-trust or other obstacles. Competitors may attach conditions that make an offer more or less attractive in the short or long run.
>
> In a merger like this involving several hundred million dollars, one cannot say whether the $23 offer was superior to the $22 offer without knowing a lot more. A rule requiring that a corporation always accept nominally higher offers, in addition to sometimes harming shareholders, would replace the business judgment that Texas law requires a board of directors to exercise. As a result, a board cannot analyze a shareholder's complaint about a higher competing offer without knowing the basis of that complaint. As this demand said nothing about that, it was not stated "with particularity" as required by article 5.14.
>
> The second sentence of the demand here added that the Board should "fully and fairly consider all potential offers" and "disclose to shareholders all of your analysis" for recommending the Hosizaki sale. This bland statement of a corporate board's duties could be sent to any board at any time on any issue. The demand did not suggest how the board had failed to consider other offers, or what information it might be withholding. Thus, it gives no direction about what Lancer's board should have done here.
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> * * *
>
> Whether a demand is specific enough will depend on the circumstances of the corporation, the board, and the transaction involved in the complaint. But given the size of this corporation and the nature of this transaction, this demand was clearly inadequate.

[212] FED. R. CIV. P. 23.1.

course of the derivative action.[213] This demand requirement may be excused if the facts show that demand would have been futile.[214]

6. Effect of Merger on Derivative Claims.

Questions arise with respect to the effect of a merger in which the corporation is not the acquiring entity on a derivative action. Under Delaware law, in the absence of fraud, "the effect of a merger . . . is normally to deprive a shareholder of the merged corporation of standing to maintain a derivative action."[215] Allegations that a Board Chairman foiled a potential superior bid by demanding a position for himself with the superior bidder (an entrenchment claim) were derivative in nature and did not survive a merger with another bidder.[216] A narrow exception to Delaware's general non-survival rule exists: a "stockholder who directly attacks the fairness or validity of a merger alleges an injury to the stockholders, not the corporation, and may pursue such a claim even after the merger at issue has been consummated."[217]

The effect of a merger in which the corporation is not the acquiring entity on a derivative action is not as clear under Texas law. Like Delaware, the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure[218]

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213 *See infra* note 218 and related text.

214 *Potter v. Hughes*, 546 F.3d 1051, 1056 (9th Cir. 2008).

215 *Feldman v. Cutaia*, 951 A.2d 727 (Del. 2008) (claim by shareholder that invalid grant of options resulted in dilution, which resulted in shareholder getting less value in merger, was derivative and did not survive merger); *Lewis v. Ward*, 852 A.2d 896 (Del. 2004); *Lewis v. Anderson*, 477 A.2d 1040, 1047–49 (Del. 1984); *In re Merrill Lynch & Co., Inc. Sec., Derivative and ERISA Litig.*, Master File No. 07 Civ. 9633 (JSR) (S.D.N.Y. Feb. 17, 2009); *Binks v. DSL.net, Inc.*, C.A. No. 2823-VCN (April 29, 2010); *In re Countrywide Fin. Corp. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 3464-VCN, 2008 WL 4173839 (Del. Ch. Sept. 10, 2008); *In re Countrywide Fin. Corp. Derivative Litig.*, Civ. No. 07-372-SLR (D. Del. Oct. 7, 2008); *Schreiber v. Carney*, 447 A.2d 17, 21 (Del. Ch. 1982) ("[A] merger which eliminates a complaining stockholder's ownership of stock in a corporation also ordinarily eliminates his status to bring or maintain a derivative suit on behalf of the corporation, whether the merger takes place before or after the suit is brought, on the theory that upon the merger the derivative rights pass to the surviving corporation which then has the sole right or standing to prosecute the action."); *see Elloway v. Pate*, 238 S.W.3d 882, 900 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2007, no pet.), in which a Texas court applying Delaware law held that a merger eliminated standing to bring a derivative action, but not a direct action, and explained: "A derivative claim is brought by a stockholder, on behalf of the corporation, to recover harm done to the corporation. *Tooley v. Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette*, 845 A.2d 1031, 1036 (Del. 2004). A stockholder's direct claim must be independent of any alleged injury to the corporation. *Id.* at 1039. If the stockholder's claim is derivative, the stockholder loses standing to pursue his claim upon accomplishment of the merger. *Parnes v. Bally Entm't Corp.*, 722 A.2d 1243, 1244-45 (Del. 1999). A stockholder who directly attacks the fairness or validity of a merger alleges an injury to the stockholders, not the corporation, and may pursue such claim even after the merger at issue has been consummated. *Id.* at 1245. To state a direct claim with respect to a merger, a stockholder must challenge the validity of the merger itself, usually by charging the directors with breaches of fiduciary duty in unfair dealing and/or unfair price. *Id.* at 1245." *Cf. Pate v. Elloway*, No. 01-03-00187-CV, 2003 WL 22682422 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] Nov. 13, 2003, pet. denied); *Grosset v. Wenaas*, 175 P.3d 1184 (Cal. 2008) (in holding that a derivative lawsuit for breaches of fiduciary duty and insider trading in connection with a secondary offering by the corporation did not survive a reverse triangular merger in which it was the surviving corporation, the California Supreme Court wrote: "[W]e hold that California law, like Delaware law, generally requires a plaintiff in a shareholder's derivative suit to maintain continuous stock ownership throughout the pendency of the litigation. Under this rule, a derivative plaintiff who ceases to be a stockholder by reason of a merger ordinarily loses standing to continue the litigation. Although equitable considerations may warrant an exception to the continuous ownership requirement if the merger itself is used to wrongfully deprive the plaintiff of standing, or if the merger is merely a reorganization that does not affect the plaintiff's ownership interest, we need not address such matters definitively in this case, where no such circumstances appear.").

216 *In re NYMEX Shareholder Litigation*, C.A. No. 3621-VCN (Del. Ch. Sept. 30, 2009).

217 *Parnes v. Bally Entm't Corp.*, 722 A.2d 1243, 1245 (Del. 1999).

218 FED. R. CIV. P. 23.1; *Schilling v. Belcher*, 582 F.2d 995, 999 (5th Cir. 1978) (noting "the [stock] ownership requirement continues throughout the life of the suit"); *Romero v. US Unwired, Inc.*, No. 04-2312, 2006 WL 2366342, at *5 (E.D.

and Texas' prior derivative action provisions in the TBCA[219] have been interpreted to require that the claimant in a derivative case remain a shareholder throughout the course of the derivative claim, which requirement would not be satisfied where a derivative plaintiff's shares in the corporation are converted in the merger into cash or securities of another entity. Only one Texas court has ruled on the merger survival issue under the derivative provisions in the current Texas Corporate Statutes, holding that, at least in a cash-out merger, the right of a shareholder to bring a derivative action on behalf of the non-surviving corporation does not survive the merger.[220] Whereas Delaware law explicitly allows for direct suit in such cases, *Gearhart* held

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La. Aug. 11, 2006) (slip op.) (holding that merger divested shareholder plaintiff of standing to pursue derivative claim under Fed. R. Civ. P. 23.1 and dismissing suit); *Quinn v. Anvil Corporation*, 620 F.3d 1005 (9th Cir. 2010) (holding that because of the extraordinary nature of a shareholder derivative suit, FRCP 23.1 establishes two stringent conditions for bringing such a suit: First, plaintiffs must comply with Rule 23.1's pleading requirements, including that the plaintiff "allege with particularity the efforts, if any, made by the plaintiff to obtain the action the plaintiff desires from the directors;" Second, under Rule 23.1 (a) a derivative action "may not be maintained if it appears that the plaintiff does not fairly and adequately represent the interests of shareholders or members who are similarly situated in enforcing the right of the corporation or association", from which courts have inferred a requirement not only "that a derivative plaintiff be a shareholder at the time of the alleged wrongful acts" but also "that the plaintiff retain ownership of the stock for the duration of the lawsuit" (the so-called "continuous ownership requirement") so that "if a shareholder is divested of his or her shares during the pendency of litigation, that shareholder loses standing" and as a result plaintiff's derivative action was foreclosed by operation of the reverse stock split in which plaintiff's shares were cancelled and plaintiff thereafter held no stock; plaintiff's derivative claims are an "intangible asset" belonging to the corporation, not to plaintiff and plaintiff as a nonshareholder cannot benefit from any recovery the company obtains; equitable exceptions to the continuous ownership requirement were not applicable because (i) there were other shareholders who could have brought the claim and the challenged transaction did not result in a dissolution of the corporation leaving no continuing shareholders as in the case of some mergers and (ii) there was a valid business purpose (consolidating stock ownership in employees for benefit of the corporation for the transaction) and no evidence beyond plaintiff's self serving statements that the reverse split was undertaken to cut off plaintiff's derivative claims)..

[219] *Zauber v. Murray Sav. Ass'n*, 591 S.W.2d 932, 937-38 (Tex. Civ. App. – Dallas 1979), writ ref'd per curiam, 601 S.W.2d 940 (Tex. 1980) ("The requirement in article [TBCA] 5.14(B) [as it existed in 1979] that in order to bring a derivative suit a plaintiff must have been a shareholder at the time of the wrongful transaction, is only a minimum requirement. The federal rule governing derivative suits, which contains similar requirements to article 5.14(B), has been construed to include a further requirement that shareholder status be maintained throughout the suit. [citations omitted] The reasoning behind allowing a shareholder to maintain a suit in the name of the corporation when those in control wrongfully refuse to maintain it is that a shareholder has a proprietary interest in the corporation. Therefore, when a shareholder sues, he is protecting his own interests a well as those of the corporation. If a shareholder voluntarily disposes of his shares after instituting a derivative action, he necessarily destroys the technical foundation of his right to maintain the action. [citation omitted] If, on the other hand, a shareholder's status is involuntarily destroyed, a court of equity must determine whether the status was destroyed without a valid business purpose; for example, was the action taken merely to defeat the plaintiff's standing to maintain the suit? * * * If no valid business purpose exists, a court of equity will consider the destruction of a stockholder's status a nullity and allow him to proceed with the suit in the name of the corporation. Therefore, on remand of this suit, a finding that appellant has failed to maintain his status as shareholder is dependent upon findings that the disposition of the stock was voluntary or, though involuntary, that the corporation's termination proceeding was instituted to accomplish a valid business purpose, rather than to dispose of the derivative suit by a reverse stock split.").

[220] *Somers v. Crane*, 295 S.W.3d 5 (Tex. App. [1st] 2009). TBCA art. 5.03(M) provides that for the purposes of TBCA art. 5.03: "To the extent a shareholder of a corporation has standing to institute or maintain derivative litigation on or behalf of the corporation immediately before a merger, nothing in this article may be construed to limit or extinguish the shareholder's standing." (Substantially the same language is included in TBOC § 21.552(b)). At least one federal court interpreting Texas law has suggested that under TBCA art. 5.03(M) a shareholder who could have properly brought a derivative suit prior to a merger will maintain that right, even after a merger has rendered the corporation in question nonexistent. *Marron v. Ream*, Civil Action No. H-06-1394, 2006 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 72831, at *23 (S.D. Tex. May 8, 2006). But the *Somers* opinion dismissed this analysis, holding that *Marron* did not squarely address the issue of standing and that the federal court's suggestion that 5.03(M) might support survival was merely dicta. *Somers*, No. 01-08-00119-CV at 21. *Somers* also held that "because of the abundant authority stating that a director's or officer's fiduciary duty runs only to the corporation, not to individual shareholders, we decline to recognize the existence of a fiduciary relationship owed directly by a director to a shareholder in the context of a cash-out merger" and, thus, that a direct class action could not be brought against directors and officers for their role in a cash-out merger. *Id.* at 13.

that under Texas law fiduciary claims in connection with a merger are the right of the corporation itself, not individual shareholders.[221]

7. Special Litigation Committees.

In *Zapata Corporation v. Maldonado*,[222] the Delaware Supreme Court established a two-step analysis that must be applied to a motion to dismiss a derivative claim based on the recommendation of a Special Litigation Committee ("*SLC*") established by a Board in a demand-excused case. The first step of the analysis is a court review of the independence of SLC members and whether the SLC conducted a good faith investigation of reasonable scope that yielded reasonable bases supporting its conclusions.[223] The second step of the analysis is the Court applying its own business judgment to the facts to determine whether the corporation's best interests would be served by dismissing the suit, and it is a discretionary step designed for situations in which the technical requirements of step one are met but the result does not appear to satisfy the spirit of the requirements.[224]

The court treats the SLC's motion in a manner similar to a motion for summary judgment. The SLC bears the burden of demonstrating that there are no genuine issues of material fact as to its independence, the reasonableness and good faith of its investigation and that there are reasonable bases for its conclusions.[225] If the court determines that a material fact is in dispute on any of these issues, it must deny the SLC's motion to dismiss.[226] If an SLC's motion to dismiss is denied, control of the litigation is returned to the plaintiff shareholder.[227]

The *Zapata* test was applied in *London v. Tyrrell*,[228] in which a two member SLC was found to have failed to show that it was independent and that the scope of its investigation was reasonable. As to independence, the Court stressed that the SLC must carry the burden of "fully convinc[ing] the Court that the SLC can act with integrity and objectivity." The two member SLC failed because one committee member was the husband of the defendant's cousin, and the other was a former colleague of the defendant who felt indebted to the defendant for getting him "a good price" in the prior sale of a company. The Court commented that "it will be nigh unto impossible" to show independence where "the SLC member and a director defendant have a family relationship" or where an SLC member "feels he owes something to an interested director." The Court was also concerned with deposition testimony and notes suggesting that the SLC members viewed their job as "attacking" the plaintiffs' complaint. As to the SLC's investigation, the Court found that the SLC wrongly concluded that some claims were barred by the exculpation provision in the corporation's charter, made key mistakes of fact, and systematically failed to pursue evidence that might suggest liability. Although the Court denied the SLC's motion to dismiss and authorized the plaintiffs to pursue the action, the Court

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221 *Gearhart Indus., Inc. v. Smith Int'l. Inc.*, 741 F.2d 707,721 (5th Cir. 1984).

222 430 A.2d 779 (Del. 1981).

223 *Id.* at 789; *see infra* notes 253-264.

224 *Id.* at 789.

225 *Kaplan v. Wyatt*, 484 A.2d 501, 506-507 (Del. Ch. 1984), *aff'd*, 499 A.2d 1184 (Del. 1985).

226 *Id.* at 508.

227 *Id.* at 509.

228 C.A. No. 3321-CC (Del. Ch. Mar. 11, 2010).

commented that the SLC process remains "a legitimate mechanism" in Delaware corporate law, and in an appropriate case an SLC can serve the corporate interest by short-circuiting ill-advised litigation and restoring the Board's management authority to determine corporate litigation policy.

H. Effect of Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 on Common Law Fiduciary Duties.

1. Overview.

Responding to problems in corporate governance, SOX and related changes to SEC rules and stock exchange listing requirements[229] have implemented a series of reforms that require all public companies[230] to implement or refrain from specified actions,[231] some of which are expressly permitted by state corporate laws, subject to general fiduciary principles. Several examples of this interaction of state law with SOX or new SEC or stock exchange requirements are discussed below.

2. Shareholder Causes of Action.

SOX does not create new causes of action for shareholders, with certain limited exceptions, and leaves enforcement of its proscriptions to the SEC or federal criminal authorities.[232] The corporate plaintiffs' bar, however, can be expected to be creative and

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229 On November 4, 2003, the SEC issued Exchange Act Release No. 48,745, titled "Self-Regulatory Organizations; New York Stock Exchange, Inc. and National Association of Securities Dealers, Inc.; Order Approving Proposed Rule Changes," pursuant to which the SEC approved the rule changes proposed by the NYSE and NASD to comply with SOX. Self-Regulatory Organizations; New York Stock Exchange, Inc. and National Association of Securities Dealers, Inc.; Order Approving Proposed Rule Changes, Exchange Act Release No. 48,745, 81 S.E.C. Docket 1586 (Nov. 4, 2003), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/sro/34-48745.htm. These rule changes are now effective for all NYSE and NASDAQ listed companies. Any references to the rules in the NYSE Listed Company Manual (the *"NYSE Rules"*) or the marketplace rules in the NASD Manual (the *"NASD Rules"*) are references to the rules as approved by the SEC on November 4, 2003.

230 SOX is generally applicable to all companies required to file reports with the SEC under the 1934 Act (*"reporting companies"*) or that have a registration statement on file with the SEC under the 1933 Act, in each case regardless of size (collectively, *"public companies"* or *"issuers"*). Some of the SOX provisions apply only to companies listed on a national securities exchange (*"listed companies"*), such as the New York Stock Exchange (*"NYSE"*), the American Stock Exchange (*"AMEX"*) or the NASDAQ Stock Market (*"NASDAQ"*) (the national securities exchanges and NASDAQ are referred to collectively as *"SROs"*), but not to companies traded on the NASD OTC Bulletin Board or quoted in the Pink Sheets or the Yellow Sheets. SOX and the SEC's rules thereunder are applicable in many, but not all, respects to (i) investment companies registered under the Investment Company Act of 1940 (the *"1940 Act"*) and (ii) public companies domiciled outside of the United States (*"foreign companies"*), although many of the SEC rules promulgated under SOX's directives provide limited relief from some SOX provisions for the *"foreign private issuer,"* which is defined in 1933 Act Rule 405 and 1934 Act Rule 3b-4(c) as a private corporation or other organization incorporated outside of the U.S., as long as:

- More than 50% of the issuer's outstanding voting securities are not directly or indirectly held of record by U.S. residents;
- The majority of the executive officers or directors are not U.S. citizens or residents;
- More than 50% of the issuer's assets are not located in the U.S.; and;
- The issuer's business is not administered principally in the U.S.

231 *See infra* **Appendix A**; Byron F. Egan, *The Sarbanes-Oxley Act and Its Expanding Reach*, 40 TEX. J. BUS. L. 305 (Winter 2005), *available at* http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=505; Byron F. Egan, *Communicating with Auditors After the Sarbanes-Oxley Act*, 41 TEX. J. BUS. L. 131 (Fall 2005); Byron F. Egan, *Perils of In-House Counsel* (July 22, 2010), http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1430.

232 "Except in the case of recovery of profits from prohibited sales during a blackout period and suits by whistleblowers, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act does not expressly create new private rights of action for civil liability for violations of the Act.

aggressive in asserting that the new standards of corporate governance should be carried over into state law fiduciary duties, perhaps by asserting that violations of SOX constitute violations of fiduciary duties of obedience or supervision.[233]

3. Director Independence.

a. Power to Independent Directors.

(1) *General*. The SEC rules under SOX and related stock exchange listing requirements are shifting the power to govern public companies to outside directors. Collectively, they will generally require that listed companies have:

- A board of directors, a majority of whom are independent;[234]
- An audit committee[235] composed entirely of independent directors;[236]

The Sarbanes-Oxley Act, however, potentially affects existing private rights of action under the Exchange Act by: (1) lengthening the general statute of limitations applicable to private securities fraud actions to the earlier of two years after discovery of the facts constituting the violation or five years after the violation; and (2) expanding reporting and disclosure requirements that could potentially expand the range of actions that can be alleged to give rise to private suits under Section 10(b) and Section 18 of the Exchange Act and SEC Rule 10b-5." Patricia A. Vlahakis et al., *Understanding the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002*, CORP. GOVERNANCE REFORM, Sept.-Oct. 2002, at 16.

233 See William B. Chandler III & Leo E. Strine Jr., *The New Federalism of the American Corporate Governance System: Preliminary Reflections of Two Residents of One Small State* (February 26, 2002), at 43–48 (N.Y.U. Ctr. for Law and Bus. Research Paper Working Paper Series, Paper No. 03-01; U. of Penn. Inst. for Law & Econ. Working Paper Series, Research Paper No. 03-03) (Posted Jan. 8, 2003, *last revised* Mar. 13, 2003), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=367720.

234 *See* NYSE Rules 303A.01, 303A.02; NASD Rules 4350(c)(1), 4200(a)(15).

235 The 1934 Act § 3(a)(58) added by SOX § 2(a)(3) provides:

(58) *Audit Committee*. The term "audit committee" means –

(A) A committee (or equivalent body) established by and amongst the board of directors of an issuer for the purpose of overseeing the accounting and financial reporting processes of the issuer and audits of the financial statements of the issuer; and

(B) If no such committee exists with respect to an issuer, the entire board of directors of the issuer.

236 On April 9, 2003, the SEC issued Release No. 33-8220 (the *"SOX § 301 Release"*) adopting, effective April 25, 2003, 1934 Act Rule 10A-3, titled "Standards Relating to Listed Company Audit Committees" (the *"SOX § 301 Rule"*), to implement SOX § 301. Standards Relating to Listed Company Audit, Securities Act Release No. 8220, Exchange Act Release No. 47,654, Investment Company Act Release No. 26,001, 79 S.E.C. Docket 2876 (Apr. 9 2003), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8220.htm. Under the SOX § 301 Rule, each SRO must adopt rules conditioning the listing of any securities of an issuer upon the issuer being in compliance with the standards specified in SOX § 301, which may be summarized as follows:

- Oversight. The audit committee must have direct responsibility for the appointment, compensation, and oversight of the work (including the resolution of disagreements between management and the auditors regarding financial reporting) of any registered public accounting firm employed to perform audit services, and the auditors must report directly to the audit committee.
- Independence. The audit committee members must be independent directors, which means that each member may not, other than as compensation for service on the board of directors or any of its committees: (i) accept any consulting, advisory or other compensation, directly or indirectly, from the issuer or (ii) be an officer or other affiliate of the issuer.
- Procedures to Receive Complaints. The audit committee is responsible for establishing procedures for the receipt, retention and treatment of complaints regarding accounting, internal accounting controls or auditing matters, and the confidential, anonymous submission by employees of the issuer (*"whistleblowers"*) of concerns regarding questionable accounting or auditing matters.

- A nominating/corporate governance committee composed entirely of independent directors;[237] and

- A compensation committee composed entirely of independent directors.[238]

These independent directors will be expected to actively participate in the specified activities of the board of directors and the committees on which they serve.

State law authorizes boards of directors to delegate authority to committees of directors. Texas and Delaware law both provide that boards of directors may delegate authority to committees of the Board subject to limitations on delegation for fundamental corporate transactions.[239] Among the matters that a Board committee will not have the authority to approve are (i) charter amendments, except to the extent such amendments are the result of the issuance of a series of stock permitted to be approved by a Board, (ii) a plan of merger or similar transaction, (iii) the sale of all or substantially all of the assets of the corporation outside the ordinary course of its business, (iv) a voluntary dissolution of the corporation and (v) amending bylaws or creating new bylaws of the corporation.[240] In addition, under Texas law, a Board committee may not fill any vacancy on the Board, remove any officer, fix the compensation of a member of the committee or amend or repeal a resolution approved by the whole Board to the extent that such resolution by its terms is not so amendable or repealable.[241] Further, under both

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- Funding and Authority. The audit committee must have the authority to hire independent counsel and other advisers to carry out its duties, and the issuer must provide for funding, as the audit committee may determine, for payment of compensation of the issuer's auditor and of any advisors that the audit committee engages.

SROs may adopt additional listing standards regarding audit committees as long as they are consistent with SOX and the SOX § 301 Rule. The NYSE and NASD have adopted such rules, which are discussed below. *See* NYSE Rules 303A.06, 303A.07; NASD Rule 4350(d).

237 *See* NYSE Rule 303A.04; NASD Rule 4350(c)(4).

238 *See* NYSE Rule 303A.05; NASD Rule 4350(c)(3). The compensation committee typically is composed of independent directors and focuses on executive compensation and administration of stock options and other incentive plans. While the duties of the compensation committee will vary from company to company, the *ALI's Principles of Corporate Governance* § 3A.05 (Supp 2002) recommend that the compensation committee should:

(1) Review and recommend to the board, or determine, the annual salary, bonus, stock options, and other benefits, direct and indirect, of the senior executives.

(2) Review new executive compensation programs; review on a periodic basis the operation of the corporation's executive compensation programs to determine whether they are properly coordinated; establish and periodically review policies for the administration of executive compensation programs; and take steps to modify any executive compensation programs that yield payments and benefits that are not reasonably related to executive performance.

(3) Establish and periodically review policies in the area of management perquisites.

Under SEC Rule 16b-3 under the 1934 Act, the grant and exercise of employee stock options, and the making of stock awards, are generally exempt from the short-swing profit recovery provisions of § 16(b) under the 1934 Act if approved by a committee of independent directors. Further, under Section 162(m) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1980, as amended, corporations required to be registered under the 1934 Act are not able to deduct compensation to specified individuals in excess of $1,000,000 per year, except in the case of performance based compensation arrangements approved by the shareholders and administered by a compensation committee consisting of two or more "outside directors" as defined. Treas. Reg. § 1.162-27 (2002).

239 TBOC § 21.416; TBCA art. 2.36; DGCL § 141(c). These restrictions only apply to Delaware corporations that incorporated prior to July 1, 1996, and did not elect by board resolution to be governed by DGCL § 141(c)(2). If a Delaware corporation is incorporated after that date or elects to be governed by DGCL § 141(c)(2), then it may authorize a board committee to declare dividends or authorize the issuance of stock of the corporation.

240 TBOC § 21.416; TBCA art. 2.36; DGCL § 141(c).

241 TBOC § 21.416; TBCA art. 2.36(B).

Texas and Delaware law, no Board committee has the authority to authorize a distribution (a dividend in the case of Delaware law) or authorize the issuance of stock of a corporation unless that authority is set forth in the charter or bylaws of the corporation.[242] Alternative members may also be appointed to committees under both states' laws.[243]

(2) *NYSE*. NYSE Rule 303A.01 requires the Board of each NYSE listed company to consist of a majority of independent directors.

(a) NYSE Base Line Test. Pursuant to NYSE Rule 303A.02, no director qualifies as "independent" unless the board affirmatively determines that the director has no material relationship with the company (either directly or as a partner, shareholder or officer of an organization that has a relationship with the company). The company is required to disclose the basis for such determination in its annual proxy statement or, if the company does not file an annual proxy statement, in the company's annual report on Form 10-K filed with the SEC. In complying with this requirement, the company's Board is permitted to adopt and disclose standards to assist it in making determinations of independence, disclose those standards, and then make the general statement that the independent directors meet those standards.

(b) NYSE Per Se Independence Disqualifications. In addition to the general requirement discussed above, NYSE Rule 303A.02 considers a number of relationships to be an absolute bar on a director being independent as follows:

> First, a director who is an employee, or whose immediate family member is an executive officer, of the company would not be independent until three years after the end of such employment (employment as an interim Chairman or CEO will not disqualify a director from being considered independent following that employment).
>
> Second, a director who has received, or whose immediate family member has received, more than $120,000 in any twelve-month period within the last three years in direct compensation from the NYSE listed company, except for certain payments, would not be independent.
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> Third, a director who is, or who has an immediate family member who is, a current partner of a firm that is the NYSE listed company's internal or external auditor; a director who is a current employee of such a firm; a director who has an immediate family member who is a current employee of such a firm and who participates in the firm's audit, assurance or tax compliance (but not tax planning) practice; or a director who was, or who has an immediate family member who was, within the last three years (but is no longer) a partner or employee of such a firm and personally worked on the NYSE listed company's audit within that time.
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> Fourth, a director who is employed, or whose immediate family member is employed, as an executive officer of another company where any of the NYSE

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242 TBOC § 21.416(d); TBCA art. 2.36(C); DGCL § 141(c)(1). In Texas, such authorization may alternatively appear in the resolution designating the committee. TBOC § 21.416(d); TBCA art. 2.36(C).

243 TBOC § 21.416(a); TBCA art. 2.36(A); DGCL § 141(c)(1).

listed company's present executives served on that company's compensation committee at the same time can not be considered independent until three years after the end of such service or the employment relationship.

Fifth, a director who is a current employee, or whose immediate family member is a current executive officer, of a company that has made payments to, or received payments from, the NYSE listed company for property or services in an amount which, in any of the last three fiscal years, exceeds the greater of $1 million, or 2% of such other company's consolidated gross revenues. Charitable organizations are not considered "companies" for purposes of the exclusion from independence described in the previous sentence, provided that the NYSE listed company discloses in its annual proxy statement, or if the NYSE listed company does not file an annual proxy statement, in its annual report on Form 10-K filed with the SEC, any charitable contributions made by the NYSE listed company to any charitable organization in which a director serves as an executive officer if, within the preceding three years, such contributions in any single year exceeded the greater of $1 million or 2% of the organization's consolidated gross revenues.

(3) *NASDAQ*. NASD Rule 4350(c)(1) requires a majority of the directors of a NASDAQ-listed company to be "*independent directors*," as defined in NASD Rule 4200.[244]

(a) NASDAQ Base Line Test. NASD Rule 4350(c)(1) requires each NASDAQ listed company to disclose in its annual proxy (or, if the issuer does not file a proxy, in its Form 10-K or 20-F) those directors that the Board has determined to be independent as defined in NASD Rule 4200.[245]

(b) NASDAQ Per Se Independence Disqualifications. NASD Rule 4200(a)(15) specifies certain relationships that would preclude a board finding of independence as follows:

First, a director who is, or at anytime during the past three years was, employed by the NASDAQ listed company or by any parent or subsidiary of the company (the "*NASDAQ Employee Provision*").

Second, a director who accepted or has a family member who accepted any payments from the NASDAQ listed company, or any parent or subsidiary of the company, in excess of $60,000 during any period of twelve consecutive months within the three years preceding the determination of independence other than certain permitted payments (the "*NASDAQ Payments Provision*"). NASDAQ

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244 NASD Rule 4350, which governs qualitative listing requirements for NASDAQ National Market and NASDAQ SmallCap Market issuers (other than limited partnerships), must be read in tandem with NASD Rule 4200, which provides definitions for the applicable defined terms.

245 If a NASDAQ listed company fails to comply with the requirement that a majority of its board of directors be independent due to one vacancy, or one director ceases to be independent due to circumstances beyond a company's reasonable control, NASD Rule 4350(c)(1) requires the issuer to regain compliance with the requirement by the earlier of its next annual shareholders meeting or one year from the occurrence of the event that caused the compliance failure. Any issuer relying on this provision must provide notice to NASDAQ immediately upon learning of the event or circumstance that caused the non-compliance.

states in the interpretive material to the NASD Rules (the "*NASDAQ Interpretive Material*") that this provision is generally intended to capture situations where a payment is made directly to, or for the benefit of, the director or a family member of the director. For example, consulting or personal service contracts with a director or family member of the director or political contributions to the campaign of a director or a family member of the director prohibit independence.

Third, a director who is a family member of an individual who is, or at any time during the past three years was, employed by the company or by any parent or subsidiary of the company as an executive officer (the "*NASDAQ Family of Executive Officer Provision*").

Fourth, a director who is, or has a family member who is, a partner in, or a controlling shareholder or an executive officer of, any organization to which the company made, or from which the company received, payments for property or services in the current or any of the past three fiscal years that exceed 5% of the recipient's consolidated gross revenues for that year, or $200,000, whichever is more, other than certain permitted payments (the "*NASDAQ Business Relationship Provision*"). The NASDAQ Interpretive Material states that this provision is generally intended to capture payments to an entity with which the director or family member of the director is affiliated by serving as a partner (other than a limited partner), controlling shareholder or executive officer of such entity. Under exceptional circumstances, such as where a director has direct, significant business holdings, the NASDAQ Interpretive Material states that it may be appropriate to apply the NASDAQ Business Relationship Provision in lieu of the NASDAQ Payments Provision described above, and that issuers should contact NASDAQ if they wish to apply the rule in this manner. The NASDAQ Interpretive Material further notes that the NASDAQ Business Relationship Provision is broader than the rules for audit committee member independence set forth in 1934 Act Rule 10A-3(e)(8).

The NASDAQ Interpretive Material further states that under the NASDAQ Business Relationship Provision, a director who is, or who has a family member who is, an executive officer of a charitable organization may not be considered independent if the company makes payment to the charity in excess of the greater of 5% of the charity's revenues or $200,000. The NASDAQ Interpretive Material also discusses the treatment of payments from the issuer to a law firm in determining whether a director who is a lawyer may be considered independent. The NASDAQ Interpretive Material notes that any partner in a law firm that receives payments from the issuer is ineligible to serve on that issuer's audit committee.

Fifth, a director who is, or has a family member who is, employed as an executive officer of another entity where at any time during the past three years any of the executive officers of the NASDAQ listed company serves on the compensation committee of such other entity ("*NASDAQ Interlocking Directorate Provision*").

Sixth, a director who is, or has a family member who is, a current partner of the company's outside auditor, or was a partner or employee of the company's outside auditor, and worked on the company's audit, at any time, during the past three years ("*NASDAQ Auditor Relationship Provision*").

Seventh, in the case of an investment company, a director who is an "*interested person*" of the company as defined in section 2(a)(19) of the Investment Company Act, other than in his or her capacity as a member of the Board or any Board committee.

With respect to the look-back periods referenced in the NASDAQ Employee Provision, the NASDAQ Family of Executive Officer Provision, the NASDAQ Interlocking Directorate Provision, and the NASDAQ Auditor Relationship Provision, "*any time*" during any of the past three years should be considered. The NASDAQ Interpretive Material states that these three year look-back periods commence on the date the relationship ceases. As an example, the NASDAQ Interpretive Material states that a director employed by the NASDAQ listed company would not be independent until three years after such employment terminates. The NASDAQ Interpretive Material states that the reference to a "*parent or subsidiary*" in the definition of independence is intended to cover entities the issuer controls and consolidates with the issuer's financial statements as filed with the SEC (but not if the issuer reflects such entity solely as an investment in its financial statements). The NASDAQ Interpretive Material also states that the reference to "*executive officer*" has the same meaning as the definition in Rule 16a-1(f) under the 1934 Act.

b. Audit Committee Member Independence.

(1) *SOX*. To be "*independent*" and thus eligible to serve on an issuer's audit committee under the SOX § 301 Rule, (i) audit committee members may not, directly or indirectly, accept any consulting, advisory or other compensatory fee from the issuer or a subsidiary of the issuer, other than in the member's capacity as a member of the Board and any Board committee (this prohibition would preclude payments to a member as an officer or employee, as well as other compensatory payments; indirect acceptance of compensatory payments includes payments to spouses, minor children or stepchildren or children or stepchildren sharing a home with the member, as well as payments accepted by an entity in which an audit committee member is a general partner, managing member, executive officer or occupies a similar position and which provides accounting, consulting, legal, investment banking, financial or other advisory services or any similar services to the issuer or any subsidiary; receipt of fixed retirement plan or deferred compensation is not prohibited)[246] and (ii) a member of the audit committee of an issuer may not be an "*affiliated person*" of the issuer or any subsidiary of the issuer apart from his or her capacity as a member of the Board and any board committee (subject to the safe harbor described below).[247]

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[246] The SOX § 301 Rule restricts only current relationships and does not extend to a "look back" period before appointment to the audit committee, although SRO rules may do so.

[247] The terms *"affiliate"* and *"affiliated person"* are defined consistent with other definitions of those terms under the securities laws, such as in 1934 Act Rule 12b-2 and 1933 Act Rule 144, with an additional safe harbor. In the SOX § 301 Release, the SEC clarified that an executive officer, general partner and managing member of an affiliate would

Since it is difficult to determine whether someone controls the issuer, the SOX § 301 Rule creates a safe harbor regarding whether someone is an "*affiliated person*" for purposes of meeting the audit committee independence requirement. Under the safe harbor, a person who is not an executive officer, director or 10% shareholder of the issuer would be deemed not to control the issuer. A person who is ineligible to rely on the safe harbor, but believes that he or she does not control an issuer, still could rely on a facts and circumstances analysis. This test is similar to the test used for determining insider status under 1934 Act § 16.

The SEC has authority to exempt from the independence requirements particular relationships with respect to audit committee members, if appropriate in light of the circumstances. Because companies coming to market for the first time may face particular difficulty in recruiting members that meet the proposed independence requirements, the SOX § 301 Rule provides an exception for non-investment company issuers that requires only one fully independent member at the time of the effectiveness of an issuer's initial registration statement under the 1933 Act or the 1934 Act, a majority of independent members within 90 days and a fully independent audit committee within one year.

For companies that operate through subsidiaries, the composition of the Boards of the parent company and subsidiaries are sometimes similar given the control structure between the parent and the subsidiaries. If an audit committee member of the parent is otherwise independent, merely serving on the Board of a controlled subsidiary should not adversely affect the Board member's independence, assuming that the board member also would be considered independent of the subsidiary except for the member's seat on the parent's Board. Therefore, SOX § 301 Rule exempts from the "*affiliated person*" requirement a committee member that sits on the Board of both a parent and a direct or indirect subsidiary or other affiliate, if the committee member otherwise meets the independence requirements for both the parent and the subsidiary or affiliate, including the receipt of only ordinary-course compensation for serving as a member of the Board, audit committee or any other Board committee of the parent, subsidiary or affiliate. Any issuer taking advantage of any of the exceptions described above would have to disclose that fact.

(2) *NYSE.*

(i) Audit Committee Composition. NYSE Rules 303A.06 and 303A.07 require each NYSE listed company to have, at a minimum, a three person audit committee composed entirely of directors that meet the independence standards of both NYSE Rule 303A.02 and 1934 Act Rule 10A-3. The Commentary to NYSE Rule 303A.06 states: "The [NYSE] will apply the requirements of SEC Rule 10A-3 in a manner consistent with the guidance provided by the Securities and Exchange Commission in SEC Release No. 34-47654 (April 1, 2003). Without limiting the generality of the foregoing, the [NYSE] will provide companies with the opportunity to cure defects provided in SEC Rule 10A-3(a)(3)."

The Commentary to NYSE Rule 303A.07 requires that each member of the audit committee be financially literate, as such qualification is interpreted by the board in its business

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be deemed to be an affiliate, but outside directors, limited partners and others with no policy making function would not be deemed affiliates. Similarly, a member of the audit committee of an issuer that is an investment company could not be an *"interested person"* of the investment company as defined in 1940 Act § 2(a)(19).

judgment, or become financially literate within a reasonable period of time after his or her appointment to the audit committee. In addition, at least one member of the audit committee must have accounting or related financial management expertise, as the NYSE listed company's board interprets such qualification in its business judgment. While the NYSE does not require an NYSE listed company's audit committee to include a person who satisfies the definition of audit committee financial expert set forth in Item 401(h) of Regulation S-K, a board may presume that such a person has accounting or related financial management experience.

If an audit committee member simultaneously serves on the audit committee of more than three public companies, and the NYSE listed company does not limit the number of audit committees on which its audit committee members serve to three or less, each board is required to determine that such simultaneous service does not impair the ability of such board member to effectively serve on the NYSE listed company's audit committee and to disclose such determination.

(ii) Audit Committee Charter and Responsibilities. NYSE Rule 303A.07(c) requires the audit committee of each NYSE listed company to have a written audit committee charter that addresses: (i) the committee's purpose; (ii) an annual performance evaluation of the audit committee; and (iii) the duties and responsibilities of the audit committee ("*NYSE Audit Committee Charter Provision*").

The NYSE Audit Committee Charter Provision provides details as to the duties and responsibilities of the audit committee that must be addressed. These include, at a minimum, those set out in 1934 Act Rule 10A-3(b)(2), (3), (4) and (5), as well as the responsibility to at least annually obtain and review a report by the independent auditor; meet to review and discuss the company's annual audited financial statements and quarterly financial statements with management and the independent auditor, including reviewing the NYSE listed company's specific disclosures under MD&A; discuss the company's earnings press releases, as well as financial information and earnings guidance provided to analysts and rating agencies; discuss policies with respect to risk assessment and risk management; meet separately, periodically, with management, with internal auditors (or other personnel responsible for the internal audit function), and with independent auditors; review with the independent auditors any audit problems or difficulties and management's response; set clear hiring policies for employees or former employees of the independent auditors; and report regularly to the board. The commentary to NYSE Rule 303A.07 explicitly states that the audit committee functions specified in NYSE Rule 303A.07 are the sole responsibility of the audit committee and may not be allocated to a different committee.

Each NYSE listed company must have an internal audit function. The commentary to NYSE Rule 303A.07 states that listed companies must maintain an internal audit function to provide management and the audit committee with ongoing assessments of the NYSE listed company's risk management processes and system of internal control. A NYSE listed company may choose to outsource this function to a third party service provider other than its independent auditor.

(3) NASDAQ.

(i) Audit Committee Composition. NASD Rule 4350(d) requires each NASDAQ listed issuer to have an audit committee composed of at least three members. In addition, it requires each audit committee member to: (1) be independent, as defined under NASD Rule 4200(a)(15); (2) meet the criteria for independence set forth in 1934 Act Rule 10A-3 (subject to the exceptions provided in 1934 Act Rule10A-3(c)); (3) not have participated in the preparation of the financial statements of the company or any current subsidiary of the company at any time during the past three years; and (4) be able to read and understand fundamental financial statements, including a company's balance sheet, income statement, and cash flow statement ("NASDAQ Audit Committee Provision").

One director who is not independent as defined in NASD Rule 4200(a)(15) and meets the criteria set forth in 1934 Act § 10A(m)(3) and the rules thereunder, and is not a current officer or employee of the company or a family member of such person, may be appointed to the audit committee if the Board, under exceptional and limited circumstances, determines that membership on the committee by the individual is required by the best interests of the company and its shareholders, and the Board discloses, in the next annual proxy statement subsequent to such determination (or, if the issuer does not file a proxy, in its Form 10-K or 20-F), the nature of the relationship and the reasons for that determination. A member appointed under this exception would not be permitted to serve longer than two years and would not be permitted to chair the audit committee. The NASDAQ Interpretive Material recommends that an issuer disclose in its annual proxy (or, if the issuer does not file a proxy, in its Form 10-K or 20-F) if any director is deemed independent but falls outside the safe harbor provisions of SEC Rule 10A-3(e)(1)(ii).

At least one member of the audit committee must have past employment experience in finance or accounting, requisite professional certification in accounting, or any other comparable experience or background which results in the individual's financial sophistication, including being or having been a chief executive officer, chief financial officer or other senior officer with financial oversight responsibilities.

(ii) Audit Committee Charter and Responsibilities. NASD Rule 4350(d) requires each NASDAQ listed company to adopt a formal written audit committee charter and to review and reassess the adequacy of the formal written charter on an annual basis. The charter must specify: (1) the scope of the audit committee's responsibilities, and how it carries out those responsibilities, including structure, processes, and membership requirements; (2) the audit committee's responsibility for ensuring its receipt from the outside auditors of a formal written statement delineating all relationships between the auditor and the company, and the audit committee's responsibility for actively engaging in a dialogue with the auditor with respect to any disclosed relationships or services that may impact the objectivity and independence of the auditor and for taking, or recommending that the full Board take, appropriate action to oversee the independence of the outside auditor; (3) the committee's purpose of overseeing the accounting and financial reporting processes of the issuer and the audits of the financial statements of the issuer; and (4) other specific audit committee responsibilities and authority set forth in NASD Rule 4350(d)(3). NASDAQ states in the NASDAQ Interpretive Material to NASD Rule 4350(d) that the written charter sets forth the scope of the audit committee's responsibilities and the means by which the committee carries out those responsibilities; the

outside auditor's accountability to the committee; and the committee's responsibility to ensure the independence of the outside auditors.

c. **Nominating Committee Member Independence.**

(1) *NYSE*. NYSE Rule 303A.04 requires each NYSE listed company to have a nominating/corporate governance committee composed entirely of independent directors. The nominating/corporate governance committee must have a written charter that addresses, among other items, the committee's purpose and responsibilities, and an annual performance evaluation of the nominating/corporate governance committee ("*NYSE Nominating/Corporate Governance Committee Provision*"). The committee is required to identify individuals qualified to become board members, consistent with the criteria approved by the board.

(2) *NASDAQ*. NASD Rule 4350(c)(4)(A) requires director nominees to be selected, or recommended for the board's selection, either by a majority of independent directors, or by a nominations committee comprised solely of independent directors ("*NASDAQ Director Nomination Provision*").

If the nominations committee is comprised of at least three members, one director, who is not independent (as defined in NASD Rule 4200(a)(15)) and is not a current officer or employee or a family member of such person, is permitted to be appointed to the committee if the board, under exceptional and limited circumstances, determines that such individual's membership on the committee is required by the best interests of the company and its shareholders, and the board discloses, in its next annual meeting proxy statement subsequent to such determination (or, if the issuer does not file a proxy, in its Form 10-K or 20-F), the nature of the relationship and the reasons for the determination. A member appointed under such exception is not permitted to serve longer than two years.

Further, NASD Rule 4350(c)(4)(B) requires each NASDAQ listed company to certify that it has adopted a formal written charter or Board resolution, as applicable, addressing the nominations process and such related matters as may be required under the federal securities laws. The NASDAQ Director Nomination Provision does not apply in cases where either the right to nominate a director legally belongs to a third party, or the company is subject to a binding obligation that requires a director nomination structure inconsistent with this provision and such obligation pre-dates the date the provision was approved.

d. **Compensation Committee Member Independence.**

(1) *NYSE*. NYSE Rule 303A.05 requires each NYSE listed company to have a compensation committee composed entirely of independent directors. The compensation committee must have a written charter that addresses, among other items, the committee's purpose and responsibilities, and an annual performance evaluation of the compensation committee ("*NYSE Compensation Committee Provision*"). The Compensation Committee is required to produce a compensation committee report on executive compensation, as required by SEC rules, to be included in the company's annual proxy statement or annual report on Form 10-K filed with the SEC. NYSE Rule 303A.05 provides that either as a committee or together with the other independent directors (as directed by the Board), the committee will determine and

approve the CEO's compensation level based on the committee's evaluation of the CEO's performance. The commentary to this rule indicates that discussion of CEO compensation with the board generally is not precluded.

(2) *NASDAQ*. NASD Rule 4350(c)(3) requires the compensation of the CEO of a NASDAQ listed company to be determined or recommended to the Board for determination either by a majority of the independent directors, or by a compensation committee comprised solely of independent directors ("*NASDAQ Compensation of Executives Provision*"). The CEO may not be present during voting or deliberations. In addition, the compensation of all other officers has to be determined or recommended to the Board for determination either by a majority of the independent directors, or a compensation committee comprised solely of independent directors.

Under these NASD Rules, if the compensation committee is comprised of at least three members, one director, who is not "*independent*" (as defined in NASD Rule 4200(a)(15)) and is not a current officer or employee or a family member of such person, is permitted to be appointed to the committee if the Board, under exceptional and limited circumstances, determines that such individual's membership on the committee is required by the best interests of the company and its shareholders, and the Board discloses, in the next annual meeting proxy statement subsequent to such determination (or, if the issuer does not file a proxy statement, in its Form 10-K or 20-F), the nature of the relationship and the reasons for the determination. A member appointed under such exception would not be permitted to serve longer than two years.

e. **State Law.**

Under state law and unlike the SOX rules, director independence is not considered as a general status, but rather is tested in the context of each specific matter on which the director is called upon to take action.

Under Texas common law, a director is generally considered "*interested*" only in respect of matters in which he has a financial interest. The Fifth Circuit in *Gearhart* summarized Texas law with respect to the question of whether a director is "*interested*" as follows:

> A director is considered "interested"' if he or she (1) makes a personal profit from a transaction by dealing with the corporation or usurps a corporate opportunity . . .; (2) buys or sells assets of the corporation . . .; (3) transacts business in his director's capacity with a second corporation of which he is also a director or significantly financially associated . . .; or (4) transacts business in his director's capacity with a family member.[248]

In the context of the dismissal of a derivative action on motion of the corporation, those making the decision on behalf of the corporation to dismiss the proceeding must lack both any disqualifying financial interest and any relationships that would impair independent decision making.[249] The Texas Corporate Statues provide that a court shall dismiss a derivative action if

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248 *Gearhart Indus., Inc. v. Smith Int'l, Inc.*, 741 F.2d 707, 719-20 (5th Cir. 1984) (citations omitted).

249 *Johnson v. Jackson Walker, L.L.P.*, 247 S.W.3d 765 (Tex. App.—Dallas 2008).

the determination to dismiss is made by directors who are both disinterested and independent.[250] For this purpose, a director is considered "*disinterested*"[251] if he lacks any disqualifying financial interest in the matter, and is considered "*independent*"[252] if he is both disinterested and lacks any

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250 TBOC § 21.554, 21.558; TBCA art. 5.14(F) and 5.14(H).

251 TBOC § 1.003 defines *"disinterested"* as follows:

Sec. 1.003. Disinterested Person.

(a) For purposes of this code, a person is disinterested with respect to the approval of a contract, transaction, or other matter or to the consideration of the disposition of a claim or challenge relating to a contract, transaction, or particular conduct, if the person or the person's associate:

(1) is not a party to the contract or transaction or materially involved in the conduct that is the subject of the claim or challenge; and

(2) does not have a material financial interest in the outcome of the contract or transaction or the disposition of the claim or challenge.

(b) For purposes of Subsection (a), a person is not materially involved in a contract or transaction that is the subject of a claim or challenge and does not have a material financial interest in the outcome of a contract or transaction or the disposition of a claim or challenge solely because:

(1) the person was nominated or elected as a governing person by a person who is:

(A) interested in the contract or transaction; or

(B) alleged to have engaged in the conduct that is the subject of the claim or challenge;

(2) the person receives normal fees or customary compensation, reimbursement for expenses, or benefits as a governing person of the entity;

(3) the person has a direct or indirect equity interest in the entity;

(4) the entity has, or its subsidiaries have, an interest in the contract or transaction or was affected by the alleged conduct;

(5) the person or an associate of the person receives ordinary and reasonable compensation for reviewing, making recommendations regarding, or deciding on the disposition of the claim or challenge; or

(6) in the case of a review by the person of the alleged conduct that is the subject of the claim or challenge:

(A) the person is named as a defendant in the derivative proceeding regarding the matter or as a person who engaged in the alleged conduct; or

(B) the person, acting as a governing person, approved, voted for, or acquiesced in the act being challenged if the act did not result in a material personal or financial benefit to the person and the challenging party fails to allege particular facts that, if true, raise a significant prospect that the governing person would be held liable to the entity or its owners or members as a result of the conduct.

TBCA art. 1.02(A)(12) provides substantially the same.

252 TBOC § 1.004 defines *"independent"* as follows:

Sec. 1.004. Independent Person.

(a) For purposes of this code, a person is independent with respect to considering the disposition of a claim or challenge regarding a contract or transaction, or particular or alleged conduct, if the person:

(1) is disinterested;

(2) either:

(A) is not an associate, or member of the immediate family, of a party to the contract or transaction or of a person who is alleged to have engaged in the conduct that is the subject of the claim or challenge; or

(B) is an associate to a party or person described by Paragraph (A) that is an entity if the person is an associate solely because the person is a governing person of the entity or of the entity's subsidiaries or associates;

(3) does not have a business, financial, or familial relationship with a party to the contract or transaction, or with another person who is alleged to have engaged in the conduct, that is the subject of the claim or challenge that could reasonably be expected to materially and adversely

other specified relationships that could be expected to materially and adversely affect his judgment as to the disposition of the matter.

Under Delaware law, an "*independent director*" is one whose decision is based on the corporate merits of the subject before the board rather than extraneous considerations or influence.[253] The Delaware Supreme Court's teachings on independence can be summarized as follows:

> At bottom, the question of independence turns on whether a director is, *for any substantial reason*, incapable of making a decision with only the best interests of the corporation in mind. That is, the Supreme Court cases ultimately focus on impartiality and objectivity.[254]

The Delaware focus includes both financial and other disabling interests.[255] In the words of the Chancery Court:

> Delaware law should not be based on a reductionist view of human nature that simplifies human motivations on the lines of the least sophisticated notions of the law and economics movement. *Homo sapiens* is not merely *homo*

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affect the judgment of the person in favor of the party or other person with respect to the consideration of the matter; and

(4) is not shown, by a preponderance of the evidence, to be under the controlling influence of a party to the contract or transaction that is the subject of the claim or challenge or of a person who is alleged to have engaged in the conduct that is the subject of the claim or challenge.

(b) For purposes of Subsection (a), a person does not have a relationship that could reasonably be expected to materially and adversely affect the judgment of the person regarding the disposition of a matter that is the subject of a claim or challenge and is not otherwise under the controlling influence of a party to a contract or transaction that is the subject of a claim or challenge or that is alleged to have engaged in the conduct that is the subject of a claim or challenge solely because:

(1) the person has been nominated or elected as a governing person by a person who is interested in the contract or transaction or alleged to be engaged in the conduct that is the subject of the claim or challenge;

(2) the person receives normal fees or similar customary compensation, reimbursement for expenses, or benefits as a governing person of the entity;

(3) the person has a direct or indirect equity interest in the entity;

(4) the entity has, or its subsidiaries have, an interest in the contract or transaction or was affected by the alleged conduct;

(5) the person or an associate of the person receives ordinary and reasonable compensation for reviewing, making recommendations regarding, or deciding on the disposition of the claim or challenge; or

(6) the person, an associate of the person, other than the entity or its associates, or an immediate family member has a continuing business relationship with the entity that is not material to the person, associate, or family member.

TBCA art. 1.02(A)(15) provides substantially the same.

253 *Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A.2d 805, 816 (Del. 1984) (overruled as to standard of appellate review); *Odyssey Partners v. Fleming Cos.*, 735 A.2d 386, 407 (Del. Ch. 1999).

254 *Parfi Holding AB v. Mirror Image Internet, Inc.*, 794 A.2d 1211, 1232 (Del. Ch. 2001) (footnotes omitted) (emphasis in original), *rev'd in part on other grounds*, 817 A.2d 149 (Del. 2002), *cert. denied*, 123 S. Ct. 2076 (2003).

255 *See In re infoUSA, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 953 A.2d 963 (Del. Ch. 2007) (mere allegations of personal liability in respect of challenged activities are not sufficient to impair independence, but independence may be found lacking where there is a substantial likelihood that liability will be found).

economicus. We may be thankful that an array of other motivations exist that influence human behavior; not all are any better than greed or avarice, think of envy, to name just one. But also think of motives like love, friendship, and collegiality, think of those among us who direct their behavior as best they can on a guiding creed or set of moral values.[256]

Delaware draws a distinction between director disinterest and director independence. A director is "*interested*" when he or she stands on both sides of a transaction, or will benefit or experience some detriment that does not flow to the corporation or the stockholders generally. Absent self-dealing, the benefit must be material to the individual director.[257] In contrast, a director is not "*independent*" where the director's decision is based on "extraneous

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[256] *In re Oracle Corp. Derivative Litig.*, 824 A.2d 917 (Del. Ch. 2003). In *Oracle*, the Chancery Court denied a motion by a special litigation committee of Oracle Corporation to dismiss pending derivative actions which accused four Oracle directors and officers of breaching their fiduciary duty of loyalty by misappropriating inside information in selling Oracle stock while in possession of material, nonpublic information that Oracle would not meet its projections. These four directors were Oracle's CEO, its CFO, the Chair of the Executive, Audit and Finance Committees, and the Chair of the Compensation Committee who was also a tenured professor at Stanford University. The other members of Oracle's board were accused of a breach of their *Caremark* duty of oversight through indifference to the deviation between Oracle's earnings guidance and reality.

In response to this derivative action and a variety of other lawsuits in other courts arising out of its surprising the market with a bad earnings report, Oracle created a special litigation committee to investigate the allegations and decide whether Oracle should assume the prosecution of the insider trading claims or have them dismissed. The committee consisted of two new outside directors, both tenured Stanford University professors, one of whom was former SEC Commissioner Joseph Grundfest. The new directors were recruited by the defendant CFO and the defendant Chair of Compensation Committee/Stanford professor after the litigation had commenced and to serve as members of the special litigation committee.

The Chancery Court held that the special committee failed to meet its burden to prove that no material issue of fact existed regarding the special committee's independence due to the connections that both the committee members and three of four defendants had to Stanford. One of the defendants was a Stanford professor who taught special committee member Grundfest when he was a Ph.D. candidate, a second defendant was an involved Stanford alumnus who had contributed millions to Stanford, and the third defendant was Oracle's CEO who had donated millions to Stanford and was considering a $270 million donation at the time the special committee members were added to the Oracle board. The two Stanford professors were tenured and not involved in fund raising for Stanford, and thus were not dependent on contributions to Stanford for their continued employment.

The Court found troubling that the special litigation committee's report recommending dismissal of the derivative action failed to disclose many of the Stanford ties between the defendants and the special committee. The ties emerged during discovery.

Without questioning the personal integrity of either member of the special committee, the Court found that interrelationships among Stanford University, the special committee members and the defendant Oracle directors and officers necessarily would have colored in some manner the special committee's deliberations. The Court commented that it is no easy task to decide whether to accuse a fellow director of the serious charge of insider trading and such difficulty was compounded by requiring the committee members to consider accusing a fellow professor and two large benefactors of their university of conduct that is rightly considered a violation of criminal law.

The Chancery Court wrote that the question of independence "turns on whether a director is, for any substantial reason, incapable of making a decision with only the best interests of the corporation in mind." *Id.* at 920 (citations omitted). That is, the independence test ultimately "focus[es] on impartiality and objectivity." *Id.* (citations omitted). While acknowledging a difficulty in reconciling Delaware precedent, the Court declined to focus narrowly on the economic relationships between the members of the special committee and the defendant officers and directors - *i.e.* "treating the possible effect on one's personal wealth as the key to an independence inquiry." *Id.* at 936. Commenting that "*homo sapiens* is not merely *homo economicus*," the Chancery Court wrote, "Whether the [special committee] members had precise knowledge of all the facts that have emerged is not essential, what is important is that by any measure this was a social atmosphere painted in too much vivid Stanford Cardinal red for the [special committee] members to have reasonably ignored." *Id.* at 938, 947.

[257] *Orman v. Cullman*, 794 A.2d 5, 23 (Del. Ch. 2002).

considerations or influences" and not on the "corporate merits of the subject."[258] Employment or consulting relationships can impair independence.[259] A director who is a partner of a law firm that receives substantial fees from the corporation may not be independent.[260] Family relationships can also impair independence.[261] Other business relationships may also prevent independence.[262]

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258 *Id.* at 24.

259 *See In re Ply Gem Indus., Inc. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 15779-NC, 2001 Del. Ch. LEXIS 84 (Del. Ch. 2001) (holding plaintiffs raised reasonable doubt as to directors' independence where (i) interested director as Chairman of the Board and CEO was in a position to exercise considerable influence over directors serving as President and COO; (ii) director was serving as Executive Vice President; (iii) a director whose small law firm received substantial fees over a period of years; and (iv) directors receiving substantial consulting fees); *Goodwin v. Live Entm't, Inc*., C.A. No. 15765, 1999 WL 64265 (Del. Ch. Jan. 25, 1999) (stating on motion for summary judgment that evidence produced by plaintiff generated a triable issue of fact regarding whether directors' continuing employment relationship with surviving entity created a material interest in merger not shared by the stockholders); *Orman*, 794 A.2d 5 (questioning the independence of one director who had a consulting contract with the surviving corporation and questioning the disinterestedness of another director whose company would earn a $3.3 million fee if the deal closed); *In re The Ltd., Inc. S'holders Litig*., C.A. No. 17148-NC, 2002 Del. Ch. LEXIS 28, 2002 WL 537692 (Del. Ch. March 27, 2002) (finding, in context of demand futility analysis, that the plaintiffs cast reasonable doubt on the independence of certain directors in a transaction that benefited the founder, Chairman, CEO and 25% stockholder of the company, where one director received a large salary for his management positions in the company's wholly-owned subsidiary, one director received consulting fees, and another director had procured, from the controlling stockholder, a $25 million grant to the university where he formerly served as president); *Biondi v. Scrushy*, C.A. No. 19896, 2003 Del. Ch. LEXIS 7 (Del. Ch. Jan. 16, 2003) (questioning the independence of two members of a special committee formed to investigate charges against the CEO because committee members served with the CEO as directors of two sports organizations and because the CEO and one committee member had "long-standing personal ties" that included making large contributions to certain sports programs); *In re infoUSA, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 953 A.2d 963 (Del. Ch. 2007) (finding, in a case where self dealing transactions by 41% stockholder were challenged on duty of loyalty grounds, independence lacking as to (i) director who was a professor in university business school named after the 41% stockholder and received substantial compensation from the university and (ii) directors who received free office space from the company for non-company uses).

260 *In re infoUSA*, 953 A.2d 963 (finding the threat of withdrawal of legal business to be enough to raise a reasonable doubt as to a director's independence where annual payments listed in the complaint come close to or exceed a reasonable estimate of the annual yearly income per partner of the law firm; the Court commented:

> "Legal partnerships normally base the pay and prestige of their members upon the amount of revenue that partners (and, more importantly, their clients) bring to their firms. Indeed, with law becoming an ever-more competitive business, there is a notable trend for partners who fail to meet expectations to risk a loss of equity in their firms. The threat of withdrawal of one partner's worth of revenue from a law firm is arguably sufficient to exert considerable influence over a named partner such that . . . his independence may be called into question.").

261 See *Chaffin v. GNI Group, Inc.*, C.A. No. 16211, 1999 Del. Ch. LEXIS 182, at *13 (Del. Ch. Sept. 3, 1999) (finding that director lacked independence where a transaction benefited son financially); *Harbor Fin. Partners v. Huizenga*, 751 A.2d 879, 889 (Del. Ch. 1999) (holding that director who was brother-in-law of CEO and involved in various businesses with CEO could not impartially consider a demand adverse to CEO's interests); *Mizel v. Connelly*, C.A. No. 16638, 1999 Del. Ch. LEXIS 157, at *1 (Del. Ch. July 22, 1999) (holding director could not objectively consider demand adverse to interest of grandfather).

262 See *Kahn v. Tremont Corp.*, 694 A.2d 422, 429-30 (Del. 1997) (holding members of special committee had significant prior business relationship with majority stockholder such that the committee lacked independence triggering entire fairness); *Heineman v. Datapoint Corp.,* 611 A.2d 950, 955 (Del. 1992) (holding that allegations of "extensive interlocking business relationships" did not sufficiently demonstrate the necessary "nexus" between the conflict of interest and resulting personal benefit necessary to establish directors' lack of independence) (overruled as to standard of appellate review); *see Citron v. Fairchild Camera & Instrument Corp.*, 569 A.2d 53 (Del. 1989) (holding mere fact that a controlling stockholder elects a director does not render that director non-independent).

A controlled director is not an independent director.[263] Control over individual directors is established by facts demonstrating that "through personal or other relationships the directors are beholden to the controlling person."[264]

4. Compensation.

a. Prohibition on Loans to Directors or Officers.

SOX § 402 generally prohibits, effective July 30, 2002, a corporation from directly or indirectly making or arranging for personal loans to its directors and executive officers.[265] Four categories of personal loans by an issuer to its directors and officers are expressly exempt from SOX § 402's prohibition:[266]

(1) any extension of credit existing before SOX's enactment as long as no material modification or renewal of the extension of credit occurs on or after the date of SOX's enactment (July 30, 2002);

(2) specified home improvement and consumer credit loans if:

- made in the ordinary course of the issuer's consumer credit business,
- of a type generally made available to the public by the issuer, and
- on terms no more favorable than those offered to the public;

(3) loans by a broker-dealer to its employees that:

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263 *In re MAXXAM, Inc.*, 659 A.2d 760, 773 (Del. Ch. 1995) ("To be considered independent, a director must not be dominated or otherwise controlled by an individual or entity interested in the transaction.").

264 *Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A.2d 805, 815; *compare In re The Limited, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 2002 Del. Ch. LEXIS 28, 2002 WL 537692 (Del. Ch. Mar. 27, 2002) (concluding that a university president who had solicited a $25 million contribution from a corporation's President, Chairman and CEO was not independent of that corporate official in light of the sense of "owingness" that the university president might harbor with respect to the corporate official), *and Lewis v. Fuqua*, 502 A.2d 962, 966-67 (Del. Ch. 1985) (finding that a special litigation committee member was not independent where the committee member was also the president of a university that received a $10 million charitable pledge from the corporation's CEO and the CEO was a trustee of the university), *with In re Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litig.*, 731 A.2d 342, 359 (Del. Ch. 1998) (deciding that the plaintiffs had not created reasonable doubt as to a director's independence where a corporation's Chairman and CEO had given over $1 million in donations to the university at which the director was the university president and from which one of the CEO's sons had graduated), *aff'd in part, rev'd in part sub nom. See Brehm v. Eisner*, 746 A.2d 244 (Del. 2000); *and Beam v. Martha Stewart*, 845 A.2d 1040, 1054 (Del. 2004) ("bare social relationships clearly do not create reasonable doubt of independence"). The Delaware Supreme Court in distinguishing *Beam* from *Oracle*, wrote "[u]nlike the demand-excusal context [of *Beam*], where the board is presumed to be independent, the SLC [special litigation committee in *Oracle*] has the burden of establishing its own independence by a yardstick that must be 'like Caesar's wife' – 'above reproach.' Moreover, unlike the presuit demand context, the SLC analysis contemplates not only a shift in the burden of persuasion but also the availability of discovery into various issues, including independence."). *Beam*, 845 A.2d at 1055.

265 SOX § 402(a) provides: "It shall be unlawful for any issuer (as defined in [SOX § 2]), directly or indirectly, including through any subsidiary, to extend or maintain credit, to arrange for the extension of credit, or to renew an extension of credit, in the form of a personal loan to or for any director or executive officer (or equivalent thereof) of that issuer. An extension of credit maintained by the issuer on the date of enactment of this subsection shall not be subject to the provisions of this subsection, provided that there is no material modification to any term of any such extension of credit or any renewal of any such extension of credit on or after that date of enactment."

266 SEC Foreign Bank Exemption from The Insider Lending Prohibition of Exchange Act Section 13(k), Exchange Act Release No. 48,481, 81 S.E.C. Docket 107 (September 11, 2003), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/proposed/34-48481.htm.

- fulfill the three conditions of paragraph (2) above,
- are made to buy, trade or carry securities other than the broker-dealer's securities, and
- are permitted by applicable Federal Reserve System regulations; and

(4) loans made or maintained by depository institutions that are insured by the U.S. Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation "if the loans are subject to the insider lending restrictions of section 22(h) of the Federal Reserve Act (12 U.S.C. 375b)."[267]

The SEC to date has not provided guidance as to the interpretation of SOX § 402, although a number of interpretative issues have surfaced. The prohibitions of SOX § 402 apply only to an extension of credit "in the form of a personal loan" which suggests that all extensions of credit to a director or officer are not proscribed. While there is no legislative history or statutory definition to guide, it is reasonable to take the position that the following in the ordinary course of business are not proscribed: travel and similar advances, ancillary personal use of company credit card or company car where reimbursement is required; advances of relocation expenses ultimately to be borne by the issuer; stay and retention bonuses subject to reimbursement if the employee leaves prematurely; advancement of expenses pursuant to typical charter, bylaw or contractual indemnification arrangements; and tax indemnification payments to overseas-based officers.[268]

SOX § 402 raises issues with regard to cashless stock option exercises and has led a number of issuers to suspend cashless exercise programs. In a typical cashless exercise program, the optionee delivers the notice of exercise to both the issuer and the broker, and the broker executes the sale of some or all of the underlying stock on that day (T). Then, on or prior to the settlement date (T+3), the broker pays to the issuer the option exercise price and applicable withholding taxes, and the issuer delivers (i.e., issues) the option stock to the broker. The broker transmits the remaining sale proceeds to the optionee. When and how these events occur may determine the level of risk under SOX § 402.[269] The real question is whether a broker-administered same-day sale involves "an extension of credit in the form of a personal loan" made or arranged by the issuer. The nature of the arrangement can affect the analysis.[270]

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267 This last exemption applies only to an "insured depository institution," which is defined by the Federal Deposit Insurance Act (*"FDIA"*) as a bank or savings association that has insured its deposits with the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (*"FDIC"*). Although this SOX § 402 provision does not explicitly exclude foreign banks from the exemption, under current U.S. banking regulation a foreign bank cannot be an "insured depository institution" and, therefore, cannot qualify for the bank exemption. Since 1991, following enactment of the Foreign Bank Supervision Enhancement Act (*"FBSEA"*), a foreign bank that seeks to accept and maintain FDIC-insured retail deposits in the United States must establish a U.S. subsidiary, rather than a branch, agency or other entity, for that purpose. These U.S. subsidiaries of foreign banks, and the limited number of grandfathered U.S. branches of foreign banks that had obtained FDIC insurance prior to FBSEA's enactment, can engage in FDIC-insured, retail deposit activities and, thus, qualify as "insured depository institutions." But the foreign banks that own the U.S. insured depository subsidiaries or operate the grandfathered insured depository branches are not themselves "insured depository institutions" under the FDIA. The SEC, however, has proposed a rule to address this disadvantageous situation for foreign banks.

268 See the outline dated October 15, 2002, authored jointly by a group of 25 law firms and posted at www.TheCorporateCounsel.net as "Sarbanes-Oxley Act: Interpretative Issues Under § 402 – Prohibition of Certain Insider Loans."

269 See *Cashless Exercise and Other SOXmania*, The Corporate Counsel (September-October 2002).

270 If the issuer delivers the option stock to the broker before receiving payment, the issuer may be deemed to have loaned the exercise price to the optionee, perhaps making this form of program riskier than others. If the broker advances

Some practitioners have questioned whether SOX § 402 prohibits directors and executive officers of an issuer from taking loans from employee pension benefit plans, which raised the further question of whether employers could restrict director and officer plan loans without violating the U.S. Labor Department's antidiscrimination rules. On April 15, 2003, the Labor Department issued Field Assistance Bulletin 2003-1 providing that plan fiduciaries of public companies could deny participant loans to directors and officers without violating the Labor Department rules.

b. **Stock Exchange Requirements.**

The stock exchanges require shareholder approval of many equity compensation plans.[271] In contrast, state law generally authorizes such plans and leaves the power to authorize them generally with the power of the board of directors to direct the management of the affairs of the corporation.

c. **Fiduciary Duties.**

In approving executive compensation, directors must act in accordance with their fiduciary duties. The fiduciary duties discussed elsewhere herein, including the duties of care, loyalty and disclosure, are all applicable when directors consider executive compensation matters.[272] As in other contexts, process and disinterested judgment are critical.

5. Related Party Transactions.

a. **Stock Exchanges.**

(1) *General*. Stock exchange listing requirements generally require all related party transactions to be approved by a committee of independent directors.[273]

(2) *NYSE*. The NYSE, in NYSE Rule 307, takes the general position that a publicly-owned company of the size and character appropriate for listing on the NYSE should be able to operate on its own merit and credit standing free from the suspicions that may arise when

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payment to the issuer prior to T+3, planning to reimburse itself from the sale of proceeds on T+3, that advance may be viewed as an extension of credit by the broker, and the question then becomes whether the issuer "arranged" the credit. The risk of this outcome may be reduced where the issuer does not select the selling broker or set up the cashless exercise program, but instead merely confirms to a broker selected by the optionee that the option is valid and exercisable and that the issuer will deliver the stock upon receipt of the option exercise price and applicable withholding taxes. Even where the insider selects the broker, the broker cannot, under Regulation T, advance the exercise price without first confirming that the issuer will deliver the stock promptly. In that instance, the issuer's involvement is limited to confirming facts, and therefore is less likely to be viewed as "arranging" the credit.

Where both payment and delivery of the option stock occur on the same day (T+3), there arguably is no extension of credit at all, in which case the exercise should not be deemed to violate SOX § 402 whether effected through a designated broker or a broker selected by the insider.

If the insider has sufficient collateral in his or her account (apart from the stock underlying the option being exercised) to permit the broker to make a margin loan equal to the exercise price and applicable withholding taxes, arguably the extension of credit is between the broker and the insider, and does not violate SOX § 402 assuming the issuer is not involved in arranging the credit.

271 *See* NYSE Rule 312; NASD Rule 4350(i).

272 *See infra* notes 367-434 and related text.

273 *See* NYSE Rules 307, 312; NASD Rule 4350(h).

business transactions are consummated with insiders. The NYSE feels that the company's management is in the best position to evaluate each such relationship intelligently and objectively.

However, there are certain related party transactions that do require shareholder approval under the NYSE Rules. Therefore, a review of NYSE Rule 312 should be done whenever related party transactions are analyzed by a NYSE listed company.

(3) *NASDAQ*. NASD Rule 4350(h) requires each NASDAQ listed company to conduct an appropriate review of all related party transactions for potential conflict of interest situations on an ongoing basis and all such transactions must be approved by the company's audit committee or another independent body of the board of directors. For purposes of this rule, the term "*related party transaction*" shall refer to transactions required to be disclosed pursuant to SEC Regulation S-K, Item 404.

b. Interested Director Transactions—TBOC § 21.418; TBCA Art. 2.35-1; and DGCL § 144.

Both Texas and Delaware have embraced the principle that a transaction or contract between a director or officer and the corporation served is presumed to be valid and will not be voidable solely by reason of the interest of the director or officer as long as certain conditions are met.[274]

I. Contractual Limitation of Corporate Fiduciary Duties.

Unlike the statutes governing partnerships and limited liability companies ("*LLCs*"),[275] neither the Texas Corporate Statutes nor the DGCL include provisions generally recognizing the principle of freedom of contract.[276] The Texas Corporate Statutes and the DGCL do, however,

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274 *See infra* notes 284-292 and related text.

275 *See infra* notes 1234, 1259-1267, 1274-1281 and related text.

276 *See* Edward P. Welch & Robert S. Saunders, *Freedom and its Limits in the Delaware General Corporation Law*, 33 Del. J. Corp. L. 845 (2008); *cf.* DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 6, § 18-1101(a)-(f) (2007); *cf.* E. Norman Veasey & Christine T. Di Guglielmo, *How Many Masters Can a Director Serve? A Look at the Tensions Facing Constituency Directors*, 63 Bus. Law. 761 (May 2008). The Delaware Limited Liability Company Act aggressively adopts a "contracterian approach" (i.e., the bargains of the parties manifested in LLC agreements are to be respected and rarely trumped by statute or common law) and does not have any provision which itself creates or negates Member or Manager fiduciary duties, but instead allows modification of fiduciary duties by an LLC agreement as follows:

> **18-1101 CONSTRUCTION AND APPLICATION OF CHAPTER AND LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY AGREEMENT.**
>
> (a) The rule that statutes in derogation of the common law are to be strictly construed shall have no application to this chapter.
>
> (b) It is the policy of this chapter to give the maximum effect to the principle of freedom of contract and to the enforceability of limited liability company agreements.
>
> (c) To the extent that, at law or in equity, a member or manager or other person has duties (including fiduciary duties) to a limited liability company or to another member or manager or to another person that is a party to or is otherwise bound by a limited liability company agreement, the member's or manager's or other person's duties may be expanded or restricted or eliminated by provisions in the limited liability company agreement; provided, that the limited liability company agreement may not eliminate the implied contractual covenant of good faith and fair dealing.

allow fiduciary duties or the consequences thereof to be modified by charter provision or contract in some limited circumstances.

1. Limitation of Director Liability.

Both the DGCL and the Texas Corporate Statutes allow corporations to provide limitations on (or partial elimination of) director liability in relation to the duty of care in their certificates of incorporation. DGCL § 102(b)(7) reads as follows:

> **102 Contents of Certificate of Incorporation.**
>
> * * *
>
> (b) In addition to the matters required to be set forth in the certificate of incorporation by subsection (a) of this section, the certificate of incorporation may also contain any or all of the following matters:
>
> * * *
>
> (7) A provision eliminating or limiting the personal liability of a director to the corporation or its stockholders for monetary damages for breach of fiduciary duty as a director, provided that such provision shall not eliminate or limit the liability of a director: (i) for any breach of the director's duty of loyalty to the corporation or its stockholders; (ii) for acts or omissions not in good faith or which involve intentional misconduct or a knowing violation of law; (iii) under § 174 of this title; or (iv) for any transaction from which the director derived an improper personal benefit. No such provision shall eliminate or limit the liability of a director for any act or omission occurring prior to the date when such provision becomes effective. All references in this paragraph to a director shall also be deemed to refer (x) to a member of the governing body of a corporation which is not authorized to issue capital stock, and (y) to such other person or

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> (d) Unless otherwise provided in a limited liability company agreement, a member or manager or other person shall not be liable to a limited liability company or to another member or manager or to another person that is a party to or is otherwise bound by a limited liability company agreement for breach of fiduciary duty for the member's or manager's or other person's good faith reliance on the provisions of the limited liability company agreement.
>
> (e) A limited liability company agreement may provide for the limitation or elimination of any and all liabilities for breach of contract and breach of duties (including fiduciary duties) of a member, manager or other person to a limited liability company or to another member or manager or to another person that is a party to or is otherwise bound by a limited liability company agreement; provided, that a limited liability company agreement may not limit or eliminate liability for any act or omission that constitutes a bad faith violation of the implied contractual covenant of good faith and fair dealing.
>
> (f) Unless the context otherwise requires, as used herein, the singular shall include the plural and the plural may refer to only the singular. The use of any gender shall be applicable to all genders. The captions contained herein are for purposes of convenience only and shall not control or affect the construction of this chapter.

DLLCA §§ 18-1101(a)-(f) are counterparts of, and virtually identical to, §§ 17-1101(a)-(f) of the Delaware Revised Limited Partnership Act. *See* DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 6, § 17-1101 (2007). Thus, Delaware cases regarding partner fiduciary duties should be helpful in the LLC context.

> persons, if any, who, pursuant to a provision of the certificate of incorporation in accordance with § 141(a) of this title, exercise or perform any of the powers or duties otherwise conferred or imposed upon the board of directors by this title.[277]

DGCL § 102(b)(7) in effect permits a corporation to include a provision in its certificate of incorporation limiting or eliminating a director's personal liability for monetary damages for breaches of the duty of care.[278] The liability of directors may not be so limited or eliminated, however, in connection with breaches of the duty of loyalty, the failure to act in good faith, intentional misconduct, knowing violations of law, obtaining improper personal benefits, or paying dividends or approving stock repurchases in violation of DGCL § 174.[279] Delaware courts have routinely enforced DGCL § 102(b)(7) provisions and held that, pursuant to such provisions, directors cannot be held monetarily liable for damages caused by alleged breaches of the fiduciary duty of care.[280]

The Texas Corporate Statutes contain provisions which are comparable to DGCL § 102(b)(7) and permit a corporation to include a provision in its charter limiting or eliminating a director's personal liability for monetary damages for breaches of the duty of care.[281]

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277 DGCL § 102(b)(7).

278 *Id.*

279 *Id. See also Zirn v. VLI Corp.*, 621 A.2d 773, 783 (Del. 1993) (holding DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision in corporation's certificate did not shield directors from liability where disclosure claims involving breach of the duty of loyalty were asserted).

280 A DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision does not operate to defeat the validity of a plaintiff's claim on the merits, rather it operates to defeat a plaintiff's ability to recover monetary damages. *Emerald Partners v. Berlin*, 787 A.2d 85, 92 (Del. 2000). In determining when a DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision should be evaluated by the Court of Chancery to determine whether it exculpates defendant directors, the Delaware Supreme Court recently distinguished between cases invoking the business judgment presumption and those invoking entire fairness review (these standards of review are discussed below). *Id.* at 92-93. The Court determined that if a stockholder complaint unambiguously asserts solely a claim for breach of the duty of care, then the complaint may be dismissed by invocation of a DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision. *Id.* at 92. The Court held, however, that "when entire fairness is the applicable standard of judicial review, a determination that the director defendants are exculpated from paying monetary damages can be made only *after the basis* for their liability has been decided." *Id.* at 94. In such a circumstance, defendant directors can avoid personal liability for paying monetary damages only if they establish that their failure to withstand an entire fairness analysis was exclusively attributable to a violation of the duty of care. *Id.* at 98.

281 The Texas analogue to DGCL § 102(b)(7) is TBOC § 7.001, which provides in relevant part:

> (b) The certificate of formation or similar instrument of an organization to which this section applies [generally, corporations] may provide that a governing person of the organization is not liable, or is liable only to the extent provided by the certificate of formation or similar instrument, to the organization or its owners or members for monetary damages for an act or omission by the person in the person's capacity as a governing person.
>
> (c) Subsection (b) does not authorize the elimination or limitation of the liability of a governing person to the extent the person is found liable under applicable law for:
>
> (1) a breach of the person's duty of loyalty, if any, to the organization or its owners or members;
>
> (2) an act or omission not in good faith that:
>
> (A) constitutes a breach of duty of the person to the organization; or
>
> (B) involves intentional misconduct or a knowing violation of law;
>
> (3) a transaction from which the person received an improper benefit, regardless of whether the benefit resulted from an action taken within the scope of the person's duties; or
>
> (4) an act or omission for which the liability of a governing person is expressly provided by an applicable statute.

TMCLA art. 1302-7.06 provides substantially the same.

2. Renunciation of Corporate Opportunities.

Both Texas and Delaware law permit a corporation to renounce any interest in business opportunities presented to the corporation or one or more of its officers, directors or shareholders in its certificate of formation or by action of its board of directors.[282] While this allows a corporation to specifically forgo individual corporate opportunities or classes of opportunities, the type of judicial scrutiny applied to the decision to make any such renunciation of corporate opportunities will generally be governed by a traditional common law fiduciary duty analysis.[283]

3. Interested Director Transactions.

Both Texas and Delaware have embraced the principle that a transaction or contract between a director or officer and the corporation served is presumed to be valid and will not be void or voidable solely by reason of the interest of the director or officer as long as certain conditions are met.

DGCL § 144 provides that a contract between a director or officer and the corporation served will not be voidable due to the interest of the director or officer if (i) the transaction or contract is approved in good faith by a majority of the disinterested directors after the material facts as to the relationship or interest and as to the transaction or contract are disclosed or known to the directors, (ii) the transaction or contract is approved in good faith by shareholders after the material facts as to the relationship or interest and as to the transaction or contract is disclosed or known to the shareholders, or (iii) the transaction or contract is fair to the corporation as of the time it is authorized, approved, or ratified by the directors or shareholders of the corporation.[284] In *Fliegler v. Lawrence*, however, the Delaware Supreme Court held that where the votes of directors, qua stockholders, were necessary to garner stockholder approval of a transaction in which the directors were interested, the taint of director self-interest was not removed, and the transaction or contract may still be set aside and liability imposed on a director if the transaction

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282 TBCA art. 2.02(20), TBOC § 2.101(21); DGCL § 122(17).

283 R. FRANKLIN BALOTTI & JESSE A. FINKELSTEIN, THE DELAWARE LAW OF CORPORATIONS AND BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS § 2.1 (2d ed. 1997); *see generally id.* at § 4.36.

284 DGCL § 144 provides as follows:

> (a) No contract or transaction between a corporation and 1 or more of its directors or officers, or between a corporation and any other corporation, partnership, association, or other organization in which 1 or more of its directors or officers, are directors or officers, or have a financial interest, shall be void or voidable solely for this reason, or solely because the director or officer is present at or participates in the meeting of the board or committee which authorizes the contract or transaction, or solely because any such director's or officer's votes are counted for such purpose, if:
>
> (1) The material facts as to the director's or officer's relationship or interest and as to the contract or transaction are disclosed or are known to the board of directors or the committee, and the board or committee in good faith authorizes the contract or transaction by the affirmative votes of a majority of the disinterested directors, even though the disinterested directors be less than a quorum; or
>
> (2) The material facts as to the director's or officer's relationship or interest and as to the contract or transaction are disclosed or are known to the shareholders entitled to vote thereon, and the contract or transaction is specifically approved in good faith by vote of the shareholders; or
>
> (3) the contract or transaction is fair as to the corporation as of the time it is authorized, approved or ratified, by the board of directors, a committee or the shareholders.
>
> (b) Common or interested directors may be counted in determining the presence of a quorum at a meeting of the board of directors or of a committee which authorizes the contract or transaction.

is not fair to the corporation.[285] The question remains, however, whether approval by a majority of disinterested stockholders will, pursuant to DGCL § 144(a)(2), cure any invalidity of director actions and, by virtue of the stockholder ratification, eliminate any director liability for losses from such actions.[286]

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[285] *Fliegler v. Lawrence*, 361 A.2d 218, 222 (Del. 1976). In *Sutherland v. Sutherland*, C.A. No. 2399-VCL (Del. Ch. March 23, 2009), the Court of Chancery held that an exculpatory provision in a corporation's certificate of incorporation purporting to immunize interested transactions from entire fairness review would effectively eviscerate the duty of loyalty for corporate directors and would, therefore, be void as contrary to the laws of Delaware and against public policy. The provision at issue in *Sutherland* read in pertinent part:

> Any director individually . . . may be a party to or may be pecuniarily or otherwise interested in any contract or transaction of the corporation, provided that the fact that he . . . is so interested shall be disclosed or shall have been known to the board of directors, or a majority thereof; and any director of the corporation, who is . . . so interested, may be counted in determining the existence of a quorum at any meeting of the board of directors of the corporation which shall authorize such contract or transaction, and may vote thereat to authorize any such contract or transaction, with like force and effect, as if he were not . . . so interested.

The Court construed the provision at issue to simply mean that interested directors may be counted toward a quorum; since the provision did not sanitize disloyal transactions, it was valid. The Court then proceeded to explain that if the provision would transmogrify an interested director into a disinterested one for the purposes of approving a transaction, it would be void:

> However, if, *arguendo*, the meaning of the provision is as the defendants suggest, interested directors would be treated as disinterested for the purposes of approving corporate transactions. Because approval by a majority of disinterested directors affords a transaction the presumptions of the business judgment rule, all interested transactions would be immunized from entire fairness analysis under this scheme. Thus, the only basis that would remain to attack a self-dealing transaction would be waste.
>
> The question that remains then is whether such a far-reaching provision would be enforceable under Delaware law. It would not. If the meaning of the above provision were as the defendants suggest, it would effectively eviscerate the duty of loyalty for corporate directors as it is generally understood under Delaware law. While such a provision is permissible under the Delaware Limited Liability Company Act and the Delaware Revised Uniform Limited Partnership Act, where freedom of contract is the guiding and overriding principle, it is expressly forbidden by the DGCL. Section 102(b)(7) of the DGCL provides that a corporate charter may contain a provision eliminating or limiting personal liability of a director for money damages in a suit for breach of fiduciary duty, so long as such provision does not affect director liability for "any breach of the director's duty of loyalty to the corporation or its stockholders. . . ."
>
> The effect of the provision at issue would be to do exactly what is forbidden. It would render any breach of the duty of loyalty relating to a self-dealing transaction beyond the reach of a court to remedy by way of damages. The exculpatory charter provision, if construed in the manner suggested by the defendants, would therefore be void as "contrary to the laws of this State" and against public policy. As such, it could not form the basis for a dismissal of claims of self-dealing.
>
> Thus, the charter provision, under either interpretation, provides no protection for the defendants beyond that afforded by Sections 144 of the DGCL. Because none of the safe-harbor provisions of Section 144(a)(1) or (a)(2) apply, the challenged interested transactions are not insulated on grounds of unfairness.

[286] *See Michelson v. Duncan*, 407 A.2d 211, 219 (Del. 1979). In *Gantler v. Stephens*, 965 A.2d 695 (Del. 2009), the Delaware Supreme Court found that stockholder approval of a going private stock reclassification proposal did not effectively ratify or cleanse the transaction for two reasons:

> First, because a shareholder vote was required to amend the certificate of incorporation, that approving vote could not also operate to "ratify" the challenged conduct of the interested directors. Second, the adjudicated cognizable claim that the Reclassification Proxy contained a material misrepresentation, eliminates an essential predicate for applying the doctrine, namely, that the shareholder vote was fully informed.
>
> * * *

In 1985, Texas followed Delaware's lead in the area of interested director transactions and adopted TBCA article 2.35-1,[287] the predecessor to TBOC § 21.418. In general, these Texas Corporate Statues provide that a transaction between a corporation and one or more of its directors or officers will not be voidable solely by reason of that relationship if the transaction is approved by shareholders or disinterested directors after disclosure of the interest, or if the transaction is otherwise fair.[288] Because TBCA art. 2.35-1, as initially enacted, was essentially identical to DGCL § 144, some uncertainty on the scope of TBCA art. 2.35-1 arose because of *Fliegler*'s interpretation of DGCL § 144. This imposition of a fairness gloss on the Texas statute rendered the effect of the safe harbor provisions in TBCA article 2.35-1 uncertain.

In 1997, TBCA article 2.35-1 was amended to address the ambiguity created by *Fliegler* and to clarify that contracts and transactions between a corporation and its directors and officers or in which a director or officer has a financial interest are valid notwithstanding that interest as long as any one of the following are met: (i) the disinterested directors of the corporation approve the transaction after disclosure of the interest, (ii) the shareholders of the corporation approve the transaction after disclosure of the interest or (iii) the transaction is fair.[289] TBOC § 21.418 mirrors these clarifications. Under the Texas Corporate Statues, if any one of these conditions is met, the contract will be considered valid notwithstanding the fact that the director or officer has an interest in the transaction.[290] These provisions rely heavily on the statutory definitions of "*disinterested*" contained in TBCA art. 1.02 and TBOC § 1.003. Under these definitions, a director will be considered "*disinterested*" if the director is not a party to the contract or transaction or does not otherwise have a material financial interest in the outcome of the contract.[291]

Article 2.35-1 also changed the general approach of the statute from a mere presumption that a contract is not voidable by reason of the existence of an affiliated relationship if certain conditions are met to an absolute safe harbor that provides that an otherwise valid contract will be valid if the specified conditions are met, a change retained by TBOC § 21.418.[292] Although

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> [T]he scope of the shareholder ratification doctrine must be limited to its so-called "classic" form; that is, to circumstances where a fully informed shareholder vote approves director action that does not legally require shareholder approval in order to become legally effective. Moreover, the only director action or conduct that can be ratified is that which the shareholders are specifically asked to approve. With one exception, the "cleansing" effect of such a ratifying shareholder vote is to subject the challenged director action to business judgment review, as opposed to "extinguishing" the claim altogether (i.e., obviating all judicial review of the challenged action).

287 TBOC § 21.418; TBCA art. 2.35-1.

288 TBOC § 21.418; TBCA art. 2.35-1; *see Landon v. S & H Marketing Group, Inc.*, 82 S.W.3d 666 (Tex. App.—Eastland 2002, no pet.).

289 TBCA art. 2.35-1.

290 *Id.* art. 2.35-1(A); TBOC § 21.418(b).

291 TBCA art. 2.35-1(A); TBOC § 21.418(b).

292 TBOC § 21.418 provides:

> (a) This section applies only to a contract or transaction between a corporation and:
>
> (1) one or more of the corporation's directors or officers; or
>
> (2) an entity or other organization in which one or more of the corporation's directors or officers:
>
> (A) is a managerial official; or
>
> (B) has a financial interest.

the difference between the Texas and Delaware constructions is subtle, the distinction is significant and provides more certainty as transactions are structured. However, these Texas Corporate Statutes do not eliminate a director's or officer's fiduciary duty to the corporation.

III. Shifting Duties When Company on Penumbra of Insolvency.

A. Insolvency Can Change Relationships.

While creditors' power over the corporate governance of a solvent company is limited to the rights given to them by their contracts, their influence expands as the company approaches insolvency. As a troubled company approaches insolvency, its creditors may organize into ad hoc committees to negotiate with, and perhaps attempt to dictate to, the company about its future and its restructuring efforts.[293] They may become aggressive in asserting that the company's resources should be directed toward getting them paid rather than taking business risks that could, if successful, create value for the shareholders.[294] Once a troubled company enters formal proceedings under the Bankruptcy Code, the corporation becomes subject to the powers of a Bankruptcy Court which must approve all actions outside of the ordinary course of business, although (depending on the nature of the proceedings)[295] the corporation may continue to be governed by its Board or a trustee may be appointed to administer its assets for the benefit of its creditors.[296] In addition, a committee of unsecured creditors may be appointed. The committee has standing to appear and be heard on any matter in the bankruptcy case, including any attempt

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> (b) An otherwise valid contract or transaction is valid notwithstanding that a director or officer of the corporation is present at or participates in the meeting of the board of directors, or of a committee of the board that authorizes the contract or transaction, or votes to authorize the contract or transaction, if:
>
> (1) the material facts as to the relationship or interest and as to the contract or transaction are disclosed to or known by:
>
> (A) the corporation's board of directors or a committee of the board of directors and the board of directors or committee in good faith authorizes the contract or transaction by the affirmative vote of the majority of the disinterested directors or committee members, regardless of whether the disinterested directors or committee members constitute a quorum; or
>
> (B) the shareholders entitled to vote on the authorization of the contract or transaction, and the contract or transaction is specifically approved in good faith by a vote of the shareholders; or
>
> (2) the contract or transaction is fair to the corporation when the contract or transaction is authorized, approved, or ratified by the board of directors, a committee of the board of directors, or the shareholders.
>
> (c) Common or interested directors of a corporation may be included in determining the presence of a quorum at a meeting of the corporation's board of directors, or a committee of the board of directors, that authorizes the contract or transaction.

Cf. Val D. Ricks, *Texas' So-Called "Interested Director" Statute*, 50 S. TEX. L. REV. 129 (Winter 2008).

293 D.J. (Jan) Baker, John Wm. (Jack) Butler, Jr., & Mark A. McDermott, *Corporate Governance of Troubled Companies and the Role of Restructuring Counsel*, 63 Bus. Law. 855 (May 2008).

294 *Id.*

295 The directors in office prior to the Chapter 11 filing continue in office until replaced under the entity's governing documents, applicable state law or section 1104 of the Bankruptcy Code. Section 1104 of the Bankruptcy Code authorizes the court to order the appointment of a trustee for cause or if such appointment is in the best interests of creditors, any equity holders and other interests of the estate, or if grounds exist for conversion to Chapter 7 or dismissal, but the court determines that a trustee is a better alternative. In a Chapter 7 case, a trustee is appointed to liquidate the corporation.

296 *Cf. Torch Liquidating Trust v. Stockstill*, 561 F.3d 377 (5th Cir. 2009), and *Thornton v. Bernard Tech., Inc.*, C.A. No. 962-VCN, 2009 WL 426179 (Del. Ch. Feb. 20, 2009).

by the debtor to obtain approval from the Bankruptcy Court to take actions outside of the debtor's ordinary business.[297] Committees on occasion seek to impose their will by suing, or threatening to sue, directors for breaches of fiduciary duty if they believe that the company did not act appropriately.[298] In the troubled company context, directors often face vocal and conflicting claims to their attention and allegiance from multiple constituencies as they address issues that affect the groups differently.

Directors owe fiduciary duties to the corporation and its owners.[299] When the corporation is solvent, the directors owe fiduciary duties to the corporation and to the shareholders of the corporation.[300] The creditor's relationship to the corporation is contractual in nature. A solvent corporation's directors do not owe any fiduciary duties to the corporation's creditors, whose rights in relation to the corporation are those that they have bargained for and memorialized in their contracts.[301]

In Texas a corporation's directors continue to owe shareholders, not creditors, fiduciary duties "so long as [the corporation] continues to be a going concern, conducting its business in the ordinary way, without some positive act of insolvency, such as the filing of a bill to administer its assets, or the making of a general assignment."[302] When the corporation is both insolvent and has ceased doing business, the corporation's creditors become its owners and the directors owe fiduciary duties to the creditors as the owners of the business in the sense they have a duty to administer the corporation's remaining assets as a trust fund for the benefit of all of the creditors.[303] The duties of directors of an insolvent corporation to its creditors, however, do not require that the directors must abandon their efforts to direct the affairs of the corporation in a manner intended to benefit the corporation and its shareholders or that they lose the

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297 *Cf. Torch*, 561 F.3d 377, and *Bernard Tech*, 2009 WL 426179.

298 Myron M. Sheinfeld & Judy Harris Pippitt, *Fiduciary Duties of Directors of a Corporation in the Vicinity of Insolvency and After Initiation of a Bankruptcy Case*, 60 Bus. Law. 79 (Nov. 2004).

299 Delaware Vice Chancellor Leo E. Strine, Comments at the 24th Annual Conference on Securities Regulation and Business Law Problems: Sponsored by University of Texas School of Law, et al. (February 22, 2002).

300 *Hoggett v. Brown*, 971 S.W. 2d 472, 488 (Tex. App—Houston [14th Dist.] 1997, pet. denied) ("A director's fiduciary duty runs only to the corporation, not to individual shareholders or even to a majority of the shareholders" [citing *Gearhart Indus., Inc. v, Smith Int'l, Inc.*, 741 F.2d 707, 721 (5th Cir. 1984)]. Similarly, a co-shareholder in a closely held corporation does not as a matter of law owe a fiduciary duty to his co-shareholder . . . whether such duty exists depends on the circumstances [as] if a confidential relationship exists [which] is ordinarily a question of fact for the jury . . .); *North American Catholic Educational Programming Foundation Inc. v. Gheewalla*, 930 A.2d 92, 101 (Del. 2007) ("The directors of Delaware corporations have 'the legal responsibility to manage the business of a corporation for the benefit of its shareholders owners'") (quoting *Malone v. Brincat*, 722 A.2d 5 (1998)); *see* Norman Veasey & Christine T. Di Guglielmo, *How Many Masters Can a Director Serve? A Look at the Tensions Facing Constituency Directors*, 63 Bus. Law. 761 (May 2008).

301 *See Fagan v. La Gloria Oil & Gas Co.*, 494 S.W.2d 624, 628 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1973, no writ) ("[O]fficers and directors of a corporation owe to it duties of care and loyalty. . . . Such duties, however, are owed to the corporation and not to creditors of the corporation.").

302 *Conway v. Bonner*, 100 F.2d 786, 787 (5th Cir. 1939); *Floyd v. Hefner*, C.A. No. H-03-5693, 2006 WL 2844245, at *10 (S.D. Tex. Sept. 29, 2006) (quoting *Conway v. Bonner*); *see Askanase v. Fatjo*, No. H-91-3140, 1993 WL 208440, at *4 (S.D. Tex. April 22, 1993), *aff'd* 130 F.3d 657 (5th Cir. 1997); but see *Carrieri v. Jobs.com*, 393 F.3d 508, 534, n.24 (5th Cir. 2004) ("Officers and directors that are aware that the corporation is insolvent, or within the 'zone of insolvency' . . . have expanded fiduciary duties to include the creditors of the corporation.").

303 *Floyd*, 2006 WL 2844245 at *10; *Askanase*, 1993 WL 208440 at *4; *see also Hixson v. Pride of Tex. Distrib. Co.*, 683 S.W.2d 173, 176 (Tex. App.–Fort Worth 1985, no writ); *State v. Nevitt*, 595 S.W.2d 140, 143 (Tex. App.–Dallas 1980, writ ref'd n.r.e.); and *Fagan v. La Gloria Oil & Gas. Co.*, 494 S.W.2d 624, 628 (Tex. App.–Houston [14th Dist.] 1973, no writ).

protections of the business judgment rule.[304] However, owing a duty of loyalty means that "a self-interested director cannot orchestrate the sale of a corporation's assets for his benefit below the price that diligent marketing efforts would have obtained."[305] The trust fund doctrine in Texas requires the directors and officers of an insolvent corporation to deal fairly with its creditors without preferring one creditor over another or themselves to the injury of other creditors.[306] Even where they are not direct beneficiaries of fiduciary duties, the creditors of an insolvent corporation may benefit from the fiduciary duties which continue to be owed to the corporation.[307]

In Delaware, the corporation need not have ceased doing business for that trust fund to arise and the directors to owe duties to creditors.[308] However, the Delaware formulation of the trust fund doctrine would not afford relief if the self-dealing was fair:

> [C]reditors need protection even if an insolvent corporation is not liquidating, because the fact of insolvency shifts the risk of loss from the stockholders to the creditors. While stockholders no longer risk further loss, creditors become at risk when decisions of the directors affect the corporation's ability to repay debt. This new fiduciary relationship is certainly one of loyalty, trust and confidence, but it does not involve holding the insolvent corporation's assets in trust for distribution

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304 *Floyd*, 2006 WL 2844245 at *24 (concluding that "Texas law does not impose fiduciary duties in favor of creditors on the directors of an insolvent, but still operating, corporation, [but] it does require those directors to act as fiduciaries of the corporation itself" and that *Gearhart Industries, Inc. v. Smith International, Inc.*, 741 F.2d 707, 719 (5th Cir. 1984), remains the controlling statement of Texas director fiduciary duty law); *see* Glenn D. West & Emmanuel U. Obi, *Corporations*, 60 SMU L. REV. 885, 910-11 (2007). *Floyd v. Hefner* was not followed by *In Re: Vartec Telecom, Inc.*, in which the Bankruptcy Court wrote: "[A] cause of action based on a company's directors' and officers' fiduciary duty to creditors when the company is in the "vicinity" or "zone" of insolvency is recognized in both states [Texas and Delaware]." Case No. 04-81694-HDH-7, 2007 WL 2872283 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. Sept. 24, 2007).

305 *Floyd*, 2006 WL 2844245 at *14; *cf. In re Performance Nutrition, Inc.*, 237 B.R. 93 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 1999); *In re General Homes Corp.*, 199 B.R. 148 (S.D. Tex. 1996).

306 *Plas-Tex v. Jones*, No. 03-99-00289-CV, 2000 WL 632677 at *4 (Tex. App.—Austin 2002; no pet.) ("As a general rule, corporate officers and directors owe fiduciary duties only to the corporation and not to the corporation's creditors, unless there has been prejudice to the creditors. . . . However, when a corporation is insolvent, a fiduciary relationship arises between the officers and directors of the corporation and its creditors, and creditors may challenge a breach of the duty. . . . Officers and directors of an insolvent corporation have a fiduciary duty to deal fairly with the corporation's creditors, and that duty includes preserving the value of the corporate assets to pay corporate debts without preferring one creditor over another or preferring themselves to the injury of other creditors. . . . However, a creditor may pursue corporate assets and hold directors liable only for 'that portion of the assets that would have been available to satisfy his debt if they had been distributed pro rata to all creditors.'"); *Geyer v. Ingersoll Pub. Co.*, 621 A.2d 784, 787 (Del.Ch. 1992) ("[T]he general rule is that directors do not owe creditors duties beyond the relevant contractual terms absent 'special circumstances' . . . e.g., fraud, insolvency or a violation of a statute. . . .' [citation omitted]. Furthermore, [no one] seriously disputes that when the insolvency does arise, it creates fiduciary duties for directors for the benefit of creditors. Therefore, the issue . . . is when do directors' fiduciary duties to creditors arise via insolvency."); *see* Allen M. Terrell, Jr. & Andrea K. Short, *Directors Duties in Insolvency: Lessons From Allied Riser*, 14 Bankr. L. Rep. (BNA) 293 (March 14, 2002).

307 *Floyd*, 2006 WL 2844245 at *24.

308 *Askanase*, 1993 WL 208440; *Geyer v. Ingersoll Pub. Co.*, 621 A. 2d 784, 787 (Del.Ch. 1992) ("[T]he general rule is that directors do not owe creditors duties beyond the relevant contractual terms absent 'special circumstances' . . . e.g., fraud, insolvency or a violation of a statute. . . .' [citation omitted]. Furthermore, [no one] seriously disputes that when the insolvency does arise, it creates fiduciary duties for directors for the benefit of creditors. Therefore, the issue . . . is when do directors' fiduciary duties to creditors arise via insolvency."); *see* Allen M. Terrell, Jr. & Andrea K. Short, *Directors Duties in Insolvency: Lessons From Allied Riser*, 14 Bankr. L. Rep. (BNA) 293 (March 14, 2002).

to creditors or holding directors strictly liable for actions that deplete corporate assets.[309]

The trust fund doctrine does not preclude the directors from allowing the corporation to take on economic risk for the benefit of the corporation's equity owners.[310] Rather, the shifting merely exonerates the directors who choose to maintain the corporation's long term viability by considering the interests of creditors.[311]

B. When is a Corporation Insolvent or in the Vicinity of Insolvency?

There are degrees of insolvency (e.g., a corporation may be unable to pay its debts as they come due because of troubles with its lenders or its liabilities may exceed the book value of its assets, but the intrinsic value of the entity may significantly exceed its debts).[312] Sometimes it is unclear whether the corporation is insolvent. In circumstances where the corporation is on the penumbra of insolvency, the directors may owe fiduciary duties to the "whole enterprise."[313]

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309 *Decker v. Mitchell (In re JTS Corp.)*, 305 B.R. 529, 539 (Bankr. N.D. Cal. 2003).

310 *North American Catholic Educational Programming Foundation Inc. v. Gheewalla*, 930 A2d 92, 100 (Del. 2007); *Floyd*, 2006 WL 2844245; *see U.S. Bank v. Stanley*, 297 S.W.3d 815 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2009) ("Delaware law recognizes that the directors' obligations to a corporation and its shareholders may at times put them at odds with the creditors: It is the obligation of directors to attempt, within the law, to maximize the long-run interests of the corporation's stockholders; that they may sometimes do so at the expense of others . . . does not for that reason constitute a breach of duty. It seems likely that corporate restructurings designed to maximize shareholder values may in some instances have the effect of requiring bondholders to bear greater risk of loss and thus in effect transfer economic value from bondholders to stockholders. * * * Likewise, the representation in a management presentation that the appellees authorized expenditures totaling $225 million with "no positive results" and the evidence of the reduction in TransTexas' assets between the two bankruptcies does not raise a genuine issue as to damages. Companies often spend money that does not achieve positive results, and they may become insolvent as a result. The mere assertion that TransTexas, a company engaged in oil and gas exploration efforts — an enterprise that inherently involves certain risks — spent too much money and achieved too little results — does not equate to a damages theory or model."); Rutheford B. Campbell, Jr. & Christopher W. Frost, *Managers' Fiduciary Duties in Financially Distressed Corporations: Chaos in Delaware (and Elsewhere)*, 32 J. CORP. L. 492 (Spring 2007).

311 Rutheford B. Campbell, Jr. & Christopher W. Frost, *Managers' Fiduciary Duties in Financially Distressed Corporations: Chaos in Delaware (and Elsewhere)*, 32 J. CORP. L. 492 (Spring 2007); *see Equity-Linked Investors, L.P. v. Adams*, 705 A.2d 1040, 1042 n.2 (Del. Ch. 1997) ("[W]here foreseeable financial effects of a board decision may importantly fall upon creditors as well as holders of common stock, as where corporation is in the vicinity of insolvency, an independent board may consider impacts upon all corporate constituencies in exercising its good faith business judgment for benefit of the 'corporation.'").

312 *See* Rutheford B. Campbell, Jr. & Christopher W. Frost, *Managers' Fiduciary Duties in Financially Distressed Corporations: Chaos in Delaware (and Elsewhere)*, 32 J. Corp. L. 491 (2007).

313 *Geyer v. Ingersoll Pub. Co.*, 621 A. 2d 784, 789 (Del.Ch. 1992) ("The existence of the fiduciary duties at the moment of insolvency may cause directors to choose a course of action that best serves the entire corporate enterprise rather than any single group interested in the corporation at a point in time when the shareholders' wishes should not be the directors only concern."). *See Credit Lyonnais Bank Nederland, N.V. v. Pathe Commc'ns Corp.*, which expressed the following in *dicta*:

> The possibility of insolvency can do curious things to incentives, exposing creditors to risks of opportunistic behavior and creating complexities for directors. Consider, for example, a solvent corporation having a single asset, a judgment for $51 million against a solvent debtor. The judgment is on appeal and thus subject to modification or reversal. Assume that the only liabilities of the company are to bondholders in the amount of $12 million. Assume that the array of probable outcomes of the appeal is as follows:

	Expected Value
25% chance of affirmance ($51mm)	$12.75
70% chance of modification ($4 mm)	2.8

Owing fiduciary duties to the "whole enterprise" puts the directors in the uncomfortable position of owing duties to the corporation which may have multiple constituencies having conflicting interests that may claim the right to enforce on behalf of the corporation.[314]

In Delaware it is the fact of insolvency, rather than the commencement of statutory bankruptcy or other insolvency proceedings, that causes the shift in the focus of director duties.[315] Delaware courts define insolvency as occurring when the corporation "is unable to pay its debts as they fall due in the usual course of business . . . or it has liabilities in excess of a reasonable market value of assets held."[316]

Under the "balance sheet" test used for bankruptcy law purposes, insolvency is defined as when an entity's debts exceed the entity's property at fair valuation,[317] and the value at which the assets carried for financial accounting or tax purposes is irrelevant.

Fair value of assets is the amount that would be realized from the sale of assets within a reasonable period of time.[318] Fair valuation is not liquidation or book value, but is the value of

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5% chance of reversal ($0)	0
Expected value of Judgment on Appeal	$15.55

Thus, the best evaluation is that the current value of the equity is $3.55 million. ($15.55 million expected value of judgment on appeal $12 million liability to bondholders). Now assume an offer to settle at $12.5 million (also consider one at $17.5 million). By what standard do the directors of the company evaluate the fairness of these offers? The creditors of this solvent company would be in favor of accepting either a $12.5 million offer or a $17.5 million offer. In either event they will avoid the 75% risk of insolvency and default. The stockholders, however, will plainly be opposed to acceptance of a $12.5 million settlement (under which they get practically nothing). More importantly, they very well may be opposed to acceptance of the $17.5 million offer under which the residual value of the corporation would increase from $3.5 to $5.5 million. This is so because the litigation alternative, with its 25% probability of a $39 million outcome to them ($51 million - $12 million $39 million) has an expected value to the residual risk bearer of $9.75 million ($39 million x 25% chance of affirmance), substantially greater than the $5.5 million available to them in the settlement. While in fact the stockholders' preference would reflect their appetite for risk, it is possible (and with diversified shareholders likely) that shareholders would prefer rejection of both settlement offers.

But if we consider the community of interests that the corporation represents it seems apparent that one should in this hypothetical accept the best settlement offer available providing it is greater than $15.55 million, and one below that amount should be rejected. But that result will not be reached by a director who thinks he owes duties directly to shareholders only. It will be reached by directors who are capable of conceiving of the corporation as a legal and economic entity. Such directors will recognize that in managing the business affairs of a solvent corporation in the vicinity of insolvency, circumstances may arise when the right (both the efficient and the fair) course to follow for the corporation may diverge from the choice that the stockholders (or the creditors, or the employees, or any single group interested in the corporation) would make if given the opportunity to act.

C.A. No. 12150, 1991 Del. Ch. LEXIS 215 at n.55 (Del. Ch. 1991).

314 *See Odyssey Partners, L.P. v. Fleming Cos., Inc.*, 735 A.2d 386, 420 (Del. Ch. 1999).

315 *Geyer*, 621 A. 2d at 789.

316 *Id.*

317 11 U.S.C. § 101(32) (2008). A "balance sheet" test is also used under the fraudulent transfer statutes of Delaware and Texas. *See* DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 6, § 1302 and TEX. BUS. & COM. CODE § 24.003. For general corporate purposes, TBOC § 1.002(39) defines insolvency as the "inability of a person to pay the person's debts as they become due in the usual course of business or affairs." TBCA art. 1.02(A)(16) provides substantially the same. For transactions covered by the U.C.C., TEX. BUS. & COM. CODE 1.201(23) (2001) defines an entity as "insolvent" who either has ceased to pay its debts in the ordinary course of business or cannot pay its debts as they become due or is insolvent within the meaning of the federal bankruptcy law.

318 *Cf. Production Resources Group, L.L.C. v. NCT Group, Inc.*, 863 A.2d 772, 799 (Del. Ch. 2004); *Angelo, Gordon & Co., L.P. v. Allied Riser Commc'ns Corp.*, 805 A.2d 221, 223 (Del. Ch. 2002).

the assets considering the age and liquidity of the assets, as well as the conditions of the trade.[319] For liabilities, the fair value assumes that the debts are to be paid according to the present terms of the obligations.

Directors' duties, however, do not shift before the moment of insolvency. The Delaware Supreme Court has explained: "When a solvent corporation is navigating in the zone of insolvency, the focus for Delaware directors does not change: directors must continue to discharge their fiduciary duties to the corporation and its shareholders by exercising their business judgment in the best interests of the corporation for the benefit of its shareholder owners."[320] In cases where the corporation has been found to be in the vicinity of insolvency, the entity was in dire financial straits with a bankruptcy petition likely in the minds of the directors.[321]

C. Director Liabilities to Creditors.

The issue of creditor rights to sue directors for breach of fiduciary duty was resolved for Delaware corporations in *North American Catholic Educational Programming Foundation Inc. v. Gheewalla* in 2007.[322] In *Gheewalla*, the Delaware Supreme Court held "that the creditors of a Delaware corporation that is either insolvent or in the zone of insolvency have no right, as a matter of law, to assert direct claims for breach of fiduciary duty against the corporation's directors," but the creditors of an insolvent corporation may bring a derivative action on behalf of the corporation against its directors.[323] The Delaware Supreme Court elaborated on this holding as follows:

> It is well established that the directors owe their fiduciary obligations to the corporation and its shareholders. While shareholders rely on directors acting as fiduciaries to protect their interests, creditors are afforded protection through contractual agreements, fraud and fraudulent conveyance law, implied covenants of good faith and fair dealing, bankruptcy law, general commercial law and other sources of creditor rights. Delaware courts have traditionally been reluctant to expand existing fiduciary duties. Accordingly, "the general rule is that directors do not owe creditors duties beyond the relevant contractual terms."
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> * * *
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> In this case, the need for providing directors with definitive guidance compels us to hold that no direct claim for breach of fiduciary duties may be

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319 *In re United Finance Corporation*, 104 F.2d 593, 598 (7th Cir. 1939).

320 *North American Catholic Educational Programming Foundation Inc. v. Gheewalla*, 930 A2d 92, 101 (Del. 2007); *but cf. Credit Lyonnais Bank Nederland, N.V. v. Pathe Commc'ns Corp.*, C.A. No. 12150 Mem. Op., 1991 Del. Ch. LEXIS 215 (Del. Ch. 1991).

321 In *Credit Lyonnais*, a bankruptcy petition had recently been dismissed, but the corporation continued to labor "in the shadow of that prospect." 1991 Del. Ch. LEXIS 215; *see also Equity-Linked Investors LP v. Adams*, 705 A.2d 1040, 1041 (Del. Ch. 1997) (corporation found to be on "lip of insolvency" where a bankruptcy petition had been prepared and it had only cash sufficient to cover operations for one more week).

322 930 A.2d 92 (Del. 2007); *cf.* Sabin Willett, *Gheewalla and the Director's Dilemma*, 64 BUS. LAW. 1087 (August 2009).

323 *Id.* at 94; *see CML V, LLC v. Bax*, C.A. No. 5373-VCL (Del. Ch. Nov. 3, 2010) (creditors of an insolvent LLC cannot sue derivatively).

asserted by the creditors of a solvent corporation that is operating in the zone of insolvency. When a solvent corporation is navigating in the zone of insolvency, the focus for Delaware directors does not change: directors must continue to discharge their fiduciary duties to the corporation and its shareholders by exercising their business judgment in the best interests of the corporation for the benefit of its shareholder owners. Therefore, we hold the Court of Chancery properly concluded that Count II of the NACEPF Complaint fails to state a claim, as a matter of Delaware law, to the extent that it attempts to assert a direct claim for breach of fiduciary duty to a creditor while Clearwire was operating in the zone of insolvency.

* * *

It is well settled that directors owe fiduciary duties to the corporation. When a corporation is *solvent*, those duties may be enforced by its shareholders, who have standing to bring *derivative* actions on behalf of the corporation because they are the ultimate beneficiaries of the corporation's growth and increased value. When a corporation is *insolvent*, however, its creditors take the place of the shareholders as the residual beneficiaries of any increase in value.

Consequently, the creditors of an insolvent corporation have standing to maintain derivative claims against directors on behalf of the corporation for breaches of fiduciary duties. The corporation's insolvency "makes the creditors the principal constituency injured by any fiduciary breaches that diminish the firm's value." Therefore, equitable considerations give creditors standing to pursue derivative claims against the directors of an insolvent corporation. Individual creditors of an insolvent corporation have the same incentive to pursue valid derivative claims on its behalf that shareholders have when the corporation is solvent.

* * *

Recognizing that directors of an insolvent corporation owe direct fiduciary duties to creditors, would create uncertainty for directors who have a fiduciary duty to exercise their business judgment in the best interest of the insolvent corporation. To recognize a new right for creditors to bring direct fiduciary claims against those directors would create a conflict between those directors' duty to maximize the value of the insolvent corporation for the benefit of all those having an interest in it, and the newly recognized direct fiduciary duty to individual creditors. Directors of insolvent corporations must retain the freedom to engage in vigorous, good faith negotiations with individual creditors for the benefit of the corporation. Accordingly, we hold that individual *creditors* of an *insolvent* corporation have *no right to assert direct* claims for breach of fiduciary duty against corporate directors. Creditors may nonetheless protect their interest by bringing derivative claims on behalf of the insolvent corporation or any *other*

direct nonfiduciary claim, as discussed earlier in this opinion, that may be available for individual creditors.[324]

Gheewalla was followed by the Fifth Circuit in *Torch Liquidating Trust v. Stockstill*,[325] in which Torch Liquidating Trust through its Bankruptcy Trustee brought a derivative action on behalf of the creditors and shareholders of the corporation against its officers and directors alleging breach of fiduciary duties by the officers and directors. The U.S. District Court in Louisiana dismissed plaintiff's complaint under Rule 12(b)(6) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure on the ground that plaintiff's allegations of injury to the creditors failed to state a claim, and on the ground that Delaware's business judgment rule applied to preclude liability of the officers and directors. The Fifth Circuit, applying Delaware law because the corporation was a Delaware corporation, affirmed on a different basis, holding that plaintiff failed to allege injury to the corporation and thus failed to state a claim on behalf of the Torch Liquidating Trust.

Torch operated a fleet of specialized vessels used in offshore underwater construction and pipeline laying in the Gulf of Mexico. Starting in 2003, Torch's business deteriorated to the point that by the end of 2003 Torch may have been insolvent, although it continued to incur trade debt. By December 2004, Torch's loans were in default, leading the company to stop paying its vendors. On January 7, 2005, it filed a voluntary petition for relief under Chapter 11 of the Bankruptcy Code in the Eastern District of Louisiana. The Bankruptcy Court confirmed Torch's proposed Chapter 11 Plan of Reorganization pursuant to which the Torch Liquidating Trust was created. The Trust was comprised of "all property of the Debtors' Estates which has not previously been transferred," included claims against Torch's directors and officers, authorized the Trustee to retain and prosecute those claims, and empowered the Trustee to distribute to creditors any recovery of claims proceeds.

On January 5, 2007, the Trustee filed a complaint on behalf of the Trust against Torch's former directors and officers. The complaint alleged that the directors and officers breached their fiduciary duties owed to Torch's creditors when Torch entered the zone of insolvency and after it became insolvent. Defendants moved to dismiss the complaint or for a more definite statement. After the Trustee clarified that it was not alleging fraud but instead only breach of fiduciary duties, the Court denied defendants' motion to dismiss.

In the intervening period, the Delaware Supreme Court issued its opinion in *North American Catholic Educational Programming Foundation, Inc. v. Gheewalla*,[326] holding that "the creditors of a Delaware corporation that is either insolvent or in the zone of insolvency have no right, as a matter of law, to assert *direct* claims for breach of fiduciary duty against the corporation's directors," but "the creditors of an *insolvent* corporation have standing to maintain *derivative* claims against directors on behalf of the corporation for breaches of fiduciary duties." In the aftermath of *Gheewalla*, plaintiff filed an amended complaint in which plaintiff replaced nearly all of its prior references to "creditors" with new references to "creditors and shareholders," sought damages on behalf of creditors and shareholders, and alleged that "[t]his matter is in the nature of a derivative suit in that plaintiff sues on behalf of the shareholders and

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324 *Id.* at 99-103.

325 561 F.3d 377 (5th Cir. 2009).

326 930 A.2d 92 (Del. 2007).

creditors alike of [Torch]" and any recovery is to become property of the Trust for distribution according to the Plan.[327] Substantively, plaintiff alleged *inter alia* that the directors and officers "inflat[ed] the estimated fair market value of the [Torch] fleet in order to portray in published financial statements that [it was] solvent," "deferr[ed] paying unsecured creditors to the maximum extent possible while at the same time entering into an intensive campaign to mislead Torch's unsecured creditors as to its true financial condition and cajole Torch's unsecured creditors into continuing to supply goods and services to Torch on credit," and delayed for as long as possible admitting "that Torch would be unable to fund its ongoing operations without new capital."[328]

The defendants filed a motion to dismiss under Rule 12(b)(6), asserting that the Trustee lacked standing to bring the suit, that Delaware's business judgment rule applied to preclude the directors' liability, and that the DGCL § 102(b)(6) exculpatory provisions in Torch's certificate of incorporation shielded the directors from liability for certain alleged breaches of their fiduciary duties. The District Court granted the motion, holding that plaintiff lacked standing to assert many of its claims, which the District Court interpreted as continuing to allege direct creditor claims barred by *Gheewalla*, and, to the extent any of the claims were properly derivative, that Delaware's business judgment rule defeated those claims.

The Fifth Circuit affirmed the dismissal of the petition, but on a different basis. The Fifth Circuit held that:

> [T]he trustee … may bring D&O claims that were part of debtor's estate on behalf of the Trust; it need not allege a derivative suit based on either shareholder or creditor derivative standing. Although plaintiff has standing, it fails to state a claim for which the court may grant relief. It argues that it is attempting to assert a breach of fiduciary duties owed to Torch but fails to allege necessary elements of such a claim—specifically, but not limited to, injury to Torch. As the district court recognized, when plaintiff amended its complaint, it failed to allege a claim on behalf of Torch and continued to maintain what appear to be impermissible direct claims on behalf of creditors, now clothed in the unnecessary pleadings of a derivative action (ostensibly, but never expressly, on behalf of Torch). ***
>
> The Trust, through its trustee Bridge Associates, attempts to allege—in the form of a shareholder and creditor derivative suit—that the Directors breached their fiduciary duties. This ill-conceived pleading posture distracts from Bridge Associates's standing as trustee to bring a direct suit on the Trust's behalf for Torch's claims against the Directors.
>
> Under Delaware law, a claim alleging the directors' or officers' breach of fiduciary duties owed to a corporation may be brought by the corporation or through a shareholder derivative suit when the corporation is solvent or a creditor derivative suit when the corporation is insolvent. See *Gheewalla*, 930 A.2d at 101–02. A derivative suit "enables a stockholder to bring suit on behalf of the

327 *Torch*, 561 F.3d at 383.

328 *Id.*

corporation for harm done to the corporation." *Tooley v. Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette, Inc.*, 845 A.2d 1031, 1036 (Del. 2004). "The derivative action developed in equity to enable shareholders to sue in the corporation's name where those in control of the company refused to assert a claim belonging to it." *Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A.2d 805, 811 (Del. 1984), partially overruled on other grounds by *Brehm v. Eisner*, 746 A.2d 244 (Del. 2000). "The nature of the action is two-fold. First, it is the equivalent of a suit by the shareholders to compel the corporation to sue. Second, it is a suit by the corporation, asserted by the shareholders on its behalf, against those liable to it." *Aronson*, 473 A.2d at 811. Shareholders have standing to enforce claims on behalf of a solvent corporation through a derivative suit "because they are the ultimate beneficiaries of the corporation's growth and increased value." *Gheewalla*, 930 A.2d at 101. If a corporation becomes insolvent, however, its creditors become the appropriate parties to bring a derivative suit on behalf of the corporation where those in control of it refuse to assert a viable claim belonging to it because the creditors are the beneficiaries of any increase in value. *See id.* ("When a corporation is *insolvent*, however, its creditors take the place of the shareholders as the residual beneficiaries of any increase in value. . . . Consequently, the creditors of an insolvent corporation have standing to maintain derivative claims against directors on behalf of the corporation for breaches of fiduciary duties."). Whether brought by shareholders or creditors, "a derivative suit is being brought on behalf of the corporation, [so] the recovery, if any, must go to the corporation." *Tooley*, 845 A.2d at 1036.

Having reviewed Delaware's law on derivative suits, we now turn to consider the impact of a chapter 11 filing and plan confirmation on the standing of various parties to bring a suit on behalf of the debtor corporation and its bankruptcy estate. The filing of a chapter 11 petition creates an estate comprised of all the debtor's property, including "all legal or equitable interests of the debtor in property as of the commencement of the case." *** By definition then, a cause of action for breach of fiduciary duty owed to the corporation that is property of the corporation at commencement of the chapter 11 case becomes property of the debtor's estate, regardless of whether outside of bankruptcy the case was more likely to be brought by the corporation directly or by a shareholder or creditor through a derivative suit. ***

A chapter 11 plan of reorganization or liquidation then settles the estate's causes of action or retains those causes of action for enforcement by the debtor, the trustee, or a representative of the estate appointed for the purpose of enforcing the retained claims. *** To achieve the plan's goals, the retained assets of the estate may be transferred to a liquidating trust. ***

In this case, [the trustee] has standing to bring a suit on behalf of the Trust for the amended complaint's allegations that the Directors breached the fiduciary duties that they owed to Torch. When Torch filed its chapter 11 petition, all claims owned by it, including claims against the Directors for breach of fiduciary duties, became part of the estate. In turn, the Plan, as confirmed by the

> bankruptcy court, transferred all of the debtor estate's remaining assets to the Trust. As part of that transfer, the Plan and the court's order expressly preserved and transferred all D&O claims. *** [T]herefore, [the trustee] has standing to bring D&O claims on behalf of the Trust for injuries to Torch.[329]

In its discussion, the Fifth Circuit mentioned that the District Court may have incorrectly concluded that that the Trustee *would* have had standing to bring *derivative* claims on behalf of creditors and shareholders. However, the Fifth Circuit notes that this conclusion is wrong, as there was no assignment of claims to the Trust by the creditors or shareholders, and accordingly these derivative claims cannot be bought by the Trustee.

Moving past the issues of plaintiff's standing, the Fifth Circuit found plaintiff failed to allege a cause of action on behalf of Torch for breach of the Directors' fiduciary duties and explained:

> Under Delaware law, "[d]irectors owe their fiduciary obligations to the corporation and its shareholders." [citations omitted] "When the directors are not seeking shareholder action, but are deliberately misinforming shareholders about the business of the corporation, either directly or by a public statement, there is a violation of fiduciary duty." [citation omitted] The amended complaint alleges this type of breach. The elements of a claim for misrepresentation of a corporation's financial condition where no shareholder action is requested are: (1) deliberate misinformation either directly or through public statement; (2) reliance; (3) causation; and (4) actual, quantifiable damages [which required plaintiff] to prove that the directors 'knowingly disseminate[d] false information.' This level of proof is similar to, but even more stringent than, the level of scienter required for common law fraud." (alternation in original))[.] *** While we have some difficulty conceptualizing such a claim on behalf of a corporation, any such claim necessarily requires the pleading of damages and causation.
>
> The amended complaint fails to meet this burden. It alleges no actual, quantifiable damages suffered by Torch. It alleges only that the creditors and shareholders were misled and harmed. *** We conclude that the amended complaint thus fails to state a claim for breach of the fiduciary duties that the Directors owed to Torch. ***[330]

Rather than attempting a direct creditor action as was rejected in *Gheewalla*[331] or a derivative action on behalf of shareholders or creditors as was rejected in *Torch*,[332] in *Bridgeport Holdings Inc. Liquating Trust v. Boyer*[333] a liquidating trust brought a direct action against a Chapter 11 debtor's former officers and directors and an outside restructuring professional appointed to the position of chief operating officer ("*COO*") of debtor, asserting claims for

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329 *Id.* at 384-88.

330 *Id.* at 389-90. *See also U.S. Bank v. Stanley*, 297 S.W.3d 815 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2009) (diminution in value of notes held by creditors is not evidence of damages suffered by the corporation).

331 *See supra* notes 322-324 and related text.

332 *See supra* notes 325-326 and related text.

333 388 B.R. 548 (Bankr. D. Del. 2008).

breach of the fiduciary duties of care, good faith and loyalty in respect of a sale of substantially all of the debtor's assets to an unaffiliated party for an allegedly inadequate price. The liquidating trust was standing in the shoes of the debtor as assignee of all of the debtor's causes of action pursuant to a plan of distribution confirmed in accordance with the Bankruptcy Code.

One day prior to the filing of its petition, the debtor consummated the sale of a substantial portion of its assets to CDW Corporation ("*CDW*"), an unaffiliated buyer, for $28,000,000. A year later the trust commenced an adversary proceeding against CDW in the Bankruptcy Court seeking to avoid the sale transaction as a fraudulent transfer. After extensive discovery, the fraudulent transfer action was settled by CDW tendering to the trust a lump sum payment of $25,000,000, which was close to its initial purchase price of $28,000,000. The trust then filed suit against officers and directors of debtor and the COO alleging that the defendants breached their fiduciary duties to the company, the shareholders and its creditors for acts and omissions which culminated in the rushed "fire sale" of the assets to CDW.

The seeds of the company's demise were sown when in early 2000, at the height of the dot-com boom, the company was acquired by a group of investors in a leveraged buyout ("*LBO*") and became indebted to a syndicate of eighteen financial institutions. Approximately one year after the LBO, the technology sector suffered a significant downturn due to the bursting of the dot-com bubble and the lull in technology spending following "Y2K" upgrades. There was a further decrease in consumer demand following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This recession resulted in an erosion in debtor's sales. The recession, coupled with the company' debt load, resulted in a degradation of its financial outlook. Thereafter, it defaulted on one or more of its loan covenants and was forced to renegotiate its credit facility more than once.

These developments left the directors with recognized options to improve the financial performance of debtor, including (i) a new private equity investment, (ii) a business combination with a competitor, and (iii) a debt restructuring with an asset-based lender. The directors, however, failed to follow through with any of these recognized options to improve the company's financial condition, and the company's financial decline continued. Key vendors began to restrict debtor's lines of credit. As time passed, it became more difficult to obtain products to timely fill customer orders, and key salespeople began leaving to join competitors.

At the lenders' repeated urgings, the directors finally approved the retention of Alix Partners as restructuring advisor to the company. A discussion of the debtor's "strategic options" concluded that its "best option for moving forward" was "to execute upon a 'sell' strategy." The directors failed to commence a competitive bidding process at that time. Instead, the CEO called only upon his "long time acquaintance", the CEO of CDW, which led to a meeting to explore the possibility of transaction with CDW.

Although the financial condition of the debtor continued to worsen on a daily basis, the directors let nearly two weeks pass from the date they approved the concept of retaining Alix Partners to the date they actually did so. One of Alix Partners' restructuring professionals was appointed by the debtor's board of directors to the position of COO. Within 72 hours of commencing work at debtor, the COO had determined to sell the assets.

Instead of commencing a competitive bidding process for the assets, however, the COO immediately seized upon the CDW opportunity identified a few days before. The COO did not hire investment bankers to "shop" the deal; he did not conduct a thorough search for potential strategic buyers; and he did not even consider contacting potential financial buyers. Instead, the COO seized on the fact that debtor had already had a meeting with CDW, and quickly settled on CDW as the favored acquirer. Five days after the COO recommended an asset sale, CDW began its on-site due diligence. At the close of the following day, CDW made its first offer. Over the course of the ensuing Labor Day weekend, CDW and debtor negotiated only small changes in the terms of the offer, resulting in a "handshake deal" with business terms only somewhat improved over CDW's initial offer. In the week and a half between the COO recommending a sale of the assets and the "handshake deal" between debtor and CDW, neither the COO nor the directors made a serious effort to contact other potential purchases, although a few were made to other potential bidders. Other competitors of debtor were not contacted at all to see if they were interested in bidding on the assets.

The trust sued to recover damages for the directors' breaches of the fiduciary duties of loyalty, care and good faith that occurred allegedly as a result of the directors (a) failing to put the assets up for sale earlier, before a liquidity crisis ensued, (b) failing to hire a turnaround or restructuring advisor earlier, despite urgings from the lenders, (c) abdicating all responsibility to the COO, and then failing to supervise him, and (d) acquiescing in the COO's decision to sell the assets quickly, immediately before filing a Chapter 11 petition, rather than in a court-supervised auction under § 363 of the Bankruptcy Code. The trust alleged that all of these acts and omissions culminated in the hasty consummation of an asset sale to CDW for grossly inadequate consideration. The approval and closing of this transaction were alleged to constitute further breaches of the duty of loyalty and the duty of care by defendants, resulting in the debtor, its shareholders and its creditors suffering damages.

The trust further alleged that the COO breached his fiduciary duties of care and loyalty to the debtor, its shareholders, and its creditors when he acted with gross negligence and in bad faith by: (a) conducting a massively deficient sale process, failing to consider all material information that was reasonably available to him, and (b) selling the assets in a rushed and uninformed manner, resulting in the debtor's receiving grossly inadequate consideration for the assets.

The defendants moved to dismiss the duty of loyalty claims because there was no allegation that the defendants acted out of any self-interest or that they lacked independence regarding the assets sale and cited *Continuing Creditors' Committee of Star Telecommunications Inc. v. Edgecomb,*[334] as identifying the requirements for such a claim.

> To allege a breach of the duty of loyalty based on actions or omissions of the Board, the plaintiff must "plead facts demonstrating that a *majority* of a board that approved the transaction in dispute was interested and/or lacked independence." To show that a director was interested, it is usually necessary to

[334] 385 F. Supp. 2d 449, 460 (D. Del. 2004). *See supra* notes 52-108 and related text.

> show that the director was on both sides of a transaction or received a benefit not received by the shareholders.[335]

The defendants argued that the complaint contained no suggestion that the defendants acted in any way out of any self-interest or that they lacked independence regarding the assets sale. Nor did the complaint allege that the defendants received any unjust benefit-or any personal benefit at all-from the assets sale be dismissed.

In its opposition to the motion to dismiss, the trust argued that a claim for breach of loyalty may be premised upon the failure of a fiduciary to act in good faith, citing *Stone v. Ritter*:

> "Where directors fail to act in the face of a known duty to act, thereby demonstrating a conscious disregard for their responsibilities, they breach their duty of loyalty by failing to discharge that fiduciary obligation in good faith."[336]

In denying the motion to dismiss and applying Delaware law because debtor was a Delaware corporation, the Bankruptcy Court held the trust had alleged sufficient facts to support the claim that the defendants breached their duty of loyalty and acted in bad faith by consciously disregarding (i.e., abdicating) their duties to the debtor and by intentionally failing to act in the fact of a known duty to act, demonstrating a conscious disregard for their duties, by abdicating crucial decision-making authority to the COO, and then failing adequately to monitor his execution of a "sell strategy," resulting in an abbreviated and uniformed sale process and the sale to CDW for grossly inadequate consideration.

The Bankruptcy Court's holding on the good faith issue is of limited precedential value in view of the Delaware Supreme Court's March 25, 2009 decision in *Lyondell Chemical Company v. Ryan*,[337] where in holding that the sale of a company after only a week of negotiations with a single bidder and no auction or market check did not constitute director bad faith, the Delaware Supreme Court wrote that no "court can tell directors exactly how to accomplish [the *Revlon* goal to get the best price for the company], because they will be facing a unique combination of circumstances," and that bad faith exists only when the "directors utterly failed to attempt to obtain the best sale price."

The Bankruptcy Court further found that the company's DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision would not bar the trust's good faith and loyalty claims, as it would the trust's duty of care claim, against the directors. The company's DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision was no protection to the officers against the trust's duty of care claims against the officers, which the Bankruptcy Court found sufficiently pled to withstand the motion to dismiss.

While creditors of an insolvent corporation may not be able to assert direct claims for breach of fiduciary duty against directors, the government can sue both directors and officers if they cause the company to pay other creditors ahead of the government.[338] They may also be

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335 *Id.* at 460.

336 911 A.2d 362, 370 (Del. 2006).

337 970 A.2d 235 (Del. 2009). *See infra* notes 588-608 and related text.

338 31 U.S.C. § 3713 (2008) provides:

(a)(1) A claim of the United States Government shall be paid first when—

personally liable to the government for amounts withheld from employees' salaries for taxes and not paid to the government.[339]

D. Business Judgment Rule/DGCL § 102(b)(7) During Insolvency.

The business judgment rule is applicable to actions of directors even while the corporation is insolvent or on the penumbra thereof in circumstances where it would otherwise have been applicable.[340] Courts have found the business judgment rule inapplicable where the party challenging the decision can show that the director or officer failed to consider the best interests of the insolvent corporation or its creditors or breached the duty of loyalty.[341]

Where directors of an insolvent corporation are interested, their conduct will likewise be judged by the standards that would have otherwise been applicable.[342] A director's stock ownership may call into question a director's independence where the creditors are the

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(A) a person indebted to the Government is insolvent and—

(i) the debtor without enough property to pay all debts makes a voluntary assignment of property;

(ii) property of the debtor, if absent, is attached; or

(iii) an act of bankruptcy is committed; or

(B) the estate of a deceased debtor, in the custody of the executor or administrator, is not enough to pay all debts of the debtor.

(2) This subsection does not apply to a case under title 11.

(b) A representative of a person or an estate (except a trustee acting under title 11) paying any part of a debt of the person or estate before paying a claim of the Government is liable to the extent of the payment for unpaid claims of the Government.

See Michael J. Gomez, *True Zone of Insolvency Liability for Directors, Officers and Controlling Shareholders*, ABI Journal 30 (Dec./Jan. 2009).

339 26 U.S.C. 6672 (2008); *see Swinger v. United States*, 652 F. Supp. 464 (1987).

340 *North American Catholic Educational Programming Foundation Inc. v. Gheewalla*, 930 A2d 92 (Del. 2007); *Production Resources Group, L.L.C. v. NCT Group, Inc.*, 863 A.2d 772 (Del. Ch. 2004); *Angelo, Gordon & Co., L.P. v. Allied Riser Commc'ns Corp.*, 805 A.2d at 228; *Floyd v. Hefner*, C.A. No. H-03-5693, 2006 WL 2844245 (S.D. Tex. 2006); *Fleet Nat. Bank v. Boyle*, 2005 WL 2455673 (E.D. Pa. 2005); *In re Hechinger Inv. Co. of Del.*, 327 B.R. 537 (D. Del. 2005); *Growe v. Bedard*, 2004 WL 2677216 (D. Me. 2004); *Roselink Investors, L.L.C. v. Shenkman*, 386 F.Supp.2d 209 (S.D.N.Y. 2004); *Official Committee of Bond Holders of Metricom, Inc. v. Derrickson*, 2004 WL 2151336 (N.D. Cal. 2004); *In re Verestar, Inc.*, 343 B.R. 444 (Bankr. S.D.N.Y. 2006); *but see Weaver v. Kellog*, 216 B.R. 563 (S.D. Tex. 1997); *Askanase v. Fatjo*, No. H-91-3140, 1993 WL 208440 (S.D. Tex. April 22, 1993), *aff'd* 130 F.3d 657 (5th Cir. 1997); *Kahn v. Lynch Communications Systems, Inc.*, 638 A.2d 1110, 1115 (Del. 1994).

341 *RSL Commc'ns PLC ex rel. Jervis v. Bildirici*, 2006 WL 2689869 (S.D.N.Y. 2006) (directors who served on board of parent and subsidiary breached duty by failing to take into consideration interests of creditors of subsidiary); *Greater Southwest Community Hospital Corp. I v. Tuft*, 353 B.R. 324 (Bankr. D. Col. 2006) (business judgment rule inapplicable where (1) the defendants benefited from the incurrence of debt because they received personal benefits, including bonuses and repayment of loans, (2) the defendant authorized the incurrence of debt in order to generate work for an affiliated law firm, and (3) the defendant served as a director for the lender that made the allegedly wrongful loans); *In re Enivid, Inc.*, 345 B.R. 426 (Bankr. D. Mass. 2006) (complaint held to state claims for breach of the duty of loyalty under Delaware law where it contained allegations that (i) the CEO's principal motivation in the performance of his duties was his desire to maintain his position and office as the Company's chief executive officer and committed to a business strategy that was not in the best interests of the corporation, and (ii) the other officers were dominated by or beholden to the CEO, even though there was no allegation that the defendants were interested in or personally benefited from the transactions at issue); *In re Dehon, Inc.*, 334 B.R. 55 (Bank. D. Mass. 2005) (directors authorized the payment of dividends when they knew the corporation was insolvent or in the vicinity of insolvency); *Roth v. Mims*, 298 B.R. 272 (N.D. Tex. 2003) (officer not disinterested in sale transaction because he had negotiated employment agreement with purchaser prior to consummation and failed to disclose negotiations with board).

342 *RSL Commc'ns*, 2006 WL 2689869; *Greater Southwest Community Hospital*, 353 B.R. 324; *In re Enivid*, 345 B.R. 426; *In re Dehon*, 334 B.R. 55; *Roth*, 298 B.R. 272.

beneficiaries of the director's fiduciary duties, for the stock ownership would tend to ally the director with the interests of the shareholders rather than the creditors, but relatively insubstantial amounts of stock ownership should not impugn director independence.[343]

In *Pereira v. Cogan*,[344] a Chapter 7 trustee bought an adversary proceeding against Marshall Cogan, the former CEO of a closely held Delaware corporation of which he was the founder and majority stockholder, and the corporation's other officers and directors for their alleged self-dealing or breach of fiduciary duty.[345] The U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York ("SDNY") held *inter alia*, that (1) ratification by board of directors that was not independent[346] of compensation that the CEO had previously set for himself, without adequate information-gathering, was insufficient to shift from CEO the burden of demonstrating entire fairness of transaction; (2) corporate officers with knowledge of debtor's improper redemption of preferred stock from an unaffiliated stockholder and unapproved loans to the CEO and related persons could be held liable on breach of fiduciary duty theory for failing to take

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343 *In re IT Group Inc.*, Civ. A. 04-1268-KAJ, 2005 WL 3050611 (D. Del. 2005) (plaintiff sufficiently alleged breach of loyalty based upon allegation that directors were "beholden" to shareholders that received transfers in the vicinity of insolvency); *Healthco Int'l, Inc. v. Hicks, Muse & Co. (In re Healthco Int'l Inc.)*, 195 B.R. 971 (Bankr. D. Mass. 1966) (refusing to dismiss breach of fiduciary duty claims against director of the corporation arising from failed leverage buyout because director was also controlling shareholder who benefited from leveraged buyout); *cf. Angelo, Gordon & Co., L.P. v. Allied Riser Commc'ns Corp.*, 805 A.2d 221 (Del. Ch. 2002).

344 294 B.R. 449 (S.D.N.Y. 2003).

345 The Court noted the following:

> Once Cogan created the cookie jar—and obtained outside support for it—he could not without impunity take from it.
>
> The second and more difficult question posed by this lawsuit is what role the officers and directors should play when confronted by, or at least peripherally aware of, the possibility that a controlling shareholder (who also happens to be their boss) is acting in his own best interests instead of those of the corporation. Given the lack of public accountability present in a closely held private corporation, it is arguable that such officers and directors owe a greater duty to the corporation and its shareholders to keep a sharp eye on the controlling shareholder. At the very least, they must uphold the same standard of care as required of officers and directors of public companies or private companies that are not so dominated by a founder/controlling shareholder. They cannot turn a blind eye when the controlling shareholder goes awry, nor can they simply assume that all's right with the corporation without any exercise of diligence to ensure that that is the case.
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> As discussed later, it is found as a matter of fact that Trace was insolvent or in the vicinity of insolvency during most of the period from 1995 to 1999, when Trace finally filed for bankruptcy. Trace's insolvency means that Cogan and the other director and officer defendants were no longer just liable to Trace and its shareholders, but also to Trace's creditors. In addition, the insolvency rendered certain transactions illegal, such as a redemption and the declaring of dividends. It may therefore be further concluded that, in determining the breadth of duties in the situation as described above, officers and directors must at the very least be sure that the actions of the controlling shareholder (and their inattention thereto) do not run the privately held corporation into the ground.

Pereira v. Cogan, 294 B.R. at 463.

346 The Court also commented:

> Cogan also failed in his burden to demonstrate that the Committee or the Board was "independent" in connection with the purported ratification of his compensation. Sherman, the only member of the Board not on Trace's payroll, was a long-time business associate and personal friend of Cogan, with whom he had other overlapping business interests. Nelson, the only other member of the Committee, was Trace's CFO and was dependent on Cogan both for his employment and the amount of his compensation, as were Farace and Marcus, the other Board members who approved the Committee's ratification of Cogan's compensation. There is no evidence that any member of the Committee or the Board negotiated with Cogan over the amount of his compensation, much less did so at arm's length.

Id. at 478.

appropriate action; (3) directors, by abstaining from voting on challenged corporate expenditures, could not insulate themselves from liability; (4) directors did not satisfy their burden of demonstrating "entire fairness" of transactions, and were liable for any resulting damages; (5) report prepared by corporation's compensation committee on performance/salary of CEO, which was prepared without advice of outside consultants and consisted of series of conclusory statements concerning the value of services rendered by the CEO in obtaining financing for the corporation was little more than an *ipse dixit*, on which corporate officers could not rely;[347] (6) term "redeem," as used in DGCL § 160, providing that no corporation shall redeem its shares when the capital of the corporation is impaired, was broad enough to include transaction whereby corporation loaned money to another entity to purchase its shares, the other entity used money to purchase shares, and the corporation then accepted shares as collateral for loan; (7) officers and directors could not assert individual-based offsets as defenses to breach of fiduciary duty claims; (8) the exculpatory clause in the corporation's certificate of incorporation which shields directors from liability to the corporation for breach of the duty of care, as authorized by DGCL § 102(b)(7), was inapplicable because the trustee had brought the action for the benefit of the creditors rather than the corporation; and (9) the business judgment rule was not applicable because a majority of the challenged transactions were not the subject of board action. The SDNY concluded that the trustee's fiduciary duty and DGCL claims were in the nature of equitable restitution, rather than legal damages, and denied defendants' request for a jury trial. The CEO was found liable for $44.4 million and then settled with the trustee. The remaining defendants appealed to the Second Circuit.

On appeal the defendants raised a "sandstorm" of claims and ultimately prevailed. The Second Circuit held in *Pereira v. Farace*[348] that the defendants were entitled to a jury trial because the trustee's claims were principally a legal action for damages, rather than an equitable claim for restitution or unjust enrichment, because the appealing defendants never possessed the funds at issue (the CEO who had received the funds had previously settled with the trustee and

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347 The Court further noted:

> With regard to the ratification of Cogan's compensation from 1988 to 1994, there is no evidence that the Board met to discuss the ratification or that the Board actually knew what level of compensation they were ratifying. While Nelson delivered a report on Cogan's 1991-1994 compensation approximately two years prior to the ratification, on June 24, 1994, there is no evidence that the directors who ratified the compensation remembered that colloquy, nor that they relied on their two-year-old memories of it in deciding to ratify Cogan's compensation. The mere fact that Cogan had successfully spearheaded extremely lucrative deals for Trace in the relevant years and up to the ratification vote is insufficient to justify a blind vote in favor of compensation that may or may not be commensurate with those given to similarly situated executives. Any blind vote is suspect in any case given the fact that Cogan dominated the Board.
>
> The most that the Board did, or even could do, based on the evidence presented, was to rely on the recommendation of the Compensation Committee. They have not established reasonable reliance on the advice of the Compensation Committee, then composed of Nelson and Sherman (two of the four non-interested Board members who ratified the compensation). The Compensation Committee had never met. It did not seek the advice of outside consultants. The "report" to the Board consisted of several conclusory statements regarding Cogan's performance, without reference to any attachments listing how much the compensation was or any schedule pitting that level of compensation against that received by executives the Compensation Committee believed to be similarly situated. The "report" was little more than an *ipse dixit* and it should have been treated accordingly by the Board. As a result, the director-defendants cannot elude liability on the basis of reliance on the Compensation Committee's report.

Id. at 528.

348 413 F.3d 330 (2d Cir. 2005).

was not a party to the appeal). In remanding the case for a jury trial, the Second Circuit also held (i) that the bankruptcy trustee stood in the shoes of the insolvent corporation and as such was bound by the exculpatory provision in the corporation's certificate of incorporation pursuant to DGCL § 102(b)(7) which precluded shareholder claims based on mismanagement (i.e., the duty of care)[349] and (ii) that the SDNY did not properly apply the Delaware definition of insolvency when it used a cash flow test of insolvency which projected into the future whether the corporation's capital will remain adequate over a period of time rather than the Delaware test which looks solely at whether the corporation has been paying its bills on a timely basis and/or whether its assets exceed its liabilities.

When the conduct of the directors is being challenged by the creditors on fiduciary duty of loyalty grounds, the directors do not have the benefit of the statutes limiting director liability in duty of care cases.[350]

E. Deepening Insolvency.

Deepening insolvency as a legal theory can be traced to dicta in a 1983 Seventh Circuit opinion that "the corporate body is ineluctably damaged by the deepening of its insolvency," which results from the "fraudulent prolongation of a corporation's life beyond insolvency."[351] While bankruptcy and other federal courts are frequently the forum in which deepening insolvency claims are litigated, the cause of action or theory of damages (if recognized) would be a matter of state law.[352] In recent years some federal courts embraced deepening insolvency claims and predicted that Delaware would recognize such a cause of action.[353] In *Trenwick America Litigation Trust v. Ernst & Young LLP*,[354] the Delaware Court of Chancery in 2006 for the first time addressed a cause of action for deepening insolvency and, confounding the speculation of the federal courts, held that "put simply, under Delaware law, 'deepening insolvency' is no more of a cause of action when a firm is insolvent than a cause of action for

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349 Other cases have held that director exculpation charter provisions adopted under DGCL § 102(b)(7) protect directors from duty of care claims brought by creditors who were accorded standing to pursue fiduciary duty claims against directors because the company was insolvent. *Production Resources Group, L.L.C. v. NCT Group, Inc.*, 863 A.2d 772, 792 (Del. Ch. 2004) ("[T]he fact of insolvency does not change the primary object of the director's duties, which is the firm itself. The firm's insolvency simply makes the creditors the principal constituency injured by any fiduciary breaches that diminish the firm's value and logically gives them standing to pursue these claims to rectify that injury."); *Continuing Creditors' Comm. of Star Telecomms. Inc. v. Edgecomb*, 385 F. Supp. 2d 449, 463 (D. Del. 2004); *In re Verestar, Inc.*, 343 B.R. 444 (Bankr. S.D.N.Y. 2006); *In re Greater Southeast Community Hospital Corp.*, 333 B.R. 506 (Bankr. D. Colo. 2005).

350 *Geyer v. Ingersoll Pub. Co.*, 621 A. 2d 784, 789 (Del.Ch. 1992).

351 *Schacht v. Brown*, 711 F.2d 1343, 1350 (7th Cir 1983); *see* Sabin Willett, *The Shallows of Deepening Insolvency*, 60 Bus. Law 549, 550 (Feb. 2005).

352 *In re CITX Corp. Inc.*, 448 F.3d 672 (3d Cir. 2006) (holding, where a Bankruptcy Trustee sued the debtor's accountant for malpractice that deepened the debtor's insolvency, breach of fiduciary duty and negligent misrepresentation, that only fraudulent conduct would suffice to support a deepening insolvency claim (with fraud requiring proof of "a representation of material fact, falsity, scienter, reliance and injury") and declining to allow a claim alleging that negligent conduct caused a deepening insolvency; the Third Circuit also held that deepening insolvency was not a valid theory of damages supporting a professional malpractice claim against the accounting firm).

353 *Official Comm. of Unsecured Creditors v. R.F. Lafferty Co., Inc.*, 267 F.3d 340, 351 (3d Cir. 2001) (applying Pennsylvania law); *In re Exide v. Credit Suisse First Boston*, 299 B.R. 732 (Bankr. D. Del. 2003); *In re Scott Acquisition Corp.*, 344 B.R. 283 (Bankr. D. Del.); *Stanziale v. Pepper Hamilton, LLP, (In re Student Fin. Corp.)*, 355 B.R. 539, 548 (D. Del. 2005).

354 906 A.2d 168 (Del. Ch. 2006).

'shallowing profitability' would be when a firm is solvent."[355] This holding, which was affirmed by the Delaware Supreme Court on August 4, 2007, "on the basis of and for the reasons assigned by the Court of Chancery in its opinion,"[356] arose in the aftermath of two flawed public company acquisitions which were blamed for the company's troubles. In granting a motion to dismiss a claim for deepening insolvency, Vice Chancellor Strine explained his reasoning as follows:

> In the complaint, the [plaintiff] also has attempted to state a claim against the former subsidiary directors for "deepening insolvency." * * * Delaware law does not recognize this catchy term as a cause of action, because catchy though the term may be, it does not express a coherent concept. Even when a firm is insolvent, its directors may, in the appropriate exercise of their business judgment, take action that might, if it does not pan out, result in the firm being painted in a deeper hue of red. The fact that the residual claimants of the firm at that time are creditors does not mean that the directors cannot choose to continue the firm's operations in the hope that they can expand the inadequate pie such that the firm's creditors get a greater recovery. By doing so, the directors do not become a guarantor of success. Put simply, under Delaware law, "deepening insolvency" is no more of a cause of action when a firm is insolvent than a cause of action for "shallowing profitability" would be when a firm is solvent. Existing equitable causes of action for breach of fiduciary duty, and existing legal causes of action for fraud, fraudulent conveyance, and breach of contract are the appropriate means by which to challenge the actions of boards of insolvent corporations.
>
> Refusal to embrace deepening insolvency as a cause of action is required by settled principles of Delaware law. So, too, is a refusal to extend to creditors a solicitude not given to equityholders. Creditors are better placed than equityholders and other corporate constituencies (think employees) to protect themselves against the risk of firm failure.
>
> The incantation of the word insolvency, or even more amorphously, the words zone of insolvency should not declare open season on corporate fiduciaries. Directors are expected to seek profit for stockholders, even at risk of failure. With the prospect of profit often comes the potential for defeat.
>
> The general rule embraced by Delaware is the sound one. So long as directors are respectful of the corporation's obligation to honor the legal rights of its creditors, they should be free to pursue in good faith profit for the corporation's equityholders. Even when the firm is insolvent, directors are free to pursue value maximizing strategies, while recognizing that the firm's creditors have become its residual claimants and the advancement of their best interests has become the firm's principal objective.[357]

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355 *Id.* at 174.

356 *Trenwick American Litig. Trust v. Billett*, 931 A.2d 438 (Del. 2007).

357 906 A.2d at 174-175.

The strength of the *Trenwick* holding is diluted by the Vice Chancellor's finding that "the complaint fails to plead facts supporting an inference that the subsidiary was insolvent before or immediately after the challenged transactions."[358]

Also elucidating was the Vice Chancellor's statement of the fiduciary duties of the directors of a wholly owned subsidiary:

> Likewise, the complaint fails to plead facts suggesting that the subsidiary directors were less than diligent or misunderstood their roles. A wholly-owned subsidiary is to be operated for the benefit of its parent. A subsidiary board is entitled to support a parent's business strategy unless it believes pursuit of that strategy will cause the subsidiary to violate its legal obligations. Nor does a subsidiary board have to replicate the deliberative process of its parent's board when taking action in aid of its parent's acquisition strategies.[359]

The plaintiff's complaints in *Trenwick* against the failed insurance company's accountants, actuaries and lawyers for aiding and abetting a fiduciary duty breach and for malpractice were also summarily dismissed:

> At bottom, the complaint simply alleges that big-dog advisors were on the scene when Trenwick acquired Chartwell and LaSalle, that Trenwick ultimately failed, and that in the post-Enron era, big-dog advisors should pay when things go wrong with their clients, even when a plaintiff cannot articulate what it is that the advisors did that was intentionally wrongful or even negligent.
>
> Each of the defendant advisors has moved to dismiss the complaint against it on various grounds. I grant those motions for reasons that will be stated tersely.
>
> First, because the complaint fails to state a claim for breach of fiduciary duty against the Trenwick [the parent] or Trenwick America [a wholly owned subsidiary that held principally U.S. based insurance subsidiaries] directors, the claims that the defendant advisors aided and abetted any underlying breach of fiduciary duty fails. As important, a claim for aiding and abetting involves the element that the aider and abettor have "knowingly participated" in the underlying breach of fiduciary duty. The complaint is devoid of facts suggesting that any of the defendant advisors had any reason to believe they were assisting in a breach of fiduciary duty against Trenwick America, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Trenwick, by acting in the capacities they did for Trenwick, in particular in connection with non-self dealing mergers involving Trenwick's acquisition of other public companies.
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> Second, for identical reasons, the count in the complaint purporting to state a claim for "conspiracy to breach fiduciary duties" is equally defective.
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358 *Id.* at 174.

359 *Id.*

> Next, the malpractice claims fail to plead facts supporting an inference that the defendant advisors breached the standard of professional care owed by them. For example, as to defendant Milliman, an actuarial firm, the complaint simply states that Milliman's estimate that Chartwell's reserves at the time of its acquisition would be sufficient, when supplemented with $100 million in additional coverage, was wrong. The inflammatory allegations that Milliman must have known they were wrong or manipulated its certification are entirely conclusory and are not accompanied by factual context giving rise to the odor of purposeful wrongdoing or professional slack. Notably, the Litigation Trust has not pled that Milliman warranted that if its estimates were wrong, it would be strictly liable. Indeed, to the contrary, the public documents the complaint draws upon contain heavy caveats regarding these estimates. In addition, as the Second Circuit recognized, regardless of the actuarial method used, calculations of net worth for casualty risk reinsurers are not as firmly determinable as other financial line items.[360]

While it established (at least in Delaware) that deepening insolvency is not a cause of action, *Trenwick* expressly left the door open for claims based on existing causes of action such as breach of fiduciary duty, fraud, fraudulent conveyance and breach of contract. Creditors looking for other pockets to satisfy their claims have attempted to plead their claims relating to actions by directors, officers and professionals that, while attempting to save the business, only prolonged its agony and delayed its demise to fit the opening left by *Trenwick*. These attempts have met with mixed results. In *Radnor Holdings*, a Bankruptcy Court in Delaware dismissed claims that directors had breached their fiduciary duties to the company by authorizing it to borrow to "swing for the fences" in an aggressive new venture as no more than a "disguised" deepening insolvency claim.[361] Then in *Brown Schools*, another Bankruptcy Court in Delaware dismissed a cause of action for deepening insolvency based on *Trenwick*, but declined to dismiss duty of loyalty claims for self-dealing against a controlling stockholder/creditor and its representatives in causing the company to take actions intended to elevate their claims as creditors.[362]

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360 *Id.* at 215-16 (citing *Delta Holdings, Inc. v. Nat'l Distillers & Chem. Corp.*, 945 F.2d 1226, 1231 (2d Cir. 1991)).

361 *Official Comm. of Unsecured Creditors of Radnor Holdings Corp. v. Tennenbaum Capital Partners LLC (In re Radnor Holdings Corp.)*, 353 B.R. 820 (Bankr. D. Del. 2006).

362 *Miller v. McCown De Leeuw & Co. (In re Brown Schools)*, 386 B.R. 37 (Bankr. D. Del. Apr. 24, 2008). In distinguishing *Radnor*, the Bankruptcy Court wrote in *Brown Schools*:

> The *Radnor* Court noted that the plaintiff's complaint against the board only alleged duty of care violations, not duty of loyalty breaches as alleged in this case. *Radnor*, 353 B.R. at 842. Under Delaware law, a plaintiff asserting a duty of care violation must prove the defendant's conduct was grossly negligent in order to overcome the deferential business judgment rule. * * * Duty of care violations more closely resemble causes of action for deepening insolvency because the alleged injury in both is the result of the board of directors' poor business decision. To defeat such an action, a defendant need only prove that the process of reaching the final decision was not the result of gross negligence. Therefore, claims alleging a duty of care violation could be viewed as a deepening insolvency claim by another name.
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> For breach of the duty of loyalty claims, on the other hand, the plaintiff need only prove that the defendant was on both sides of the transaction. *Weinberger v. UOP, Inc.*, 457 A.2d 701, 710 (Del. 1983) ("When directors of a Delaware corporation are on both sides of a transaction, they are required to demonstrate their utmost good faith and the most scrupulous inherent fairness of the bargain."). The burden then shifts to the defendant to prove that the transaction was entirely fair. *Id.* This burden is

F. Conflicts of Interest.

Conflicts of interest are usually present in closely held corporations where the shareholders are also directors and officers. While the Texas Corporate Statues and the DGCL allow transactions with interested parties after disclosure and disinterested director or shareholder approval,[363] the conflict of interest rules may change in an insolvency situation.[364]

A developing issue involves the application of the conflict of interest rules to parties that are related to the director or officer. While the courts are not uniform in their definition, the conflict of interest rules usually extend to family members.

G. Fraudulent Transfers.

Both state and federal law prohibit fraudulent transfers.[365] All require insolvency at the time of the transaction. The Texas and Delaware fraudulent transfer statutes are identical to the Uniform Fraudulent Transfer Act, except Delaware adds the following provision: "Unless displaced by the provisions of this chapter, the principles of law and equity, including the law merchant and the law relating to principal and agent, estoppel, laches, fraud, misrepresentation, duress, coercion, mistake, insolvency or other validating or invalidating cause, supplement its provisions."[366]

The applicable statute of limitation varies with the circumstances and the applicable law. Generally, the statute of limitations for state laws may extend to four years, while bankruptcy law dictates a one year limitation starting with the petition filing date.

IV. Executive Compensation Process.

A. Fiduciary Duties.

Decisions regarding the compensation of management are among the most important and controversial decisions that a Board can make.[367] The shareholders and management both want management to be compensated sufficiently so they feel amply rewarded for their efforts in

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> greater than meeting the business judgment rule inherent in duty of care cases. Further, duty of loyalty breaches are not indemnifiable under the Delaware law. 8 Del. C. § 102(b)(7).
>
> Therefore, the Court concludes that the Trustee's claims for breach of the fiduciary duty of loyalty in the form of self-dealing are not deepening insolvency claims in disguise. Consequently, the *Trenwick* and *Radnor* decisions are not controlling.

Id. at 46-47. The Court in *Brown Schools* also allowed (i) deepening insolvency to stand as a measure of damages for duty of loyalty claims, but not duty of care claims; (ii) claims against the controlling stockholder for fraudulent transfers in respect of fees allegedly collected for which the debtor received no benefit, but not claims against directors and company counsel serving the debtor at the stockholder's behest for aiding and abetting the fraudulent transfers; and (iii) against the directors and counsel for aiding and abetting the alleged self-dealing.

363 *See supra* notes 284-292 and related text (discussing TBOC § 21.418 and TBCA art. 2.35-1).

364 *See Kahn v. Lynch Commc'ns Sys., Inc.*, 638 A.2d 1110, 1115 (Del. 1994).

365 TEX. BUS. COM. CODE 24; DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 6, § 1301 et seq.; 11 U.S.C. § 548; *see* Byron F. Egan, *Special Issues in Asset Acquisitions*, ABA 13th Annual Nat'l Inst. on Negotiating Bus. Acquisitions, Nov. 6, 2008, at 123-25, http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1043.

366 DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 6, § 1310.

367 *See* Bruce F. Dravis, *The Role of Independent Directors after Sarbanes-Oxley* 79 (ABA Bus. Sec. 2007).

making the entity a profitable investment for the shareholders, are motivated to work hard for the success of the entity, and are able to attract and retain other talented executives. Executives are naturally concerned that they be fully rewarded and provided significant incentives. The shareholders, however, are also mindful that amounts paid to management reduce the profits available for the shareholders, want pay to be linked to performance, and may challenge compensation that they deem excessive in the media, in elections of directors and in the courts.

As the situation is fraught with potential conflicts, Boards often delegate the power and responsibility for setting executive compensation to a committee of directors (a "*compensation committee*"), typically composed of independent directors.[368] The objective is to follow a process that will resolve the inherent conflicts of interest,[369] comply with the requirements of SOX and other applicable laws,[370] and satisfy the fiduciary duties of all involved.

The fiduciary duties discussed elsewhere herein, including the duties of care, loyalty and disclosure, are all applicable when directors consider executive compensation matters.[371] As in other contexts, process and disinterested judgment are critical.

B. Specific Cases.

1. Walt Disney.

In respect of directors' fiduciary duties in approving executive compensation, the Delaware Supreme Court's opinion dated June 8, 2006, in *In re The Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litigation*,[372] which resulted from the failed marriage between Disney and its former President Michael Ovitz, and the Chancery Court decisions which preceded it are instructive. The Delaware Supreme Court affirmed the Delaware Court of Chancery's determination after a thirty-seven day trial[373] that Disney's directors had not breached their fiduciary duties in

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368 *See id.* at 79-82; *see also supra* notes 265-272 and related text.

369 In *Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. v. Coughlin*, Wal-Mart was able to set aside a very expensive settlement and release agreement with a former executive vice president and director after a whistleblower induced internal investigation found he had effectively misappropriated hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash and property. 255 S.W.3d 424 (Ark. 2007). The Arkansas Supreme Court held that the settlement and release was unambiguous and by its terms would have released the claims (the agreement provided that all claims "of any nature whatsoever, whether known or unknown," were released). *Id.* at 428. In a case of first impression in Arkansas, the Arkansas Supreme Court held that the settlement was voidable because, in not disclosing to the corporation that he had been misappropriating corporate assets for his personal benefit prior to entering into the release, the former director/officer (1) breached his fiduciary duty of good faith and loyalty to Wal-Mart and (2) fraudulently induced Wal-Mart to enter into the release. After surveying the law from other jurisdictions, the Court wrote:

> We are persuaded . . . that the majority view is correct, which is that the failure of a fiduciary to disclose material facts of his fraudulent conduct to his corporation prior to entering into a self-dealing contract with that corporation will void that contract and that material facts are those facts that could cause a party to act differently had the party known of those facts. We emphasize, however, that this duty of a fiduciary to disclose is embraced within the obligation of a fiduciary to act towards his corporation in good faith, which has long been the law in Arkansas. Stated differently, we are not adopting a new principle of fiduciary law by our holding today but simply giving voice to an obvious element of the fiduciary's duty of good faith.

Id. at 430-31.

370 *See supra* notes 238-271 and related text, and *infra* notes 372-446 and related text.

371 *See supra* notes 24-144, 248-272 and related text.

372 906 A.2d 27 (Del. 2006).

373 *In re Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litig.*, 907 A.2d 693, 697 (Del. Ch. 2005).

connection with the hiring or termination of Michael Ovitz as President of The Walt Disney Company. In so ruling, the Delaware Supreme Court clarified the parameters of the obligation of corporate fiduciaries to act in good faith and offered helpful guidance about the types of conduct that constitute "bad faith." This *Disney* litigation also emphasizes the importance of corporate minutes and their contents in a court's determination whether directors have satisfied their fiduciary duties.[374]

a. Facts.

The facts surrounding the *Disney* saga involved a derivative suit against Disney's directors and officers for damages allegedly arising out of the 1995 hiring and the 1996 firing of Michael Ovitz. The termination resulted in a non-fault termination payment to Ovitz under the terms of his employment agreement valued at roughly $140 million (including the value of stock options). The shareholder plaintiffs alleged that the Disney directors had breached their fiduciary duties both in approving Ovitz's employment agreement and in later allowing the payment of the non-fault termination benefits.

b. May 28, 2003 Chancery Court Opinion.

In a May 28, 2003 opinion,[375] the Chancery Court denied the defendants' motions to dismiss an amended complaint alleging that Disney directors breached their fiduciary duties when they approved a lucrative pay package, including a $40 million no-fault termination award and stock options, to Ovitz. "It is rare when a court imposes liability on directors of a corporation for breach of the duty of care," Chancellor Chandler said.[376] However, the allegations in the new complaint "do not implicate merely negligent or grossly negligent decision making by corporate directors. Quite the contrary; plaintiffs' new complaint suggests that the Disney directors failed to exercise any business judgment and failed to make any good faith attempt to fulfill their fiduciary duties to Disney and its stockholders."[377]

c. September 10, 2004 Chancery Court Opinion (Ovitz' Fiduciary Duties Regarding His Employment Agreement).

On September 10, 2004, the Chancery Court ruled on defendant Ovitz' motion for summary judgment as follows: (i) as to claims based on Ovitz entering into his employment agreement with Disney, the Court granted summary judgment for Ovitz confirming that "before becoming a fiduciary, Ovitz had the right to seek the best employment agreement possible for himself,'" and endorsing a bright line rule that "officers and directors become fiduciaries only when they are officially installed, and receive the formal investiture of authority that accompanies such office or directorship . . ."; and (ii) as to claims based on actions after he became an officer, (a) "'an officer may negotiate his or her own employment agreement as long as the process involves negotiations performed in an adversarial and arms-length manner'"; (b) "Ovitz made the decision that a faithful fiduciary would make by abstaining from attendance at a

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374 Cullen M. "Mike" Godfrey, *In re The Walt Disney Company Derivative Litigation – A New Standard for Corporate Minutes*, BUS. L. TODAY, Vol. 17, No. 6 (July/Aug. 2008).

375 *In re Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litig.*, 825 A.2d 275 (Del. Ch. 2003).

376 *Id.* at 278.

377 *Id.*

[Compensation Committee] meeting [of which he was an ex officio member] where a substantial part of his own compensation was to be discussed and decided upon"; (c) Ovitz did not breach any fiduciary duties by executing and performing his employment agreement after he became an officer since no material change was made in it from the form negotiated and approved prior to his becoming an officer; (d) in negotiating his no fault termination, his conduct should be measured under DGCL § 144 [interested transactions not void if approved by disinterested board or shareholders after full disclosure]; but (e) since his termination involved some negotiation for additional benefits, there was a fact question as to whether he improperly colluded with other side of table in the negotiations and "whether a majority of any group of disinterested directors ever authorized the payment of Ovitz severance payments . . . . Absent a demonstration that the transaction was fair to Disney, the transaction may be voidable at the discretion of the company."[378]

d. August 9, 2005 Chancery Court Post Trial Opinion.

On August 9, 2005, the Chancery Court rendered an opinion after a thirty-seven day trial on the merits in this Disney case in which he concluded that the defendant directors did not breach their fiduciary duties or commit waste in connection with the hiring and termination of Michael Ovitz. The opinion commented that the Court was charged with the task of determining whether directors have breached their fiduciary duties, and not whether directors have acted in accordance with the best practices of ideal corporate governance, and distinguished between the role of the Court to provide a remedy for breaches of fiduciary duty and the role of the market to provide a remedy for bad business decisions, the Court reasoned as follows:

> [T]here are many aspects of defendants' conduct that fell significantly short of the best practices of ideal corporate governance. Recognizing the protean nature of ideal corporate governance practices, particularly over an era that has included the Enron and WorldCom debacles, and the resulting legislative focus on corporate governance, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the actions (and the failures to act) of the Disney board that gave rise to this lawsuit took place ten years ago, and that applying 21st century notions of best practices in analyzing whether those decisions were actionable would be misplaced.
>
> Unlike ideals of corporate governance, a fiduciary's duties do not change over time. How we understand those duties may evolve and become refined, but the duties themselves have not changed, except to the extent that fulfilling a fiduciary duty requires obedience to other positive law. This Court strongly encourages directors and officers to employ best practices, as those practices are understood at the time a corporate decision is taken. But Delaware law does not—indeed, the common law cannot—hold fiduciaries liable for a failure to comply with the aspirational ideal of best practices, any more than a common-law court deciding a medical malpractice dispute can impose a standard of liability based on ideal—rather than competent or standard—medical treatment practices, lest the average medical practitioner be found inevitably derelict.

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[378] C.A. No. 15452, 2004 WL 2050138 (Del. Ch. Sept. 10, 2004).

Fiduciaries are held by the common law to a high standard in fulfilling their stewardship over the assets of others, a standard that (depending on the circumstances) may not be the same as that contemplated by ideal corporate governance. Yet therein lies perhaps the greatest strength of Delaware's corporation law. Fiduciaries who act faithfully and honestly on behalf of those whose interests they represent are indeed granted wide latitude in their efforts to maximize shareholders' investment. Times may change, but fiduciary duties do not. Indeed, other institutions may develop, pronounce and urge adherence to ideals of corporate best practices. But the development of aspirational ideals, however worthy as goals for human behavior, should not work to distort the legal requirements by which human behavior is actually measured. Nor should the common law of fiduciary duties become a prisoner of narrow definitions or formulaic expressions. It is thus both the province and special duty of this Court to measure, in light of all the facts and circumstances of a particular case, whether an individual who has accepted a position of responsibility over the assets of another has been unremittingly faithful to his or her charge.

Because this matter, by its very nature, has become something of a public spectacle—commencing as it did with the spectacular hiring of one of the entertainment industry's best-known personalities to help run one of its iconic businesses, and ending with a spectacular failure of that union, with breathtaking amounts of severance pay the consequence—it is, I think, worth noting what the role of this Court must be in evaluating decision-makers' performance with respect to decisions gone awry, spectacularly or otherwise. It is easy, of course, to fault a decision that ends in a failure, once hindsight makes the result of that decision plain to see. But the essence of business is risk—the application of informed belief to contingencies whose outcomes can sometimes be predicted, but never known. The decision-makers entrusted by shareholders must act out of loyalty to those shareholders. They must in good faith act to make informed decisions on behalf of the shareholders, untainted by self-interest. Where they fail to do so, this Court stands ready to remedy breaches of fiduciary duty.

Even where decision-makers act as faithful servants, however, their ability and the wisdom of their judgments will vary. The redress for failures that arise from faithful management must come from the markets, through the action of shareholders and the free flow of capital, and not from this Court. Should the Court apportion liability based on the ultimate outcome of decisions taken in good faith by faithful directors or officers, those decision-makers would necessarily take decisions that minimize risk, not maximize value. The entire advantage of the risk-taking, innovative, wealth-creating engine that is the Delaware corporation would cease to exist, with disastrous results for shareholders and society alike. That is why, under our corporate law, corporate decision-makers are held strictly to their fiduciary abilities, but within the boundaries of those duties are free to act as their judgment and abilities dictate, free of post hoc penalties from a reviewing court using perfect hindsight. Corporate decisions are

made, risks are taken, the results become apparent, capital flows accordingly, and shareholder value is increased.[379]

On the issue of good faith, the Court suggested that the concept of good faith is not an independent duty, but a concept inherent in a fiduciary's duties of due care and loyalty:

> Decisions from the Delaware Supreme Court and the Court of Chancery are far from clear with respect to whether there is a separate fiduciary duty of good faith. Good faith has been said to require an "honesty of purpose," and a genuine care for the fiduciary's constituents, but, at least in the corporate fiduciary context, it is probably easier to define bad faith rather than good faith. This may be so because Delaware law presumes that directors act in good faith when making business judgments. Bad faith has been defined as authorizing a transaction "for some purpose *other than* a genuine attempt to advance corporate welfare or [when the transaction] is *known to constitute* a violation of applicable positive law." In other words, an action taken with the intent to harm the corporation is a disloyal act in bad faith. * * * It makes no difference the reason why the director intentionally fails to pursue the best interests of the corporation.
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> * * *
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> Upon long and careful consideration, I am of the opinion that the concept of *intentional dereliction of duty*, a *conscious disregard for one's responsibilities*, is an appropriate (although not the only) standard for determining whether fiduciaries have acted in good faith. Deliberate indifference and inaction *in the face of a duty to act* is, in my mind, conduct that is clearly disloyal to the corporation. It is the epitome of faithless conduct.[380]

e. June 8, 2006 Supreme Court Opinion.

The Delaware Supreme Court affirmed the Court of Chancery's conclusion that the shareholder plaintiffs had failed to prove that the defendants had breached any fiduciary duty.[381] With respect to the hiring of Ovitz and the approval of his employment agreement, the Delaware Supreme Court held that the Court of Chancery had a sufficient evidentiary basis from which to conclude, and had properly concluded, that the defendants had not breached their fiduciary duty of care and had not acted in bad faith. As to the ensuing no-fault termination of Ovitz and the resulting termination payment pursuant to his employment agreement, the Delaware Supreme Court affirmed the Chancery Court's holdings that the full board did not (and was not required to) approve Ovitz's termination, that Michael Eisner, Disney's CEO, had authorized the termination, and that neither Eisner, nor Sanford Litvack, Disney's General Counsel, had breached his duty of care or acted in bad faith in connection with the termination.

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379 907 A.2d 693 (Del. Ch. 2005).

380 *Id.* at 753-55.

381 *In re The Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litig.*, 906 A.2d 27, 35 (Del. 2006). The Delaware Supreme Court wrote: "We conclude . . . that the Chancellor's factual findings and legal rulings were correct and not erroneous in any respect." *Id.*

In its opinion, the Delaware Supreme Court acknowledged that the contours of the duty of good faith remained "relatively uncharted" and were not well developed. Mindful of the considerable debate that the Court of Chancery's prior opinions in the *Disney* litigation had generated and the increased recognition of the importance of the duty of good faith in the current corporate law environment, the Delaware Supreme Court determined that "some conceptual guidance to the corporate community [about the nature of good faith] may be helpful" and provided the following color as to the meaning of "good faith" in Delaware fiduciary duty jurisprudence:

> The precise question is whether the Chancellor's articulated standard for bad faith corporate fiduciary conduct—intentional dereliction of duty, a conscious disregard for one's responsibilities—is legally correct. In approaching that question, we note that the Chancellor characterized that definition as "an appropriate (*although not the only*) standard for determining whether fiduciaries have acted in good faith." That observation is accurate and helpful, because as a matter of simple logic, at least three different categories of fiduciary behavior are candidates for the "bad faith" pejorative label.
>
> The first category involves so-called "subjective bad faith," that is, fiduciary conduct motivated by an actual intent to do harm. That such conduct constitutes classic, quintessential bad faith is a proposition so well accepted in the liturgy of fiduciary law that it borders on axiomatic. We need not dwell further on this category, because no such conduct is claimed to have occurred, or did occur, in this case.
>
> The second category of conduct, which is at the opposite end of the spectrum, involves lack of due care—that is, fiduciary action taken solely by reason of gross negligence and without any malevolent intent. In this case, appellants assert claims of gross negligence to establish breaches not only of director due care but also of the directors' duty to act in good faith. Although the Chancellor found, and we agree, that the appellants failed to establish gross negligence, to afford guidance we address the issue of whether gross negligence (including a failure to inform one's self of available material facts), without more, can also constitute bad faith. The answer is clearly no.
>
> From a broad philosophical standpoint, that question is more complex than would appear, if only because (as the Chancellor and others have observed) "issues of good faith are (to a certain degree) inseparably and necessarily intertwined with the duties of care and loyalty. . . ." But, in the pragmatic, conduct-regulating legal realm which calls for more precise conceptual line drawing, the answer is that grossly negligent conduct, without more, does not and cannot constitute a breach of the fiduciary duty to act in good faith. The conduct that is the subject of due care may overlap with the conduct that comes within the rubric of good faith in a psychological sense, but from a legal standpoint those duties are and must remain quite distinct. Both our legislative history and our common law jurisprudence distinguish sharply between the duties to exercise due

care and to act in good faith, and highly significant consequences flow from that distinction.

The Delaware General Assembly has addressed the distinction between bad faith and a failure to exercise due care (*i.e.*, gross negligence) in two separate contexts. The first is Section 102(b)(7) of the DGCL, which authorizes Delaware corporations, by a provision in the certificate of incorporation, to exculpate their directors from monetary damage liability for a breach of the duty of care. That exculpatory provision affords significant protection to directors of Delaware corporations. The statute carves out several exceptions, however, including most relevantly, "for acts or omissions not in good faith. . . ." Thus, a corporation can exculpate its directors from monetary liability for a breach of the duty of care, but not for conduct that is not in good faith. To adopt a definition of bad faith that would cause a violation of the duty of care automatically to become an act or omission "not in good faith," would eviscerate the protections accorded to directors by the General Assembly's adoption of Section 102(b)(7).

A second legislative recognition of the distinction between fiduciary conduct that is grossly negligent and conduct that is not in good faith, is Delaware's indemnification statute, found at 8 *Del. C.* § 145. To oversimplify, subsections (a) and (b) of that statute permit a corporation to indemnify (*inter alia*) any person who is or was a director, officer, employee or agent of the corporation against expenses (including attorneys' fees), judgments, fines and amounts paid in settlement of specified actions, suits or proceedings, where (among other things): (i) that person is, was, or is threatened to be made a party to that action, suit or proceeding, and (ii) that person "acted in good faith and in a manner the person reasonably believed to be in or not opposed to the best interests of the corporation. . . ." Thus, under Delaware statutory law a director or officer of a corporation can be indemnified for liability (and litigation expenses) incurred by reason of a violation of the duty of care, but not for a violation of the duty to act in good faith.

Section 145, like Section 102(b)(7), evidences the intent of the Delaware General Assembly to afford significant protections to directors (and, in the case of Section 145, other fiduciaries) of Delaware corporations. To adopt a definition that conflates the duty of care with the duty to act in good faith by making a violation of the former an automatic violation of the latter, would nullify those legislative protections and defeat the General Assembly's intent. There is no basis in policy, precedent or common sense that would justify dismantling the distinction between gross negligence and bad faith.

That leaves the third category of fiduciary conduct, which falls in between the first two categories of (1) conduct motivated by subjective bad intent and (2) conduct resulting from gross negligence. This third category is what the Chancellor's definition of bad faith—intentional dereliction of duty, a conscious disregard for one's responsibilities—is intended to capture. The question is whether such misconduct is properly treated as a non-exculpable, non-

indemnifiable violation of the fiduciary duty to act in good faith. In our view it must be, for at least two reasons.

First, the universe of fiduciary misconduct is not limited to either disloyalty in the classic sense (i.e., preferring the adverse self-interest of the fiduciary or of a related person to the interest of the corporation) or gross negligence. Cases have arisen where corporate directors have no conflicting self-interest in a decision, yet engage in misconduct that is more culpable than simple inattention or failure to be informed of all facts material to the decision. To protect the interests of the corporation and its shareholders, fiduciary conduct of this kind, which does not involve disloyalty (as traditionally defined) but is qualitatively more culpable than gross negligence, should be proscribed. A vehicle is needed to address such violations doctrinally, and that doctrinal vehicle is the duty to act in good faith. The Chancellor implicitly so recognized in his Opinion, where he identified different examples of bad faith as follows:

> The good faith required of a corporate fiduciary includes not simply the duties of care and loyalty, in the narrow sense that I have discussed them above, but all actions required by a true faithfulness and devotion to the interests of the corporation and its shareholders. A failure to act in good faith may be shown, for instance, where the fiduciary intentionally acts with a purpose other than that of advancing the best interests of the corporation, where the fiduciary acts with the intent to violate applicable positive law, or where the fiduciary intentionally fails to act in the face of a known duty to act, demonstrating a conscious disregard for his duties. There may be other examples of bad faith yet to be proven or alleged, but these three are the most salient.

Those articulated examples of bad faith are not new to our jurisprudence. Indeed, they echo pronouncements our courts have made throughout the decades.

Second, the legislature has also recognized this intermediate category of fiduciary misconduct, which ranks between conduct involving subjective bad faith and gross negligence. Section 102(b)(7)(ii) of the DGCL expressly denies money damage exculpation for "acts or omissions not in good faith or which involve intentional misconduct or a knowing violation of law." By its very terms that provision distinguishes between "intentional misconduct" and a "knowing violation of law" (both examples of subjective bad faith) on the one hand, and "acts . . . not in good faith," on the other. Because the statute exculpates directors only for conduct amounting to gross negligence, the statutory denial of exculpation for "acts . . . not in good faith" must encompass the intermediate category of misconduct captured by the Chancellor's definition of bad faith.

> For these reasons, we uphold the Court of Chancery's definition as a legally appropriate, although not the exclusive, definition of fiduciary bad faith. We need go no further.[382]

In addition to the helpful discussion about the contours of the duty of good faith, the Delaware Supreme Court's opinion offers guidance on several other issues. For example, the Delaware Supreme Court affirmed the Chancellor's rulings relating to the power of Michael Eisner, as Disney's CEO, to terminate Mr. Ovitz as President.[383] The Delaware Supreme Court also adopted the same practical view as the Court of Chancery regarding the important statutory protections offered by DGCL § 141(e), which permits corporate directors to rely in good faith on information provided by fellow directors, board committees, officers, and outside consultants.

The Court also found plaintiffs had "not come close to satisfying the high hurdle required to establish waste" as the Board's approval of Ovitz's employment agreement "had a rational business purpose: to induce Ovitz to leave [his prior position], at what would otherwise be a considerable cost to him, in order to join Disney."[384]

2. Integrated Health.

The May 28, 2003 Chancery Court decision on the motion to dismiss in *Disney* influenced the denial of a motion to dismiss many of the allegations that a corporation's board breached its fiduciary duties in connection with an extensive and multifaceted compensation package benefiting its founder and CEO in *Official Committee of Unsecured Creditors of Integrated Health Services, Inc. v. Elkins*.[385] Integrated Health had been founded by the CEO in the mid-1980s to operate a national chain of nursing homes and to provide care to patients typically following discharge from hospitals, and prospered and grew substantially. Radical changes in Medicare reimbursement in 1997 led to Integrated Health's decline and commencement of Chapter 11 Bankruptcy Code proceedings in February 2000. After the Bankruptcy Court abstained from adjudicating fiduciary claims against the CEO and directors, plaintiff brought suit in the Delaware Chancery Court, alleging that CEO breached his fiduciary duties of loyalty and good faith to the corporation by improperly obtaining certain compensation arrangements. The plaintiff also alleged that the directors (other than the CEO) breached their duties of loyalty and *good faith* by (1) subordinating the best interests of Integrated Health to their allegiance to the CEO, by failing to exercise independent judgment with respect to certain compensation arrangements, (2) failing to select and rely on an independent compensation consultant to address the CEO's compensation arrangements, and (3) participating in the CEO's breaches of fiduciary duty by approving or ratifying his actions. The plaintiff also alleged that each of the defendant directors breached his fiduciary duty of care by (i) approving or ratifying compensation arrangements without adequate information, consideration or deliberation, (ii) failing to exercise reasonable care in selecting and overseeing the compensation expert, and (iii)

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382 *Id.* at 64-67 (internal citations and footnotes omitted).

383 *See* Marc I. Steinberg & Matthew D. Bivona, *Disney Goes Goofy: Agency, Delegation, and Corporate Governance*, 60 HASTINGS L.J., 201 (Dec. 2008) (questioning the holding that CEO Eisner had the authority to terminate Ovitz without cause under traditional principles of agency and corporate law).

384 *Id.* at 75.

385 C.A. No. 20228-NC, 2004 WL 1949290 (Del. Ch. Aug. 24, 2004).

failing to monitor how the proceeds of loans to the CEO were utilized by him. These actions were alleged to have constituted waste.

In *Integrated Health*, the defendants attempted to defend the breach of loyalty claims by arguing that a Board consisting of a majority of disinterested, independent directors had approved all compensation arrangements. Addressing first the question of whether a majority of the members of the Board were "interested" in the challenged transactions or were "beholden" to one who was interested in the challenged transactions, the Chancery Court noted the distinction between "interest," which requires that a person receive a personal financial benefit from a transaction that is not equally shared by stockholders, and "independence," which requires the pleading of facts that raise sufficient doubt that a director's decision was based on extraneous considerations or influences rather than on the corporate merits of the transaction. The Chancery Court wrote that this inquiry was fact specific (requiring the application of a subjective "actual person" standard, rather than an objective "reasonable director" standard) and that it would not deem a director to lack independence unless the plaintiff alleged, in addition to someone's control over a company, facts that would demonstrate that through personal or other relationships the directors were beholden to the controlling person. The Chancery Court concluded that under Delaware law (i) personal friendships, without more, (ii) outside business relationships, without more, and (iii) approving or acquiescing in a challenged transaction, in each case without more, were insufficient to raise a reasonable doubt of a directors' ability to exercise independent business judgment. The Court stated that while domination and control are not tested merely by economics, the plaintiff must allege some facts showing a director is "beholden" to an interested director in order to show a lack of independence. The critical issue was whether the director was conflicted in his loyalties with respect to the challenged board action. The Chancery Court found that the directors were not interested in the CEO's compensation transactions and found that most of the directors were not beholden to the CEO. Focusing specifically on a lawyer who was a founding partner of a law firm that provided legal services to the corporation, the Court said such facts, without more, were not enough to establish that the lawyer was beholden to the CEO. One director who had been an officer of a subsidiary during part of the time period involved was assumed to have lacked independence from the CEO, but there were enough other directors who were found not to be interested and found to be independent so that all the transactions were approved by a board consisting of a majority of independent, disinterested directors.

The defendants responded to the plaintiff's duty of care claims with three separate arguments: (i) to the extent the defendants relied on the compensation expert's opinions in approving the challenged transaction, they were insulated from liability by DGCL § 141(e), which permits good faith reliance on experts; (ii) to the extent DGCL § 141(e) did not insulate the defendants from liability, Integrated Health's DGCL § 102(b)(7) exculpation provision did so; and (iii) regardless of the DGCL § 141(e) and § 102(b)(7) defenses, plaintiff had failed to plead facts that showed gross negligence, which the defendants said was a necessary minimum foundation for a due care claim.

The Chancery Court declined to dismiss the *bad faith* and breach of loyalty claims against the CEO himself, adopting the May 28, 2003 *Disney* standard that once an employee becomes a fiduciary of an entity, he had a duty to negotiate further compensation arrangements "honestly and in good faith so as not to advantage himself at the expense of the [entity's] shareholders," but that such requirement did not prevent fiduciaries from negotiating their own

employment agreements so long as such negotiations were "performed in an adversarial and arms-length manner."

As to whether any of the challenged transactions was authorized with the kind of intentional or conscious disregard that avoided the DGCL § 102(b)(7) exculpatory provision defense, the Court wrote that in the May 28, 2003 *Disney* decision the Chancellor determined that the complaint adequately alleged that the defendants consciously and intentionally disregarded their responsibilities, and wrote that while there may be instances in which a board may act with deference to corporate officers' judgments, executive compensation was not one of those instances: "The board must exercise its own business judgment in approving an executive compensation transaction."[386] Since the case involved a motion to dismiss based on the DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision in the corporation's certificate of incorporation, the plaintiff must plead facts that, if true, would show that the board consciously and intentionally disregarded its responsibilities (as contrasted with being only grossly negligent). Examining each of the specific compensation pieces attacked in the pleadings, the Court found that the following alleged facts met such conscious and intentional standard: (i) loans from the corporation to the CEO that were initiated by the CEO were approved by the compensation committee and the board only after the loans had been made; (ii) the compensation committee gave approval to loans even though it was given no explanation as to why the loans were made; (iii) the Board, without additional investigation deliberation, consultation with an expert or determination as to what the compensation committee's decision process was, ratified loans (loan proceeds were received prior to approval of loans by the compensation committee); (iv) loan forgiveness provisions were extended by unanimous written consent without any deliberation or advice from any expert; (v) loans were extended without deliberation as to whether the corporation received any consideration for the loans; and (vi) there were no identified corporate authorizations or analysis of the costs to the corporation or the corporate reason therefor performed either by the compensation committee or other members of the Board with respect to the provisions in CEO's employment contract that gave him large compensation if he departed from the company.

Distinguishing between the alleged total lack of deliberation discussed in the May 28, 2003 *Disney* opinion and the alleged inadequate deliberation in *Integrated Health*, the Chancery Court wrote:

> Thus, a change in characterization from a *total* lack of deliberation (and for that matter a difference between the meaning of discussion and deliberation, if there is one), to even a short conversation may change the outcome of a *Disney* analysis. Allegations of nondeliberation are different from allegations of not enough deliberation.[387]

Later in the opinion, in granting a motion to dismiss with respect to some of the compensation claims, the Chancery Court suggested that arguments as to what would be a reasonable length of time for board discussion or what would be an unreasonable length of time for the Board to consider certain decisions were not particularly helpful in evaluation a fiduciary duty claim:

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386 *Id.* at *12.

387 *Id.* at *13 n.58.

> As long as the Board engaged in action that can lead the Court to conclude it did not act in knowing and deliberate indifference to its fiduciary duties, the inquiry of this nature ends. The Court does not look at the *reasonableness* of a Board's actions in this context, as long as the Board exercised *some* business judgment.[388]

In the end, the Chancery Court upheld claims alleging that no deliberation occurred concerning certain elements of compensation to Elkins, but dismissed claims alleging that some (but inadequate) deliberation occurred. Further, the decision upheld claims alleging a failure to consult with a compensation expert as to some elements of compensation, but dismissed claims alleging that the directors consulted for too short a period of time with the compensation expert who had been chosen by the CEO and whose work had been reviewed by the CEO in at least some instances prior to being presented to directors. Thus, it appears that directors who give some attention to an issue, as opposed to none, will have a better argument that they did not consciously and intentionally disregard their responsibilities.

3. Sample v. Morgan.

In *Sample v. Morgan*,[389] the plaintiff alleged a variety of breaches of director fiduciary duties, including the duties of disclosure and loyalty, in connection with the Board's action in seeking approval from the company's stockholders for a certificate of incorporation amendment (the "*Charter Amendment*") and a Management Stock Incentive Plan (the "*Incentive Plan*") that reduced the par value of the company stock from a dollar per share to a tenth of a cent each and authorized a 200,000 share (46%) increase in the number of shares for the purpose of "attracting and retaining" key employees. The same day as the stockholder vote, the Board formed a Compensation Committee, consisting of the Board's two putatively independent directors, to consider how to implement the Incentive Plan. At its very first meeting, which lasted only twenty-five minutes, the two member Compensation Committee considered a proposal by the company's outside counsel to grant all the newly authorized shares to just three employees of the company – the CEO, the CFO, and the Vice President of Manufacturing – all of whom were directors of the company and who collectively comprised the majority of the company's five member board of directors (the "*Insider Majority*"). Within ten days, the board approved a version of that proposal at a twenty minute meeting. Although the Compensation Committee adopted a vesting schedule for the grants that extended for some years and required the Insider Majority members to remain with the company, all of the newly authorized shares could be voted by the Insider Majority immediately and would receive dividends immediately. The Committee only required the Insider Majority to pay a tenth of a penny per share. Soon thereafter, the Compensation Committee authorized the company to borrow approximately $700,000 to cover the taxes owed by the Insider Majority on the shares they received, although the company's net sales were less than $10 million and it lost over $1.7 million before taxes. In determining the Insider Majority's tax liability, the Compensation Committee estimated the value of the shares granted to be $5.60 apiece, although the Insider Majority only paid a tenth of a penny per share to get them. Throughout the process, the only advisor to the Compensation Committee was the company's outside counsel, who had structured the transactions for the Insider Majority.

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388 *Id.* at *14. Vice Chancellor Noble wrote: "The Compensation Committee's signing of unanimous written consents in this case raises a concern as to whether it acted with knowing and deliberate indifference." *Id.*

389 914 A.2d 647 (Del. Ch. 2007).

When the use of the Incentive Plan shares was disclosed, plaintiff filed suit in the Delaware Chancery Court, alleging that the grant of the new shares was a wasteful entrenchment scheme designed to ensure that the Insider Majority would retain control of the company and that the stockholders' approval of the Charter Amendment and the Incentive Plan were procured through materially misleading disclosures. The complaint noted that the directors failed to disclose that the Charter Amendment and Incentive Plan had resulted from planning between the company's outside counsel – the same one who eventually served as the sole advisor to the Compensation Committee that decided to award all of the new shares to the Insider Majority at the cheapest possible price and with immediate voting and dividend rights – and the company's CEO. In memoranda to the CEO, the company's outside counsel articulated that the Incentive Plan was inspired by the Insider Majority's desire to own "a significant equity stake in [the company] as incentive for them to grow the company and increase stockholder value, as well as to provide them with protection against a third party . . . gaining significant voting control over the company."[390] Those memoranda also contained other material information, including the fact that the company counsel had advised the CEO that a plan constituting 46% of the then-outstanding equity was well above the range of typical corporate equity plans.

Also not disclosed to the stockholders was the fact that the company had entered into a contract with the buyer of the company's largest existing bloc of shares simultaneously with the Board's approval of the Charter Amendment and the Incentive Plan which provided that for five years thereafter the company would not issue any shares in excess of the new shares that were to be issued if the Charter Amendment and Incentive Plan were approved. Thus, the stockholders were not told that they were authorizing the issuance to management of the only equity the company could issue for five years, nor were they told that the Board knew this when it approved the contract, the Charter Amendment, and the Incentive Plan all at the same meeting.

In denying defendants' motion to dismiss, Vice Chancellor Strine wrote:

> The complaint plainly states a cause of action. Stockholders voting to authorize the issuance of 200,000 shares comprising nearly a third of the company's voting power in order to "attract[] and retain[] key employees" would certainly find it material to know that the CEO and company counsel who conjured up the Incentive Plan envisioned that the entire bloc of shares would go to the CEO and two other members of top management who were on the board. A rational stockholder in a small company would also want to know that by voting yes on the Charter Amendment and Incentive Plan, he was authorizing management to receive the only shares that the company could issue during the next five years due to a contract that the board had simultaneously signed with the buyer of another large bloc of shares.
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> In view of those non-disclosures, it rather obviously follows that the brief meetings at which the Compensation Committee, relying only the advice of the company counsel who had helped the Insider Majority develop a strategy to secure a large bloc that would deter takeover bids, bestowed upon the Insider Majority all 200,000 shares do not, as a matter of law, suffice to require dismissal

[390] *Id.* at 651.

> of the claim that those acts resulted from a purposeful scheme of entrenchment and were wasteful. The complaint raises serious questions about what the two putatively independent directors who comprised the Compensation Committee knew about the motivation for the issuance, whether they were complicitous with the Insider Majority and company counsel's entrenchment plans, and whether they were adequately informed about the implications of their actions in light of their reliance on company counsel as their sole source of advice.
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> As important, the directors do not explain how subsequent action of the board in issuing shares to the Insider Majority could cure the attainment of stockholder approval through disclosures that were materially misleading. To that point, the directors also fail to realize that the contractual limitation they placed on their ability to raise other equity capital bears on the issue of whether the complaint states a claim for relief. Requiring the Insider Majority to relinquish their equity in order to give the company breathing room to issue other equity capital without violating the contract is a plausible remedy that might be ordered at a later stage.
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> Finally, although the test for waste is stringent, it would be error to determine that the board could not, as a matter of law, have committed waste by causing the company to go into debt in order to give a tax-free grant of nearly a third of the company's voting power and dividend stream to existing managers with entrenchment motives and who comprise a majority of the board in exchange for a tenth of a penny per share. If giving away nearly a third of the voting and cash flow rights of a public company for $200 in order to retain managers who ardently desired to become firmly entrenched just where they were does not raise a pleading-stage inference of waste, it is difficult to imagine what would.[391]

After the Court's decision on the motion to dismiss, the plaintiff amended the complaint to state claims for aiding and abetting breaches of fiduciary duty against the company counsel who had structured the challenged transactions for the Insider Majority, Baker & Hostetler LLP and a Columbus, Ohio based partner who led the representation. The law firm and partner moved to dismiss the claims against them solely on the grounds that the Delaware court lacked personal jurisdiction over them. In denying this motion to dismiss, the Court determined that the non-Delaware lawyer and his non-Delaware law firm who provided advice on Delaware law to the Delaware corporation and caused a charter amendment to be filed with the Delaware Secretary of State are subject to personal jurisdiction in Delaware courts.[392] The Court summarized the issues as follows:

> The question presented is a straightforward one. May a corporate lawyer and his law firm be sued in Delaware as to claims arising out of their actions in providing advice and services to a Delaware public corporation, its directors, and its managers regarding matters of Delaware corporate law when the lawyer and law firm: i) prepared and delivered to Delaware for filing a certificate amendment

391 *Id.* at 652-53.

392 *Sample v. Morgan*, 2007 WL 4207790 (Del. Ch. Nov. 27, 2007).

> under challenge in the lawsuit; ii) advertise themselves as being able to provide coast-to-coast legal services and as experts in matters of corporate governance; iii) provided legal advice on a range of Delaware law matters at issue in the lawsuit; iv) undertook to direct the defense of the lawsuit; and v) face well-pled allegations of having aided and abetted the top managers of the corporation in breaching their fiduciary duties by entrenching and enriching themselves at the expense of the corporation and its public stockholders? The answer is yes.[393]

The Court noted that the lawyers were paid by the company, but the beneficiaries of the entrenchment plan were the Insider Majority and the losers were the other shareholders who suffered serious dilution and the company which had the pay the costs. In rejecting the lawyers' arguments that neither the Delaware long-arm statute nor the U.S. Constitution permitted lawyers who did their work outside of Delaware for a corporation headquartered outside of Delaware, the Court wrote:

> Delaware has no public policy interest in shielding corporate advisors from responsibility for consciously assisting the managers of Delaware corporations in breaching their fiduciary duties. If well-pled facts can be pled that support the inference that a corporate advisor knowingly assisted corporate directors in breaching their fiduciary duties, Delaware has a public policy interest in ensuring that its courts are available to derivative plaintiffs who wish to hold that advisor accountable to the corporation. The precise circumstances when corporate advisors should be deemed responsible to the corporation or its stockholders for their role in advising directors and officers should be determined by decisions addressing the merits of aiding and abetting claims, not by decisions about motions to dismiss for lack of personal jurisdiction. Lawyers and law firms, like other defendants, can be sued in this state if there is a statutory and constitutional foundation for doing so.[394]
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> * * *
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> For sophisticated counsel to argue that they did not realize that acting as a de facto outside general counsel to a Delaware corporation and regularly providing advice about Delaware law about matters important to that corporation and its stockholders might expose it to this court's jurisdiction fails the straight-face test. The moving defendants knew that the propriety of the corporate action taken in reliance upon its advice and through its services would be determined under Delaware corporate law and likely in a Delaware court.[395]

The Court acknowledged that the facts in the case were "highly unusual" and that in "most fiduciary duty cases, it will be exceedingly difficult for plaintiffs to state an aiding and abetting claim against corporate counsel."[396]

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393 *Id.* at *1.

394 *Id.* at *14.

395 *Id.* at *13.

396 *Id.* at *14.

4. Ryan v. Gifford.

Ryan v. Gifford[397] was a derivative action involving options backdating, a practice that involves the granting of options under a stock option plan approved by the issuer's stockholders which requires that the option exercise price not be less than the market price of the underlying stock on the date of grant and increasing the management compensation by fixing the grant date on an earlier date when the stock was trading for less than the market price on the date of the corporate action required to effect the grant.[398] Plaintiff alleged that defendants breached their fiduciary duties of due care and loyalty by approving or accepting backdated options that violated the clear terms of the stockholder approved option plans. Chancellor William B. Chandler III denied defendants' motion to discuss the derivative action because plaintiff failed to first demand that the issuer commence the proceedings, ruling that because "one half of the current board members approved each challenged transaction," asking for board approval was not required.[399] The Chancellor also denied defendants' motion to transfer the case to California where other backdating cases involving Maxim are pending, or stay the Delaware proceedings pending resolution of the California cases, basing his decision on the absence of Delaware precedent on options backdating and the importance of there being Delaware guidance on the issues.[400]

Turning to the substance of the case, the Chancellor held "that the intentional violation of a shareholder approved stock option plan, coupled with fraudulent disclosures regarding the directors' purported compliance with that plan, constitute conduct that is disloyal to the corporation and is therefore an act in bad faith."[401] The Chancellor further commented:

> A director who approves the backdating of options faces at the very *least* a substantial likelihood of liability, if only because it is difficult to conceive of a context in which a director may simultaneously lie to his shareholders (regarding his violations of a shareholder-approved plan, no less) and yet satisfy his duty of loyalty. Backdating options qualifies as one of those "rare cases [in which] a transaction may be so egregious on its face that board approval cannot meet the test of business judgment, and a substantial likelihood of director liability therefore exists." Plaintiff alleges that three members of a board *approved* backdated options, and another board member accepted them. These are

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397 918 A.2d 341 (Del. Ch. 2007).

398 *See infra* **Appendix B** (discussing options backdating issues); *see* C. Stephen Bigler & Pamela H. Sudell, *Delaware Law Developments: Stock Option Backdating and Spring-Loading*, 40 Rev. Sec. & Comm. Reg. 115 (May 16, 2007).

399 *See Conrad v. Blank*, 940 A.2d 38, 37 (Del. Ch. 2007) (derivative claims that 17 past and current board members of Staples Inc. breached their fiduciary duties and committed corporate waste by authorizing or wrongly permitting the secret backdating of stock option grants to corporate executives; the Court held that demand was excused as these "same directors" had already conducted an investigation and took no action even though company took a $10.8 million charge in 2006 (covering 10 years), cryptically stating only that certain options had been issued using "incorrect measurement dates"; the Court explained: "after finding substantial evidence that options were, in fact, mispriced, the company and the audit committee ended their 'review' without explanation and apparently without seeking redress of any kind. In these circumstances, it would be odd if Delaware law required a stockholder to make demand on the board of directors before suing on those very same theories of recovery.").

400 *See also Brandin v. Deason*, 941 A.2d 1020 (Del. Ch. 2007) (denying a motion to stay a derivative action in favor of a later-filed parallel proceeding in a Texas Federal District Court, citing the fact that the proceedings had already begun in Delaware and the involvement of unsettled aspects of Delaware law as justifications for denying the stay.

401 *Ryan*, 918 A.2d at 358.

> sufficient allegations to raise a reason to doubt the disinterestedness of the current board and to suggest that they are incapable of impartially considering demand.
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> * * *
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> I am unable to fathom a situation where the deliberate violation of a shareholder approved stock option plan and false disclosures, obviously intended to mislead shareholders into thinking that the directors complied honestly with the shareholder-approved option plan, is anything but an act of bad faith. It certainly cannot be said to amount to faithful and devoted conduct of a loyal fiduciary. Well-pleaded allegations of such conduct are sufficient, in my opinion, to rebut the business judgment rule and to survive a motion to dismiss.[402]

The Chancellor dismissed claims concerning transactions that occurred before the plaintiff owned shares.

The Chancellor's refusal to dismiss the suits on procedural grounds opened up the discovery phase of the litigation, which was marked by numerous disputes concerning jurisdiction over additional defendants and access to documents. The plaintiffs sought access to a report prepared by an outside law firm which the Special Committee engaged as Special Counsel to investigate the stock-option-backdating charges. The Chancellor rejected arguments that various communications and notes between the Special Committee and its Special Counsel were protected by the attorney-client privilege, which allows attorneys and clients to confer confidentially, or by the work product doctrine, which protects draft versions of documents related to preparation for lawsuits.[403] The Court ruled that when the Special Committee presented the internal investigation report to the full Board, the report and related communications were not protected because (1) only the Special Committee was the client of Special Counsel and not the full Board, which included the defendant CEO and CFO whose actions were being investigated by the Special Committee, and (2) the presentation to the full Board constituted a waiver of any privileges that would have otherwise attached.[404] The

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402 *Id.* The Chancellor's focus on the inability of directors consistently with their fiduciary duties to grant options that deviate from the provisions of a stockholder agreement is consistent with the statement that "Delaware law requires that the terms and conditions of stock options be governed by a written, board approved plan" in *First Marblehead Corp. v. House*, 473 F.3d 1, 6 (1st Cir. 2006), a case arising out of a former employee attempting to exercise a stock option more than three months after his resignation. In *First Marblehead* the option plan provided that no option could be exercisable more than three months after the optionee ceased to be an employee, but the former employee was never given a copy of the option plan nor told of this provision. The Court held that the employee's breach of contract claim was barred by Delaware law because it conflicted with the plan, but that under the laws of Massachusetts the issuer's failure to disclose this term constituted negligent misrepresentation.

403 *Ryan v. Gifford*, C.A. No. 2213-CC, 2007 WL 4259557 at *2 (Del. Ch. Dec. 3, 2007).

404 In so ruling, the Chancellor explained:

> There appears to be no dispute that, absent waiver or good cause, the attorney-client privilege protects communications between Orrick [Special Counsel] and its client, the Special Committee. Maxim, however, also asserts attorney-client privilege for its communications with Orrick relating to the Special Committee's findings, reports, presentations, and other communications, contending that, because the Special Committee was formed at its direction in direct response to the litigation challenging Maxim's grants of stock options, Maxim and its Special Committee share a joint privilege. As a result of this purported joint privilege, communications between not only the Special Committee and Orrick, but also Maxim and Orrick would be protected. Maxim further contends that it has not waived this privilege. Even assuming that Maxim can assert the privilege between the Special Committee and Orrick to protect communications between Maxim and Orrick about the investigation

Chancellor ordered the defendants to include all the metadata associated with the documents because it was needed to determine when and how the stock-option grant dates were altered and when the Board had reviewed the metadata.

On September 16, 2008 after years of litigation, several opinions by the Chancellor, extensive discovery, four mediations and intense negotiations, the parties to the *Ryan v. Gifford* action entered into a stipulation of settlement which provided that (i) defendants and their

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> and report, I conclude that the privilege does not apply here because plaintiffs' showing of good cause vitiates it. Applying the factors set forth in *Garner v. Wolfinbarger* [430 F.2d 1093, 1103–04 (5th Cir. 1970), *cert denied*, 401 U.S. 974 (1971)], and particularly the three identified in *Sealy Mattress Co. of New Jersey, Inc. v. Sealy, Inc.* [No. 8853, 1987 WL 12500, at *4 (Del. Ch. June 19, 1987)], I conclude that no privilege has attached to the communications between Maxim and Orrick regarding the investigation and report. Plaintiffs have demonstrated: (1) a colorable claim; (2) the unavailability of information from other sources, including the lack of written final report, the inability to depose witnesses regarding the report or investigation because of assertions of privilege, and the unavailability of witnesses due to invocation of the Fifth Amendment privilege not to testify; and (3) the specificity with which the information is identified. Of particular importance is the unavailability of this information from other sources when information regarding the investigation and report of the Special Committee is of paramount importance to the ability of plaintiffs to assess and, ultimately prove, that certain fiduciaries of the Company breached their duties. Consequently, I conclude that no attorney-client privilege attached to the communications between Maxim and Orrick regarding the investigation and, therefore, these communications must be produced.
>
> Even if, however, Maxim and its Special Committee do share a joint privilege, as to certain communications between Orrick and the Special Committee, I conclude that plaintiffs have demonstrated that the privilege has been waived. Plaintiffs appear to seek discovery of all communications between Orrick and the Special Committee related to the investigation and report, in addition to discovery of the presentation of the Special Committee's investigation and final report to the Special Committee and Maxim's board of directors. Though plaintiffs have demonstrated waiver of the privilege only as to the presentation of the report, this partial waiver operates as a complete waiver for all communications regarding this subject matter. Therefore, I conclude that plaintiffs are entitled to all communications between Orrick and the Special Committee related to the investigation and final report. Communications made in the presence of third persons not for the purpose of seeking legal advice operates as a waiver of the attorney-client privilege. On January 18 and 19, 2007, the Special Committee presented its final oral report to Maxim's board of directors. This report appears to be more than a mere acknowledgement of the existence of the report and instead disclosed such details that, for example, attendees were directed to turn in any notes taken during the presentation at the end of the meeting. In addition to the Special Committee and Orrick, other members of the board of directors and attorneys from Quinn Emmanuel were also in attendance. The presentation of the report constitutes a waiver of privilege because the client, the Special Committee, disclosed its communications concerning the investigation and final report to third parties—the individual director defendants and Quinn Emmanuel—whose interests are not common with the client, precluding application of the common interest exception to protect the disclosed communications. The individual defendants, though directors on the board of Maxim, cannot be said to have interests that are so parallel and non-adverse to those of the Special Committee that they could reasonably be characterized "joint venturers." The Special Committee was formed to investigate wrongdoing and in response to litigation in which certain directors were named as individual defendants. This describes a relationship more akin to one adversarial in nature. Though the presence of counsel that seemingly acts in a dual capacity as counsel for both Maxim (before the SEC) and the individual defendants in this litigation may confuse the issue of whether the director defendants attended the January meetings in a fiduciary—not individual—capacity, any apparent confusion may now be dismissed because the individual director defendants specifically rely on the findings of the report for exculpation as individuals defendants. Thus, there can be no doubt that the common interest exception is inapplicable to extend the protection of the attorney-client privilege to the communications disclosed at the January board meetings. Therefore, those communications relating to the final report, including any materials distributed or collected at meetings between the Board members and the Special Committee, must be produced.

Id. at *3. *See also* Byron F. Egan, *Major Themes of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act*, 42 TEX. J. BUS. L. 339, 499-500 (Winter 2008), *available at* http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1186.

insurance carriers would pay to the company approximately $28.5 million in cash (of which the insurance carriers would pay $21 million and the balance would be paid by the individual defendants; out of this sum approximately $10 million was awarded to plaintiff's counsel for fees and expenses), (ii) mispriced options would be cancelled or repriced and (iii) governance changes would be instituted to address the conditions that led to the backdating of options, including changes in the structure of the Board and its committees and strengthened internal controls. On January 2, 2009 the Chancellor approved this settlement.[405]

5. In re Tyson Foods, Inc. Consolidated Shareholder Litigation.

A 1997 settlement arising out of transactions between minority shareholders of Tyson Foods, Inc. and the family of its largest stockholder, Don Tyson, and a 2004 SEC consent order arising out of SEC allegations that Tyson Foods' proxy statements from 1997 to 2003 mislabeled payments as travel and entertainment expenses underlay the plaintiffs' fiduciary duty claims in *In re Tyson Foods, Inc. Consolidated Shareholder Litigation*.[406] Plaintiffs' complaint alleged three particular types of Board malfeasance: (1) approval of consulting contracts that provided lucrative and undisclosed benefits to corporate insiders; (2) grants of "spring-loaded" stock options to insiders;[407] and (3) acceptance of related-party transactions that favored insiders at the expense of shareholders.

In a February 6, 2007 opinion denying a motion to dismiss allegations that the directors breached their fiduciary duties in approving compensation, Chancellor Chandler wrote:

> Plaintiffs' complaint as to the approval of the compensation amounts to a claim for excessive compensation. To maintain such a claim, plaintiffs must show either that the board or committee that approved the compensation lacked independence (in which case the burden shifts to the defendant director to show that the compensation was objectively reasonable), or to plead facts sufficient to show that the board or committee lacked good faith in making the award. Assuming that this standard is met, plaintiffs need only allege some specific facts suggesting unfairness in the transaction in order to shift the burden of proof to defendants to show that the transaction was entirely fair.
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> * * *
>
> The report of the Compensation Committee in the same proxy, however, discusses salaries, bonuses, options and stock, but remains conspicuously silent about other annual compensation.
>
> It is thus reasonable to infer at this stage that the Compensation Committee did not approve or review the other annual compensation. Plaintiffs easily meet their further burden to allege some fact suggesting that the

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405 41 Sec. Reg. & L. Rep. (BNA) 133-34 (Jan. 26, 2009).

406 919 A.2d 563 (Del.Ch. 2007).

407 *See infra* **Appendix B** (discussing "backdated" and "spring-loaded" stock options); *see* C. Stephen Bigler & Pamela H. Sudell, *Delaware Law Developments: Stock Option Backdating and Spring-Loading*, 40 REV. SEC. & COMM. REG. 115 (May 16, 2007).

transactions were unfair to shareholders: the transactions and their related lack of disclosure undeniably exposed the company to SEC sanctions.[408]

With respect to the option spring-loading issues, the Chancellor wrote:

> Whether a board of directors may in good faith grant spring-loaded options is a somewhat more difficult question than that posed by options backdating, a practice that has attracted much journalistic, prosecutorial, and judicial thinking of late. At their heart, all backdated options involve a fundamental, incontrovertible lie: directors who approve an option dissemble as to the date on which the grant was actually made. Allegations of spring-loading implicate a much more subtle deception.
>
> Granting spring-loaded options, without explicit authorization from shareholders, clearly involves an indirect deception. A director's duty of loyalty includes the duty to deal fairly and honestly with the shareholders for whom he is a fiduciary. It is inconsistent with such a duty for a board of directors to ask for shareholder approval of an incentive stock option plan and then later to distribute shares to managers in such a way as to undermine the very objectives approved by shareholders. This remains true even if the board complies with the strict letter of a shareholder-approved plan as it relates to strike prices or issue dates.
>
> The question before the Court is not, as plaintiffs suggest, whether spring-loading constitutes a form of insider trading as it would be understood under federal securities law. The relevant issue is whether a director acts in bad faith by authorizing options with a market-value strike price, as he is required to do by a shareholder-approved incentive option plan, at a time when he knows those shares are actually worth more than the exercise price. A director who intentionally uses inside knowledge not available to shareholders in order to enrich employees while avoiding shareholder-imposed requirements cannot, in my opinion, be said to be acting loyally and in good faith as a fiduciary.
>
> This conclusion, however, rests upon at least two premises, each of which should be (and, in this case, has been) alleged by a plaintiff in order to show that a spring-loaded option issued by a disinterested and independent board is nevertheless beyond the bounds of business judgment. First, a plaintiff must allege that options were issued according to a shareholder-approved employee compensation plan. Second, a plaintiff must allege that the directors that approved spring-loaded (or bullet-dodging) options (a) possessed material non-public information soon to be released that would impact the company's share price, and (b) issued those options with the intent to circumvent otherwise valid shareholder-approved restrictions upon the exercise price of the options. Such allegations would satisfy a plaintiff's requirement to show adequately at the pleading stage that a director acted disloyally and in bad faith and is therefore unable to claim the protection of the business judgment rule. Of course, it is

[408] *Tyson*, 919 A.2d at 589-90.

> conceivable that a director might show that shareholders have expressly empowered the board of directors (or relevant committee) to use backdating, spring-loading, or bullet-dodging as part of employee compensation, and that such actions would not otherwise violate applicable law. But defendants make no such assertion here.
>
> Plaintiffs' have alleged adequately that the Compensation Committee violated a fiduciary duty by acting disloyally and in bad faith with regard to the grant of options. I therefore deny defendants' motion to dismiss Count III as to the seven members of the committee who are implicated in such conduct.[409]

With the several related party transactions, the plaintiffs did not challenge the disinterestedness or independence of the special committee and thus the Chancellor focused on whether the plaintiffs alleged sufficient facts to show that "the board knew that material decisions were being made without adequate deliberation in a manner that suggests that they did not care that shareholders would suffer a loss."[410] Elaborating on this scienter-based test, the Chancellor wrote:

> There is an important distinction between an allegation of non-deliberation and one of inadequate deliberation. It is easy to conclude that a director who fails to consider an issue at all has violated at the very least a duty of due care. In alleging inadequate deliberation, however, a successful complaint will need to make detailed allegations with regard to the process by which a committee conducted its deliberations: the amount of time a committee took in considering a specific motion, for instance, or the experts relied upon in making a decision.[411]

In declining to dismiss disclosure violation claims based on the DGCL § 102(b)(7) exculpatory clause in the certificate of incorporation of Tyson Foods, the Chancellor commented:

> Disclosure violations may, but do not always, involve violations of the duty of loyalty. A decision violates only the duty of care when the misstatement or omission was made as a result of a director's erroneous judgment with regard to the proper scope and content of disclosure, but was nevertheless made in good faith. Conversely, where there is reason to believe that the board lacked good faith in approving a disclosure, the violation implicates the duty of loyalty.
>
> It is too early for me to conclude that the alleged failures to disclose do not implicate the duty of loyalty.[412]

Thereafter, the outside directors moved for a judgment on the pleadings. The Chancellor denied this motion in an opinion dated August 15, 2007 that clarified that Tyson's shareholder-approved stock option plan permitted the grant of both "incentive stock options," which under

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409 *Id.* at 592-93.

410 *Id.* at 595.

411 *Id.*

412 *Id.* at 597-98.

IRS rules must be granted at not less than fair market value on the date of grant, and "non-qualified stock options," which Tyson's Compensation Committee might make exercisable at any price. In denying this motion to dismiss on duty of loyalty grounds, the Chancellor explained:

> Delaware law sets forth few bright-line rules guiding the relationship between shareholders and directors. Nor does the law require corporations to adopt complex sets of articles and bylaws that govern the method by which corporate decisions will be made. Instead, shareholders are protected by the assurance that directors will stand as fiduciaries, exercising business judgment in good faith, solely for the benefit of shareholders.
>
> Case law from the Supreme Court, as well as this Court, is replete with language describing the nature of this relationship. The affairs of Delaware corporations are managed by their board of directors, who owe to shareholders duties of *unremitting loyalty*. This means that their actions must be taken in the good faith belief that they are in the best interests of the corporation and its stockholders, especially where conflicts with the individual interests of directors are concerned. The question whether a corporation should pursue a lawsuit against an errant director belongs to the board, and will not be taken from *disinterested* directors, or those who retain their *independence* from those who might not have shareholder interests firmly at heart. When those same directors communicate with shareholders, they also must do so with *complete candor*.
>
> Loyalty. Good faith. Independence. Candor. These are words pregnant with obligation. The Supreme Court did not adorn them with half-hearted adjectives. Directors should not take a seat at the board table prepared to offer only conditional loyalty, tolerable good faith, reasonable disinterest or formalistic candor. It is against these standards, and in this spirit, that the alleged actions of spring-loading or backdating should be judged.
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> * * *
>
> When directors seek shareholder consent to a stock incentive plan, or any other quasi-contractual arrangement, they do not do so in the manner of a devil in a dime-store novel, hoping to set a trap with a particular pattern of words. Had the 2000 Tyson Stock Incentive Plan never been put to a shareholder vote, the nature of a spring-loading scheme would constitute material information that the Tyson board of directors was obligated to disclose to investors when they revealed the grant. By agreeing to the Plan, shareholders did not implicitly forfeit their right to the same degree of candor from their fiduciaries.
>
> Defendants protest that deceptive or deficient proxy disclosures cannot form the basis of a derivative claim challenging the grant of these options, asserting that "Tyson's later proxy disclosures concerning the challenged option grants are temporally and analytically distinct from the option grants themselves." * * * Where a board of directors intentionally conceals the nature of its earlier

actions, it is reasonable for a court to infer that the act concealed was itself one of disloyalty that could not have arisen from a good faith business judgment. The gravamen of Count III lies in the charge that defendants intentionally and *deceptively* channeled corporate profits to chosen executives (including members of Don Tyson's family). Proxy statements that display an uncanny parsimony with the truth are not "analytically distinct" from a series of improbably fortuitous stock option grants, but rather raise an inference that directors engaged in later dissembling to hide earlier subterfuge. The Court may further infer that grants of spring-loaded stock options were both inherently unfair to shareholders and that the long-term nature of the deceit involved suggests a scheme inherently beyond the bounds of business judgment.

In retrospect, the test applied in the February 6, 2007 Opinion was, although appropriate to the allegations before the Court at the time, couched in too limited a manner. Certainly the elements listed describe a claim sufficient to show that spring-loading would be beyond the bounds of business judgment. Given the additional information now presented by the parties, however, I am not convinced that allegations of an implicit violation of a shareholder-approved stock incentive plan are absolutely necessary for the Court to infer that the decision to spring-load options lies beyond the bounds of business judgment. Instead, I find that where I may reasonably infer that a board of directors later concealed the true nature of a grant of stock options, I may further conclude that those options were not granted consistent with a fiduciary's duty of utmost loyalty.[413]

6. Desimone v. Barrows

Following the Delaware Chancery Court decisions in *Ryan v. Gifford*[414] and *In re Tyson Foods, Inc. Consolidated Shareholder Litigation*[415] in which derivative claims involving backdated and spring-loaded options survived motions to dismiss, the Delaware Chancery Court decision in *Desimone v. Barrows*[416] demonstrates that cases involving such options issues can be very fact specific and may not result in director liability, even where there have been internal, SEC and Department of Justice investigations finding option granting irregularities. In *Desimone v. Barrows*, the issuer (Sycamore Networks, Inc.) essentially admitted in its SEC filings that many of its option grants were backdated and this truth was not disclosed until after an internal investigation. Based on allegations in an internal memorandum that options granted to six rank and file employees were backdated and the issuer's restatement of earnings after an internal investigation following that memorandum was revealed to the Board, plaintiff brought a derivative action against recipients of allegedly improper grants. The action involved a plan that permitted grants of options below market, which distinguished it from the plan in *Ryan v. Gifford*

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413 *In re Tyson Foods, Inc. Consolidated S'holder Litig.*, C.A. No. 1106-CC, 2007 WL 2351071 at *3-4 (Del. Ch. August 15, 2007); *see Elloway v. Pate*, 238 S.W.3d 882 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2007) (applying Delaware law, a Texas court affirmed jury verdicts in favor of the defendant directors, holding that the directors did not breach their fiduciary duties in approving broad based option grants during confidential merger negotiations at exercise prices below the merger price).

414 *See supra* notes 397-405 and related text.

415 *See supra* notes 406-413 and related text.

416 924 A.2d 908 (Del. Ch. 2007).

that required that options be granted at fair market value. Plaintiff endeavored to stigmatize three distinct classes of grants: (1) grants to rank and file employees that may have been effected by officers without Board or Compensation Committee approval, (2) grants to officers which involved Compensation Committee approval, although no particular facts were alleged that the Compensation Committee knew of the backdating, and (3) grants to outside directors that were awarded annually after the annual meeting of stockholders pursuant to specific stockholder approval of both the amount and the timing of the grants but that allegedly had fortuitous timing. The Court dismissed plaintiff's complaint on the basis that the complaint did not plead particularized facts establishing demand excusals as to the grants to rank and file employees and to officers because there were no specific facts plead that a majority of the Board was unable to independently decide whether to pursue the claims.[417] Because a majority of the directors received the director options and, thus, likely would be unable to act independently of their interest therein, demand was excused with respect to the director option claims, but the complaint did not survive the motion to dismiss because there were no particular allegations that the regular director option grants did not conform to non-discriminatory arrangement approved by the stockholders. In explaining, in a section captioned "Proceed With Care: The Legal Complexities Raised By Various Options Practices," how the allegations in the *Desimone v. Barrows* complaint differed from those in *Ryan* and *Tyson*, Vice Chancellor Strine wrote:

> As in *Ryan* and *Tyson*, issues of backdating and spring loading are presented here. But there are some very important differences between the allegations made here about the Employee, Officer, and Outside Director Grants, and those that were made in *Ryan* and *Tyson*. The first is that the Incentive Plan, the stockholder-approved option plan under which all of the Employee and Officer Grants were made, did not by its terms require that all options be priced at fair market value on the date of the grant. Rather, the Incentive Plan gave Sycamore's directors discretion to set the exercise price of the options and expressly permitted below-market-value options to be granted. This case thus presents a different question than those involved in *Ryan* and *Tyson*, which is whether corporate officials breach their fiduciary duties when they, despite having express permission under a stockholder-approved option plan to grant below-market options, represent to shareholders, markets, and regulatory authorities that they are granting fair-market-value options when in fact they are secretly manipulating the exercise price of the option.
>
> As to that question, there is also the subsidiary question of whether the means matters. For example, do backdating and spring loading always have the same implications? In this respect, the contraventions of stockholder-approved option plans that allegedly occurred in *Ryan* and *Tyson* are not the only cause for concern. The tax and accounting fraud that flows from acts of concealed options backdating involve clear violations of positive law. But even in such cases, there are important nuances about *who* bears responsibility when the corporation violates the law, nuances that turn importantly on the state of mind of those accused of involvement.

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[417] *See supra* notes 186-193 (regarding demand excusal standard under Delaware Chancery Court Rule 23.1).

That point highlights the second important difference between this case and *Ryan* and *Tyson*. In contrast to the plaintiff in *Ryan*, plaintiff Desimone has pled no facts to suggest even the hint of a culpable state of mind on the part of any director. Likewise, Desimone has not, as was done in *Tyson*, pled any facts to suggest that any director was incapable of acting independently of the recipients of any of the Employee or Officer Grants. The absence of pled facts of these kinds underscores the utility of a cautious, non-generic approach to addressing the various options practices now under challenge in many lawsuits. The various practices have jurisprudential implications that are also diverse, not identical, and the policy purposes of different bodies of related law (corporate, securities, and tax) could be lost if courts do not proceed with prudence. Indeed, within the corporate law alone, there are subtle issues raised by options practices.[418]

7. Teachers' Retirement System of Louisiana v. Aidinoff

In *Teachers' Retirement System of Louisiana v. Aidinoff*,[419] the plaintiff brought suit on behalf of American International Group ("*AIG*") against Maurice R. Greenberg (AIG's former CEO) and others, relating to an alleged compensation scheme, pursuant to which senior AIG executives became stockholders of a separate company which collected substantial commissions and other payments from AIG, effectively for no separate services rendered. In upholding the complaint as against defendants' motions to dismiss, the Delaware Court of Chancery rejected as determinative the defense that the relevant arrangements were approved annually by the Board and focused upon the complaint's allegations that the Board relied "blindly" on Greenberg, an interested defendant, to approve the relationship "after hearing a short song-and-dance from him annually." The Court also noted that the outside directors "did not employ any integrity-enhancing device, such as a special committee, to review the . . . relationship and to ensure that the relationship was not tainted by the self-interest of AIG executives who owned large stakes" in the second company. While stressing that the "informed approval of a conflict transaction by an independent board majority remains an important cleansing device under our law and can insulate the resulting decision from fairness review under the appropriate circumstances," the

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418 *Desimone*, 924 A.2d at 930-31; *see In Re: F5 Networks Derivative Litig.*, 2007 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 56390 (W.D. Wash., Aug. 1, 2007), *In re CNET Networks Inc. Derivative Litigation*, 483 F. Supp. 2d 947 (N.D. Cal. 2007), *In re Linear Tech. Corp. Derivative Litig.*, 2006 WL 3533024 (N.D. Cal. Dec. 7, 2006) (dismissing in each case an options-backdating derivative action in which the plaintiff failed to plead with particularity that demand on the board was excused as futile under FRCP 23.1 and recognizing that, even in the options-backdating context, in order to allege breach of fiduciary duty with the necessary particularity, derivative plaintiffs must allege more than simply improper backdating and director involvement leading to a breach of fiduciary duties); *but see In re Zoran Corp. Derivative Litig.*, 511 F. Supp. 2d 986 (N.D. Cal. 2007) (finding by the same District Court as in the *CNET* case that facts alleging backdating *were* sufficiently pled, and that demand was, therefore, excused; in *Zoran*, the plaintiffs based their strategy on the *CNET* opinion, providing exactly the sort of method and pedigree information for the backdating claims whose absence the *CNET* Court used as a basis for rejecting the *CNET* plaintiffs). *Cf. Indiana Elec. Workers Pension Fund v. Millard*, No. 07 Civ. 172-JGK, 2007 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 54203 (S.D.N.Y. July 24, 2007) (breach of fiduciary duty class action originally brought by a pension fund against officers and directors of a company in which the fund invested held not preempted by the 1998 Securities Litigation Uniform Standards Act ("*SLUSA*") due to the "Delaware carve-out," which exempts specified class actions based on the statutory or common law of the issuer's state of incorporation; the fund contended in the class action it brought in a New York state court that the defendant officers and directors breached their fiduciary duty of disclosure under Delaware law by making misrepresentations and failing to disclose material facts about an improper stock option backdating scheme, thereby persuading shareholders to authorize an increase in the number of shares available in the company's stock option plan); Lee G. Dunst, *Private Civil Litigation: The Other Side of Stock Option Backdating*, 39 Sec. Reg. & L. Rep. (BNA) 1344 (Sept. 3, 2007).

419 900 A.2d 654 (Del. Ch. 2006).

Court also made clear that to avail itself of that cleansing device, "the conflicted insider gets no credit for bending a curve ball past a group of uncurious Georges who fail to take the time to understand the nature" of the transactions at issue.[420]

8. Valeant Pharmaceuticals v. Jerney

In *Valeant Pharmaceuticals International v. Jerney*,[421] the Delaware Court of Chancery in a post-trial opinion found that compensation received by a former director and president of ICN Pharmaceuticals, Inc. (now known as Valeant Pharmaceuticals International), Adam Jerney, was not entirely fair, held him liable to disgorge a $3 million transaction bonus paid to him, and also held Jerney liable for (i) his 1/12 share (as one of 12 directors) of the costs of the special litigation committee investigation that led to the litigation and (ii) his 1/12 share of the bonuses paid by the Board to non-director employees. The Court further ordered him to repay half of the $3.75 million in defense costs that ICN paid to Jerney and the primary defendant, ICN Chairman and CEO Milan Panic. Pre-judgment interest at the legal rate, compounded monthly, was granted on all amounts.

The *Valeant* case illustrates how compensation decisions by a Board can be challenged after a change in control by a subsequent Board. The litigation was initiated by dissident stockholders as a stockholder derivative action but, following a change in control of the Board, a special litigation committee of the Board chose to realign the corporation as a plaintiff. As a result, with the approval of the Court, ICN took over control of the litigation. During the course of discovery, ICN reached settlement agreements with all of the non-management directors, leaving Panic and Jerney as the only remaining defendants at the trial. After trial, ICN reached a settlement agreement with Panic, leaving only Jerney.

The transaction on which the bonus was paid was a reorganization of ICN into three companies; a U.S. unit, an international unit and a unit holding the rights to its antiviral medication, shares of which would be sold to the public in a registered public offering ("*IPO*"). After the IPO but before the reorganization was completed, control of the Board changed as a result of the election of additional dissident directors.

The ensuing litigation illustrates the risks to all involved when the compensation committee is not independent and disinterested. Executive compensation is like any other transaction between a corporation and its management – it is voidable unless the statutory requirements for validation of interested director transactions are satisfied.[422] In Delaware a contract between a director and the director's corporation is voidable due to the director's interest unless (i) the transaction or contract is approved in good faith by a majority of the disinterested directors after the material facts as to the relationship or interest and as to the transaction or contract are disclosed or known to the directors, (ii) the transaction or contract is approved in good faith by shareholders after the material facts as to the relationship or interest and as to the transaction or contract is disclosed or known to the shareholders, or (iii) the transaction or contract is fair to the corporation as of the time it is authorized, approved or

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420 Id at 669-70.

421 921 A.2d 732 (Del. Ch. 2007).

422 *See supra* notes 284-292 and related text.

ratified by the directors or shareholders of the corporation.[423] Neither the ICN compensation committee nor the ICN Board was disinterested because all of the directors were receiving some of the questioned bonuses.[424] Since the compensation had not been approved by the stockholders, the Court applied the "entire fairness" standard[425] in reviewing the compensation arrangements, which placed the burden on the defendant director and officer of establishing both components of entire fairness: fair dealing and fair price. "Fair dealing" addresses the "questions of when the transaction was timed, how it was initiated, structured, negotiated, disclosed to the directors, and how the approvals of the directors and the stockholders were obtained."[426] "Fair price" requires that the transaction be substantively fair by examining "the economic and financial considerations."[427]

The fair dealing prong of the entire fairness led the Court to scrutinize processes of the compensation committee. The compensation committee had obtained a report supporting the bonuses from Towers Perrin, a well-regarded compensation consultant, and claimed that it was protected in relying on the report of this expert. However, the compensation consultant who prepared the compensation report on which the compensation committee was relying was initially selected by management, was hired to justify a plan developed by management, had initially criticized the amounts of the bonuses and then only supported them after further meetings with management, and opined in favor of the plan despite being unable to find any comparable transactions. As a result, the Court held that reliance on the compensation report did not provide Jerney with a defense under DGCL § 141(e), which provides that a director will be "fully protected" in relying on experts chosen with reasonable care.[428] The Court explained: "To

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423 *Id.*

424 The Court noted that each of the three directors on the compensation committee received a $330,500 cash bonus and "were clearly and substantially interested in the transaction they were asked to consider." *Valeant*, 921 A.2d at 739. Further, the Court commented:

> that at least two of the committee members were acting in circumstances which raise questions as to their independence from Panic. Tomich and Moses had been close personal friends with Panic for decades. Both were in the process of negotiating with Panic about lucrative consulting deals to follow the completion of their board service. Additionally, Moses, who played a key role in the committee assignment to consider the grant of 5 million options to Panic, had on many separate occasions directly requested stock options for himself from Panic.

425 In *Julian v. Eastern States Construction Service, Inc.*, the Delaware Chancery Court ordered the disgorgement of director compensation bonuses after its determination that the bonuses did not pass the entire fairness standard and explained:

> Self-interested directorial compensation decisions made without independent protections, like other interested transactions, are subject to entire fairness review. Directors of a Delaware corporation who stand on both sides of a transaction have "the burden of establishing its entire fairness, sufficient to pass the test of careful scrutiny by the courts." They "are required to demonstrate their utmost good faith and the most scrupulous inherent fairness of the bargain." The two components of entire fairness are fair dealing and fair price. Fair dealing "embraces questions of when the transaction was timed, how it was initiated, structured, negotiated, disclosed to the directors, and how the approvals of the directors and the stockholders were obtained." Fair price "assures the transaction was substantively fair by examining 'the economic and financial considerations.'"

C.A. No. 1892-VCP, 2008 WL 2673300 (Del. Ch. July 8, 2008). In *Julian*, the Court found it significant that the bonuses were much larger than in prior years (the subject bonus was 22% of adjusted income compared with 3.36% in prior years) and that the bonus reduced the company's book value at a time when book value was the basis for determining the purchase price for the company's purchase of the shares of a terminated founder.

426 *Weinberger v. UOP, Inc.*, 457 A.2d 701, 710 (Del. 1983).

427 *Id.* at 711.

428 *See infra* notes 1092-1094 and related text.

hold otherwise would replace this court's role in determining entire fairness under 8 *Del. C.* § 144 with that of various experts hired to give advice."[429] The Court also separately examined the consultant's work and concluded that it did not meet the standard for DGCL § 141(e) reliance.

The Court rejected an argument that the Company's senior officers merited bonuses comparable to those paid by outside restructuring experts: "Overseeing the IPO and spin-off were clearly part of the job of the executives at the company. This is in clear contrast to an outside restructuring expert."[430]

The Court held that doctrines of common law and statutory contribution would not apply to a disgorgement remedy for a transaction that was voidable under DGCL § 144. Hence Jerney was required to disgorge the entirety of his bonus without any ability to seek contribution from other defendants or a reduction in the amount of the remedy because of the settlements executed by the other defendants.

The ICN opinion shows the significant risks that directors face when entire fairness is the standard of review. The opinion also shows the dangers of transactions that confer material benefits on outside directors, thereby resulting in the loss of business judgment rule protection. Although compensation decisions made by independent boards are subject to great deference, that deference disappears when there is not an independent board and entire fairness is the standard. The Court in *Valeant* explained: "Where the self-compensation involves directors or officers paying themselves bonuses, the Court is particularly cognizant to the need for careful scrutiny."[431]

9. In re Citigroup Inc. Shareholder Derivative Litigation

In *In re Citigroup Inc. Shareholder Derivative Litigation*,[432] claims that the directors were liable to the corporation for waste in approving a multimillion dollar payment and benefit package to Citigroup's CEO upon his retirement survived a motion to dismiss even though the claim of waste under Delaware law required plaintiffs to plead particularized facts that lead to the inference that the directors approved an "exchange that is so one sided that no business person of ordinary, sound judgment could conclude that the corporation has received adequate consideration." The Court noted that there is "an outer limit" to the discretion of the Board in setting compensation, at "which point a decision of the directors on executive compensation is so disproportionately large as to be unconscionable and constitute waste."[433] If waste is found, it is a non-exculpated violation, as waste constitutes bad faith. The Court explained why the compensation package for the departing CEO, who allegedly was at least partially responsible for Citigroup's staggering losses, had been adequately pleaded as a waste claim:

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429 *Valeant*, 921 A.2d at 751.

430 *Id.* at 743-44.

431 *Id.* at 745.

432 964 A.2d 106 (Del. Ch. 2009).

433 *Id.* at 138.

According to plaintiffs' allegations, the November 4, 2007 letter agreement provides that Prince will receive $68 million upon his departure from Citigroup, including bonus, salary, and accumulated stockholdings. Additionally, the letter agreement provides that Prince will receive from Citigroup an office, an administrative assistant, and a car and driver for the lesser of five years or until he commences full time employment with another employer. Plaintiffs allege that this compensation package constituted waste and met the "so one sided" standard because, in part, the Company paid the multi-million dollar compensation package to a departing CEO whose failures as CEO were allegedly responsible, in part, for billions of dollars of losses at Citigroup. In exchange for the multi-million dollar benefits and perquisites package provided for in the letter agreement, the letter agreement contemplated that Prince would sign a non-compete agreement, a non-disparagement agreement, a non-solicitation agreement, and a release of claims against the Company. Even considering the text of the letter agreement, I am left with very little information regarding (1) how much additional compensation Prince actually received as a result of the letter agreement and (2) the real value, if any, of the various promises given by Prince. Without more information and taking, as I am required, plaintiffs' well pleaded allegations as true, there is a reasonable doubt as to whether the letter agreement meets the admittedly stringent "so one sided" standard or whether the letter agreement awarded compensation that is beyond the "outer limit" described by the Delaware Supreme Court. Accordingly, the Complaint has adequately alleged, pursuant to Rule 23.1, that demand is excused with regard to the waste claim based on the board's approval of Prince's compensation under the letter agreement.[434]

C. Non-Profit Corporations.

The compensation of directors and officers of non-profit corporations can raise conflict of interest issues[435] comparable to those discussed above in respect of the compensation of directors

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434 *Id.*

435 TBOC § 22.230 parallels Article 2.30 of the Texas Non-Profit Corporation Act and provides as follows:

> Section 22.230. Contracts or Transactions Involving Interested Directors, Officers, and Members.
>
> (a) This section applies only to a contract or transaction between a corporation and:
>
> (1) one or more of the corporation's directors, officers, or members; or
>
> (2) an entity or other organization in which one or more of the corporation's directors, officers, or members:
>
> (A) is a managerial official or a member; or
>
> (B) has a financial interest.
>
> (b) An otherwise valid contract or transaction is valid notwithstanding that a director, officer, or member of the corporation is present at or participates in the meeting of the board of directors, of a committee of the board, or of the members that authorizes the contract or transaction, or votes to authorize the contract or transaction, if:
>
> (1) the material facts as to the relationship or interest and as to the contract or transaction are disclosed to or known by:
>
> (A) the corporation's board of directors, a committee of the board of directors, or the members, and the board, the committee, or the members in good faith and with ordinary care authorize the contract or transaction by the affirmative vote of the majority of the

and officers of for-profit corporations.[436] Further, since non-profit corporations often seek to qualify for exemption from federal income taxation under § 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended (the "*IRC*"), as organizations organized and operated exclusively for charitable, religious, literary or scientific purposes and whose earnings do not inure to the benefit of any private shareholders or individuals, the compensation of directors and officers of non-profit corporations can be subject to scrutiny by the Internal Revenue Service ("*IRS*").[437] Excessive compensation can be deemed the sort of private inurement that could cause the organization to lose its status as an exempt organization under the IRC and subject the recipient to penalties and other sanctions under the IRC.[438]

The fiduciary duties of directors applicable to compensation process are comparable to those of a for-profit corporation discussed elsewhere herein.[439] Like directors of for-profit

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disinterested directors, committee members or members, regardless of whether the disinterested directors, committee members or members constitute a quorum; or

(B) the members entitled to vote on the authorization of the contract or transaction, and the contract or transaction is specifically approved in good faith and with ordinary care by a vote of the members; or

(2) the contract or transaction is fair to the corporation when the contract or transaction is authorized, approved, or ratified by the board of directors, a committee of the board of directors, or the members.

(c) Common or interested directors or members of a corporation may be included in determining the presence of a quorum at a meeting of the board, a committee of the board, or members that authorizes the contract or transaction.

436 *See*, Evelyn Brody, *Principals of the Law of Nonprofit Organizations*, Tentative Draft No. 1 (American Law Institute, Feb. 2007).

437 *See* Report on Exempt Organizations Executive Compensation Compliance Project – Parts I and II, March 2007, http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-tege/exec._comp._final.pdf.

438 *See id.* On February 2, 2007, the IRS issued voluntary guidelines for exempt corporations which are intended to help organizations comply with the requirements for maintaining their tax exempt status under the IRC. In addition to having a Board composed of informed individuals who are active in the oversight of the organization's operations and finances, the guidelines suggest the following nine specific practices that, taken together, the IRS believes every exempt organization should adopt in order to avoid potential compliance problems:

- Adopt a clearly articulated mission statement that makes manifest its goals and activities.
- Adopt a code of ethics setting ethical standards for legal compliance and integrity.
- The directors exercise that degree of due diligence that allows them to ensure that each such organization's charitable purpose is being realized in the most efficient manner possible.
- Adopt a conflicts of interest policy and require the filing of a conflicts of interest disclosure form annually by all of its directors.
- Post on its website or otherwise make available to the public all of its tax forms and financial statements.
- Ensure that its fund-raising activities comply fully with all federal and state laws and that the costs of such fund-raising are reasonable.
- Operate in accordance with an annual budget, and, if the organization has substantial assets or revenues, an annual audit should be conducted. Further, the Board should establish an independent audit committee to work with and oversee any outside auditor hired by the organization.
- Pay no more than reasonable compensation for services rendered and generally either not compensate persons for serving on the board of directors or do so only when an appropriate committee composed of persons not compensated by the organization determines to do so.
- Adopt a policy establishing standards for document integrity, retention, and destruction, including guidelines for handling electronic files.

See Good Governance Practices for 501(c)(3) Organizations, http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-tege/governance_practices.pdf.

439 TBOC § 22.221 parallels Article 2.26 of the Texas Non-Profit Corporation Act and provides as follows with respect to the duties of directors of a non-profit corporation organized under TBOC:

corporations, directors of non-profit corporations are increasingly subject to scrutiny under fiduciary duty principles with respect to how they handle the compensation of management.

In *People ex rel Spitzer v. Grasso*,[440] the New York Attorney General challenged the compensation paid or payable to Richard Grasso, the former CEO of the New York Stock Exchange (which at the relevant times was organized under the New York Not-for-Profit Law) as unreasonable, unlawful and ultra vires.[441] The litigation ensued after disclosures by the NYSE of a new employment contract with Grasso providing for an immediate lump sum payment of $139.5 million, which led to the Chairman of the SEC writing to the NYSE that Grasso's pay package "raises serious questions regarding the effectiveness of the NYSE's current governance structure."[442] The resulting furor led the NYSE's Board to request Grasso's resignation, which he tendered.[443] An internal investigation led by special independent counsel was highly critical of Grasso's level of compensation and suggested he had played an improper role in setting his own compensation by selecting the Board members who set his compensation.[444] The Court denied cross motions for summary judgment as to the reasonableness of Grasso's compensation generally, but found that the acceleration of certain deferred compensation arrangements was not in strict conformity with the plans[445] and, thus, resulted in illegal loans which Grasso was obligated to repay. The Court found that Grasso had breached his fiduciary duties of care and loyalty in failing to fully inform the Board as to the amount of his accumulated benefits as it was considering granting him additional benefits.

On appeal, the New York Appellate Division, in a 4-to-1 decision, held the New York Attorney General did not have authority to assert four of the six causes of action in which the trial court had allowed recovery from Grasso on a showing that compensation was excessive.[446] The other two causes of action, which were not subject to the appeal, required a showing of fault:

> Section 22.221. General Standards for Directors.
>
> (a) A director shall discharge the director's duties, including duties as a committee member, in good faith, with ordinary care, and in a manner the director reasonably believes to be in the best interest of the corporation.
>
> (b) A director is not liable to the corporation, a member, or another person for an action taken or not taken as a director if the director acted in compliance with this section. A person seeking to establish liability of a director must prove that the director did not act:
>
> (1) in good faith;
>
> (2) with ordinary care; and
>
> (3) in a manner the director reasonably believed to be in the best interest of the corporation.

440 13 Misc. 3d 1227(A), No. 401620/04, 2006 WL 3016952 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. Oct. 18, 2006).

441 *Id.* at *1. The Texas Attorney General has also been active in respect of compensation paid to officers and directors of Texas non-profit corporations. *See* John W. Vinson, *The Charity Oversight Authority of the Texas Attorney General*, 35 ST. MARY'S L.J. 243 (2004).

442 *Spitzer*, 2006 WL 3016952 at *2.

443 *Id.* at *3. Grasso tendered his resignation without giving the written notice required under his employment agreement for a termination by the NYSE without cause or by Grasso for good reason, which would have entitled him to additional severance payments. *Id.* at *8. The Court held that Grasso's failure to give this written notice was fatal to his claim for these additional severance payments under both his contract and New York law. *Id.*

444 *See id.* at *5.

445 The plans could have been amended by the Board directly, but the parties had attempted to effect the changes by separate agreements with Grasso, which the Court found not to be in conformity with the plans. The Court's holding seems harsh and teaches that formalities can be important when dealing with compensation issues.

446 *People ex rel Spitzer v. Grasso*, 836 N.Y.S.2d 40 (App. Div. 2007).

(1) the payments were unlawful (i.e. not reasonable) and Grasso knew of their unlawfulness; and (2) violation of fiduciary duty by influencing and accepting excessive compensation.

V. Standards of Review in M&A Transactions.

A. Texas Standard of Review.

Possibly because the Texas business judgment rule, as articulated in *Gearhart*, protects so much director action, the parties and the courts in the two leading cases in the takeover context have concentrated on the duty of loyalty in analyzing the propriety of the director conduct. This focus should be contrasted with the approach of the Delaware courts which often concentrates on the duty of care.

To prove a breach of the duty of loyalty, it must be shown that the director was "*interested*" in a particular transaction.[447] In *Copeland*, the Court interpreted *Gearhart* as indicating that "[a]nother means of showing interest, when a threat of takeover is pending, is to demonstrate that actions were taken with the goal of director entrenchment."[448]

Both the *Gearhart* and *Copeland* Courts assumed that the defendant directors were interested, thus shifting the burden to the directors to prove the fairness of their actions to the corporation.[449] Once it is shown that a transaction involves an interested director, the transaction is "subject to strict judicial scrutiny but [is] not voidable unless [it is] shown to be unfair to the corporation."[450] "[T]he burden of proof is on the interested director to show that the action under fire is fair to the corporation."[451]

In analyzing the fairness of the transaction at issue, the Fifth Circuit in *Gearhart* relied on the following criteria set forth by Justice Douglas in *Pepper v. Litton*:

> A director is a fiduciary. So is a dominant or controlling stockholder or group of stockholders. Their powers are powers in trust. Their dealings with the corporation are subjected to rigorous scrutiny and where any of their contracts or engagements with the corporation is challenged the burden is on the director or stockholder not only to prove the good faith of the transaction but also to show its inherent fairness from the viewpoint of the corporation and those interested therein. The essence of the test is whether or not under all the circumstances the transaction carries the earmarks of an arm's length bargain. If it does not, equity will set it aside.[452]

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447 *See Gearhart Indus., Inc. v. Smith Int'l, Inc.*, 741 F.2d. 707, 719 (5th Cir. 1984); *A. Copeland Enters., Inc. v. Guste*, 706 F. Supp. 1283, 1290 (W.D. Tex. 1984).

448 *Copeland*, 706 F. Supp. at 1290-91.

449 *See Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 722; *Copeland*, 706 F. Supp. at 1291-92.

450 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 720; *see also Copeland*, 706 F. Supp. at 1291.

451 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 720; *see also Copeland*, 706 F. Supp. at 1291.

452 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 723 (citations omitted) (quoting *Pepper v. Litton*, 308 U.S. 295, 306-07 (1939)).

In *Gearhart*, the Court also stated that a "challenged transaction found to be unfair to the corporate enterprise may nonetheless be upheld if ratified by a majority of disinterested directors or the majority of the stockholders."[453]

In setting forth the test for fairness, the *Copeland* Court also referred to the criteria discussed in *Pepper v. Litton* and cited *Gearhart* as controlling precedent.[454] In analyzing the shareholder rights plan (also known as a "*poison pill*") at issue, however, the Court specifically cited Delaware cases in its after-the-fact analysis of the fairness of the directors' action.[455] Whether a Texas court following *Gearhart* would follow Delaware case law in its fairness analysis remains to be seen, especially in light of the Fifth Circuit's complaint in *Gearhart* that the lawyers focused on Delaware cases and failed to deal with Texas law:

> We are both surprised and inconvenienced by the circumstance that, despite their multitudinous and voluminous briefs and exhibits, neither plaintiffs nor defendants seriously attempt to analyze officers' and directors' fiduciary duties or the business judgment rule under Texas law. This is particularly so in view of the authorities cited in their discussions of the business judgment rule: Smith and Gearhart argue back and forth over the applicability of the plethora of out-of-state cases they cite, yet they ignore the fact that we are obligated to decide these aspects of this case under Texas law. We note that two cases cited to us as purported Texas authority were both decided under Delaware law. . . .[456]

Given the extent of Delaware case law dealing with director fiduciary duties, it is certain, however, that Delaware cases will be cited and argued by corporate lawyers negotiating transactions and handling any subsequent litigation. The following analysis, therefore, focuses on the pertinent Delaware cases.

B. Delaware Standard of Review.

An examination only of the actual substantive fiduciary duties of corporate directors provides somewhat of an incomplete picture. Compliance with those duties in any particular circumstance will be informed by the standard of review that a court would apply when evaluating a board decision that has been challenged.

Under Delaware law, there are generally three standards against which the courts will measure director conduct. As articulated by the Delaware courts, these standards provide important guidelines for directors and their counsel as to the process to be followed for director action to be sustained. In the context of considering a business combination transaction, these standards are:

(i) *business judgment rule* – for a decision to remain independent or to approve a transaction not involving a sale of control;

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453 *Id*. at 720.

454 *See Copeland*, 706 F. Supp. at 1290-91.

455 *See id*. at 1291-93.

456 *Gearhart*, 741 F.2d at 719 n.4.

(ii) *enhanced scrutiny* – for a decision to adopt or employ defensive measures[457] or to approve a transaction involving a sale of control; and

(iii) *entire fairness* – for a decision to approve a transaction involving management or a principal shareholder or for any transaction in which a plaintiff successfully rebuts the presumptions of the business judgment rule.

1. Business Judgment Rule.

The Delaware business judgment rule "is a presumption that in making a business decision the directors of a corporation acted on an informed basis, in good faith and in the honest belief that the action taken was in the best interests of the company."[458] "A hallmark of the business judgment rule is that a court will not substitute its judgment for that of the board if the latter's decision can be 'attributed to any rational business purpose.'"[459]

The availability of the business judgment rule does not mean, however, that directors can act on an uninformed basis. Directors must satisfy their duty of care even when they act in the good faith belief that they are acting only in the interests of the corporation and its stockholders. Their decision must be an informed one. "The determination of whether a business judgment is an informed one turns on whether the directors have informed themselves 'prior to making a business decision, of all material information reasonably available to them.'"[460] In *Van Gorkom*, notwithstanding a transaction price substantially above the current market, directors were held to have been grossly negligent in, among other things, acting in haste without adequately informing themselves as to the value of the corporation.[461]

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457 In *Williams v. Geier*, 671 A.2d 1368 (Del. 1996), the Delaware Supreme Court held that an antitakeover defensive measure will not be reviewed under the enhanced scrutiny standard when the defensive measure is approved by stockholders. The Court stated that this standard "should be used only when a board unilaterally (i.e. without stockholder approval) adopts defensive measures in reaction to a perceived threat." *Id*. at 1377.

458 *Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A.2d 805, 812 (Del. 1984); *see also Brazen v. Bell Atl. Corp.*, 695 A.2d 43, 49 (Del. 1997); *cf.* David Rosenberg, *Galactic Stupidity and the Business Judgment Rule*, 32 J. OF CORP. LAW 301 (2007) (arguing it is wrong for courts to refrain from examining the substantive reasonableness of directors' decisions in all cases).

459 *Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petroleum Co.*, 493 A.2d 946, 954 (quoting *Sinclair Oil Corp. v. Levien*, 280 A.2d 717, 720 (Del. 1971)); *In re the Dow Chemical Company Derivative Litigation*, Del. Ch. Civ. No. 4349-CC (Jan. 11, 2010) (In the context of granting defendants' motion to dismiss a derivative action filed amid turmoil over Dow's acquisition of Rohm & Haas that alleged, *inter alia*, that the director defendants breached their fiduciary duties by entering a merger agreement with Rohm & Haas that unconditionally obligated Dow to consummate the merger ("focusing on the substantive provisions of the deal, rather than the procedure employed to make an informed business judgment by a majority of the disinterested and independent board members"), particularly "the board's decision to enter a merger agreement without a financing condition," and in rejecting plaintiffs' argument that the business judgment rule was not applicable to a "bet-the-company" deal, Chancellor Chandler wrote: "Delaware law simply does not support this distinction. A business decision made by a majority of disinterested, independent board members is entitled to the deferential business judgment rule regardless of whether it is an isolated transaction or part of a larger transformative strategy. The interplay among transactions is a decision vested in the board, not the judiciary."); *see* Stephen M. Bainbridge, *Unocal at 20: Director Primacy in Corporate Takeovers*, 31 DEL. J. CORP. L. 769 (2006); Andrew G.T. Moore II, *The Birth of Unocal—A Brief History*, 31 DEL. J. CORP. L. 865 (2006); A. Gilchrist Sparks III, *A Comment upon "Unocal at 20,"* 31 DEL. J. CORP. L. 887 (2006).

460 *Smith v. Van Gorkom*, 488 A.2d 858, 872 (Del. 1985) (quoting *Aronson*, 473 A.2d at 812). *See generally* Bernard S. Sharfman, *Being Informed Does Matter: Fine Tuning Gross Negligence Twenty Plus Years After Van Gorkom*, 62 BUS. LAW. 135 (2006).

461 *Van Gorkom*, 488 A.2d at 874.

2. Enhanced Scrutiny.

When applicable, enhanced scrutiny places on the directors the burden of proving that they have acted reasonably.

> The key features of an enhanced scrutiny test are: (a) a judicial determination regarding the adequacy of the decisionmaking process employed by the directors, including the information on which the directors based their decision; and (b) a judicial examination of the reasonableness of the directors' action in light of the circumstances then existing. The directors have the burden of proving that they were adequately informed and acted reasonably. The directors have the burden of proving that they were adequately informed and acted reasonably.[462]

The reasonableness required under enhanced scrutiny falls within a range of acceptable alternatives, which echoes the deference found under the business judgment rule.

> [A] court applying enhanced judicial scrutiny should be deciding whether the directors made a reasonable decision, not a perfect decision. If a board selected one of several reasonable alternatives, a court should not second-guess that choice even though it might have decided otherwise or subsequent events may have cast doubt on the board's determination. Thus, courts will not substitute their business judgment for that of the directors, but will determine if the directors' decision was, on balance, within a range of reasonableness.[463]

a. **Defensive Measures.**

In *Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petroleum Co.*,[464] the Delaware Supreme Court held that when directors authorize takeover defensive measures, there arises "the omnipresent specter that a board may be acting primarily in its own interests, rather than those of the corporation and its shareholders."[465] The Court reviewed such actions with enhanced scrutiny even though a traditional conflict of interest was absent. In refusing to enjoin a selective exchange offer adopted by the board to respond to a hostile takeover attempt, the *Unocal* Court held that the directors must prove that (i) they had reasonable grounds for believing there was a danger to corporate policy and effectiveness (satisfied by showing good faith and reasonable investigation)[466] and (ii) the responsive action taken was "reasonable in relation to the threat posed" (established by showing that the response to the threat was not "coercive" or "preclusive" and then by demonstrating that the response was within a "range of reasonable responses" to the threat perceived).[467]

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462 *Paramount Commc'ns Inc. v. QVC Network Inc.*, 637 A.2d 34, 45 (Del. 1994); *see also Quickturn Design Sys., Inc. v. Shapiro*, 721 A.2d 1281, 1290 (Del. 1998).

463 *QVC*, 637 A.2d at 45 (emphasis omitted).

464 493 A.2d 946 (Del. 1985).

465 *Id.* at 954.

466 *Id*. at 954-55.

467 *Id.* at 955; *Unitrin, Inc. v. Am. Gen. Corp*., 651 A.2d 1361, 1387-88 (Del. 1995).

In *Gantler v. Stephens*, the Delaware Supreme Court held that *Unocal* did not apply to the rejection of a merger proposal in favor of a going private reclassification in which the certificate of incorporation was amended to convert common stock held by persons owning less than 300 shares into non-voting preferred stock because the reclassification was not a defensive action.[468]

b. Sale of Control.

In *Revlon, Inc. v. MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings, Inc.*,[469] the Delaware Supreme Court imposed an affirmative duty on the Board to seek the highest value reasonably obtainable to the stockholders when a sale of the company becomes inevitable.[470] Then in *Paramount Communications Inc. v. QVC Network Inc.*,[471] when the issues were whether a poison pill could

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468 965 A.2d 695 (Del. 2009).

469 506 A.2d 173 (Del. 1985).

470 *See id.* at 182. While *Revlon* placed paramount importance on directors' duty to seek the highest sale price once their corporation is on the block, simply pointing to a reduced purchase price because of contingent liabilities is not enough to trigger heightened scrutiny of the directors' actions during the sale process. In *Globis Partners, L.P. v. Plumtree Software, Inc.*, the Court of Chancery dismissed at the pleading stage claims that directors failed to fulfill their duties under *Revlon* because the purchase price negotiations were complicated when the Plumtree board learned that target was in breach of a contract with the U.S. General Services Administration (the "*GSA contract*"), and that a significant liability would likely result from the breach. C.A. No. 1577-VCP, 2007 WL 4292024, at *1-2, *14 (Del. Ch. Nov. 30, 2007). Accordingly, target lowered its selling price in order to induce buyer to proceed with the purchase. *Id.* at *2.

After the merger was announced, plaintiff sued target and its directors derivatively, claiming that the directors breached their fiduciary duties in agreeing to the lower sales price in order to avoid personal liability in connection with the breached GSA contract and additional personal benefits from the merger. *Id.* at *3. In dismissing the complaint, the Court first summarized the bedrock principles of Delaware corporate law relating to directors' fiduciary duties:

- Directors owe a duty of "unremitting loyalty" to shareholders, and in particular, when the board has determined to sell the company for cash or engage in a change of control transaction, it must, under *Revlon*, "act reasonably in order to secure the highest price reasonably available";
- In making their decisions, however, directors enjoy the protection of the "business judgment rule" – the "presumption that in making a business decision the directors of a corporation acted on an informed basis, in good faith and in the honest belief that the action taken was in the best interests of the company"; and
- If a "proper" decision-making process is followed by the directors, a court will not review the wisdom of the decision itself; the plaintiff must *plead* facts challenging the directors' decision making in order to rebut the business judgment rule's presumption.

Id. at *4. As to the allegations that directors approved the merger at a sub-optimal price to avoid derivative liability, the Court held that the plaintiff must plead facts showing: (i) that the directors faced substantial liability; (ii) that the directors were motivated by such liability; and (iii) that the merger was pretextual. *Id.* at *6 (citing *Lewis v. Ward*, 852 A.2d 896, 906 (Del. 2004)). The Court chided the plaintiff for failing to even identify which fiduciary duty the directors might have breached in connection with the GSA contract, and for failing to plead any facts at all suggesting that any board member took (or failed to take) any direct action with respect to the GSA contract. *See id.* As to whether the directors faced substantial liability due to the problems with the GSA contract, the Court analyzed it as a *Caremark* "duty of oversight" claim which failed because the plaintiff did not allege "either that [target] had no system of controls that would have prevented the GSA overcharges or that there was sustained or systemic failure of the board to exercise oversight." *See supra* notes 72-88 and related text. Turning to the last two prongs of the analysis, the Court concluded that because the merger negotiations were well underway before the Board became aware of the GSA contract breach, it was unlikely that the merger was motivated by this liability, or was a pretext without a valid business purpose. *Id.* at *7-8.

As to the second possibility, while the Court acknowledged that there was no "bright-line rule" for determining when merger-related benefits compromise a director's loyalty, it found list of supposed benefits to the directors and determined that they were either immaterial (in the case of the directors' indemnification rights and the CEO director's severance), untainted by conflicts of interest (acceleration of options, the value of which would increase as the purchase price rose) or shared by all shareholders (option cash-outs). *See id.* at *8-9.

471 637 A.2d 34 (Del. 1994).

be used selectively to favor one of two competing bidders (effectively precluding shareholders from accepting a tender offer) and whether provisions of the merger agreement (a "no-shop" clause, a "lock-up" stock option, and a break-up fee) were appropriate measures in the face of competing bids for the corporation, the Delaware Supreme Court sweepingly explained the possible extent of enhanced scrutiny:

> The consequences of a sale of control impose special obligations on the directors of a corporation. In particular, they have the obligation of acting reasonably to seek the transaction offering the best value reasonably available to the stockholders. The courts will apply enhanced scrutiny to ensure that the directors have acted reasonably.[472]

The rule announced in *QVC* places a burden on the directors to obtain the *best value reasonably available* once the board determines to sell the corporation in a change of control transaction. This burden entails more than obtaining a fair price for the shareholders, one within the range of fairness that is commonly opined upon by investment banking firms. In *Cede & Co. v. Technicolor, Inc.*,[473] the Delaware Supreme Court found a breach of duty even though the transaction price exceeded the value of the corporation determined under the Delaware appraisal statute: "[I]n the review of a transaction involving a sale of a company, the directors have the burden of establishing that the price offered was the highest value reasonably available under the circumstances."[474] A merger may be sustained even if it affords modest employment packages for two directors, but a merger price so low that there is nothing left for the common shareholders.[475]

Although *QVC* mandates enhanced scrutiny of board action involving a sale of control, certain stock transactions are considered not to involve a change in control for such purpose. In *Arnold v. Society for Savings Bancorp, Inc.*, the Delaware Supreme Court considered a merger between Bancorp and Bank of Boston in which Bancorp stock was exchanged for Bank of Boston stock.[476] The shareholder plaintiff argued, among other things, that the board's actions should be reviewed with enhanced scrutiny because "(i) Bancorp was seeking to sell itself and

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472 *Id.* at 43 (footnote omitted).

473 634 A.2d 345 (Del. 1993).

474 *Id*. at 361.

475 In *Morgan v. Cash*, C.A. No. 5053-VCS (Del. Ch. July 16, 2010), a former common shareholder of Voyence, Inc. sued EMC Corporation (the acquirer of Voyence) for aiding and abetting alleged breaches of fiduciary duties by the former Voyence Board and also sued the Board for breaching its fiduciary duties. The plaintiff alleged that EMC used promises of continued employment and exploited conflicts of interest between the Voyence directors (all of whom held preferred stock or were designees of holders of preferred stock) and common stockholders to gain Voyence management's support for a low cash merger price which resulted in the preferred stock taking a discount from the price to which it was entitled under its terms and the holders of common stock receiving nothing. Because none of the consideration from the sale was distributed to Voyence's common shareholders, plaintiff argued that EMC was complicit in the Board's failure to maximize stockholder value in the sale of the Voyence. The Chancery Court granted EMC's motion to be dismissed from the shareholder litigation. The Court determined that allegations of modest employment packages offered to two directors, standing alone, did not suggest that the Voyence board accepted a low merger price in exchange for improper personal benefits, and the fact that Voyence directors received consideration from the sale of the corporation, and common shareholders did not, was not enough to sustain a claim of collusion between EMC and the Voyence directors. Vice Chancellor Strine stressed that "[i]t is not a status crime under Delaware law to buy an entity for a price that does not result in a payment to the selling entity's common stockholders." *See supra* notes 161-162 and related text.

476 650 A.2d 1270, 1273 (Del. 1994).

(ii) the [m]erger constituted a change in control" because the Bancorp shareholders were converted to minority status in Bank of Boston, losing the opportunity to enjoy a control premium.[477] The Court held that the corporation was not for sale because no active bidding process was initiated and the merger was not a change in control and, therefore, that enhanced scrutiny of the board's approval of the merger was not appropriate.[478] Quoting *QVC*, the Court stated that "there is no 'sale or change in control' when '[c]ontrol of both [corporations] remain[s] in a large, fluid, changeable and changing market.'"[479] As continuing shareholders in Bank of Boston, the former Bancorp shareholders retained the opportunity to receive a control premium.[480] The Court noted that in *QVC* a single person would have control of the resulting corporation, effectively eliminating the opportunity for shareholders to realize a control premium.[481]

In *Steinhardt v. Howard-Anderson*,[482] Vice Chancellor Laster suggested that *Revlon* should be applicable to an all stock merger where the target shareholders would be the minority in the post merger corporation and the focus would be whether the process was adequate to compensate for an appropriate control premium for the target.

3. Entire Fairness.

Both the business judgment rule and the enhanced scrutiny standard should be contrasted with the "*entire fairness*" standard applied in transactions in which an affiliate stands on both sides of the transaction.[483] In reviewing board action in transactions involving management, board members or a principal shareholder, the Delaware Supreme Court has imposed an "entire fairness" standard.[484]

In *Kahn v. Lynch Communication Systems, Inc.* ("*Lynch I*")[485] the Delaware Supreme Court held "that the exclusive standard of judicial review in examining the propriety of an interested cash-out merger transaction by a controlling or dominating shareholder is entire fairness" and that "[t]he initial burden of establishing entire fairness rests upon the party who stands on both sides of the transaction."[486] Additionally, "approval of the transaction by an independent committee of directors or an informed majority of minority shareholders" would

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477 *Id.* at 1289.

478 *Id*. at 1289-90.

479 *Id*. at 1290 (quoting *Paramount Commc'ns Inc. v. QVC Network Inc.*, 637 A.2d 34, 42-43, 47 (Del. 1994)).

480 *Id*.

481 *Id*.; *see also Paramount Commc'ns, Inc. v. Time, Inc.*, 571 A.2d 1140, 1150 (Del. 1989).

482 C.A. No. 5878-VCL (Del. Ch. Jan. 29, 2011).

483 Directors also will have the burden to prove the entire fairness of the transaction to the corporation and its stockholders if a stockholder plaintiff successfully rebuts the presumption of valid business judgment. *See Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A.2d 805, 811-12 (Del. 1984).

484 *See Weinberger v. UOP, Inc*., 457 A.2d 701, 710-11 (Del. 1983); *see also Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, 559 A.2d 1261, 1264-65 (Del. 1988) (applying the standard set forth in *Weinberger*).

485 638 A.2d 1110 (Del. 1994).

486 *Id.* at 1117 (citations omitted).

shift the burden of proof on the issue of fairness to the plaintiff, but would not change that entire fairness was the standard of review.[487]

In 2009 the entire fairness standard was applied to a transaction in which a controlling stockholder was only on one side of the transaction. *In re John Q. Hammons Hotels Inc. S'holder Litig.*[488] involved a transaction in which a corporation with a controlling stockholder (who owned 5% of the company's Class A shares and 100% of its Class B shares, which gave him 76% of the total voting power) was purchased by an unaffiliated third-party acquirer. A special committee negotiated the transaction on behalf of the minority public stockholders. There was a majority-of-the-minority-voting provision, which was waivable (but not waived) by the special committee. All of the Class A stockholders received the same cash purchase price, and the controlling stockholder received separate consideration for his Class B shares, including a line of credit and a small continuing interest in the surviving entity (to avoid certain tax implications), that was valued by the special committee's financial advisor at far less than price paid to the Class A stockholders. Plaintiffs alleged that the controlling stockholder breached his fiduciary duties as such by negotiating benefits for himself that were not shared with the minority stockholders. Plaintiffs contended that the directors breached their fiduciary duties by allowing the merger to be negotiated through a deficient process and then voting to approve the merger. Claims for aiding and abetting these breaches of fiduciary duty were asserted against the buyer entities.

On cross-motions for summary judgment, the Chancellor concluded that, although not mandated under Lynch I since the controlling stockholder was not on both sides of the transaction, the entire fairness standard of review applied because the controlling stockholder and the minority were "competing" for consideration:

> Although I have determined that Hammons [the controlling stockholder] did not stand "on both sides" of this transaction, it is nonetheless true that Hammons and the minority stockholders were in a sense "competing" for portions of the consideration Eilian was willing to pay to acquire JQH and that Hammons, as a result of his controlling position, could effectively veto any transaction. In such a case it is paramount—indeed, necessary in order to invoke business judgment review—that there be robust procedural protections in place to ensure that the minority stockholders have sufficient bargaining power and the ability to make an informed choice of whether to accept the third-party's offer for their shares.

The Chancellor explained that business judgment review would only apply if the transaction were both (i) approved by a disinterested and independent special committee and (ii) approved by stockholders in a non-waivable vote of the majority of ALL the minority stockholders which would serve as a check on the special committee. Since the majority-of-minority condition was

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487 *Id.* A different standard applies to transactions that effectively cash out minority shareholders through a tender offer followed by a short-form merger. *See In re Aquila Inc.*, 805 A.2d 184, 190-91 (Del. Ch. 2002); *In re Siliconix Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 2001 WL 716787, at *6-9 (Del. Ch. June 21, 2001); *see generally In re Pure Res., Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 808 A.2d 421, 434-39 (Del. Ch. 2002); *see also infra* notes 892-917and related text.

488 C.A. No. 758-CC, 2009 WL 3165613 (Del. Ch. Oct. 2, 2009). *See* Mark A. Morton, Michael K. Reilly and Daniel A. Mason, *In re John Q. Hammons Hotels, Inc.: A New Roadmap for Conflict Transactions?*, Vol. IX Deal Points (The Newsletter of the ABA Business Law Section Committee on Mergers and Acquisitions), Issue 3 (Fall 2009) at 3.

waivable in *Hammons* and was based on those voting and not ALL minority stockholders, entire fairness would apply, even though the condition was not waived and even though a majority of all minority stockholders did approve the transaction.

Under the entire fairness standard the burden is on directors to show both (i) fair dealing and (ii) a fair price:

> The former embraces questions of when the transaction was timed, how it was initiated, structured, negotiated, disclosed to the directors, and how the approvals of the directors and the stockholders were obtained. The latter aspect of fairness relates to the economic and financial considerations of the proposed merger, including all relevant factors: assets, market value, earnings, future prospects, and any other elements that affect the intrinsic or inherent value of a company's stock.[489]

The burden shifts to the challenger to show the transaction was unfair where (i) the transaction is approved by the majority of the minority shareholders, though the burden remains on the directors to show that they "completely disclosed all material facts relevant to the transaction,"[490] or (ii) the transaction is negotiated by a special committee of independent directors that is truly independent, not coerced and has real bargaining power.[491]

After a trial which involved dueling valuation expert witnesses, the Chancellor concluded that the merger was entirely fair and that defendants were not liable for any breach of fiduciary or aiding and abetting.[492] In finding fair process, the Chancellor found that (i) the special committee was independent and disinterested and that the Board acted in the best interests of the minority stockholders; (ii) the members of the special committee were qualified and experienced in the company's industry; (iii) the special committee understand that it had the authority and duty to reject any offer that was unfair to the minority stockholders; and (iv) the special committee was through, deliberate and negotiated at arms length over a nine month period with two active bidders. The overwhelming approval of the transaction by the unaffiliated shareholders was also influential. The controlling stockholder's power to reject any offer he did not like was not coercive because rejection would only leave the status quo, which the stockholders accepted when then bought their shares. As to the fair price prong of entire fairness, the Chancellor found the defendants' expert witness more persuasive than plaintiffs' expert witnesses with their "litigation driven projections." The proxy statement's failure to disclose that counsel for the special committee also represented a lender to the winning bidder was found to be immaterial.

C. Action Without Bright Lines.

Whether the burden will be on the party challenging Board action, under the business judgment rule, or on the directors, under enhanced scrutiny, clearly the care with which the

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489 *Weinberger*, 457 A.2d at 711.

490 *Id.* at 703.

491 *See Kahn v. Lynch Communications Sys., Inc.*, 638 A.2d 1110, 1117 (Del. 1994).

492 *In re John Q. Hammons Hotels Inc. S'holder Litig.*, C.A. No. 758-CC (Del. Ch. Jan. 14, 2011).

directors acted in a change of control transaction will be subjected to close review. For this review there will be no "bright line" tests, and it may be assumed that the board may be called upon to show care commensurate with the importance of the decisions made, whatever they may have been in the circumstances. Thus directors, and counsel advising them, should heed the Delaware Supreme Court in *Barkan v. Amsted Industries, Inc.*: "[T]here is no single blueprint that a board must follow to fulfill its duties. A stereotypical approach to the sale and acquisition of corporate control is not to be expected in the face of the evolving techniques and financing devices employed in today's corporate environment."[493] In the absence of bright lines and blueprints that fit all cases, the process to be followed by the directors will be paramount. The elements of the process should be clearly understood at the beginning, and the process should be guided and well documented by counsel throughout.

VI. M&A Transaction Process.

A. Statutory Framework: Board and Shareholder Action.

Both Texas and Delaware law permit corporations to merge with other corporations by adopting a plan of merger and obtaining the requisite shareholder approval.[494] Under Texas law, approval of a merger will generally require approval of the holders of at least two-thirds of the outstanding shares entitled to vote on the merger, while Delaware law provides that mergers may be approved by a vote of the holders of a majority of the outstanding shares.[495] As with other transactions, the Texas Corporate Statues permit a corporation's certificate of formation to reduce the required vote to an affirmative vote of the holders of a majority of the outstanding shares.[496]

Both Texas and Delaware permit a merger to be effected without shareholder approval if the corporation is the sole surviving corporation, the shares of stock of the corporation are not changed as a result of the merger and the total number of shares of stock issued pursuant to the merger does not exceed 20% of the shares of the corporation outstanding immediately prior to the merger.[497]

Board action on a plan of merger is required under both Texas and Delaware law. However, Texas law does not require that the board of directors approve the plan of merger, but rather it need only adopt a resolution directing the submission of the plan of merger to the corporation's shareholders.[498] Such a resolution must either recommend that the plan of merger be approved or communicate the basis for the board's determination that the plan be submitted to shareholders without any recommendation.[499] The Texas Corporate Statues' allowance of directors to submit a plan of merger to shareholders without recommendation is intended to address those few circumstances in which a board may consider it appropriate for shareholders to

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493 567 A.2d 1279, 1286 (Del. 1989) (citing *Mills Acquisition Co.*, 559 A.2d 1286-88).

494 *See* TBOC §§ 10.001, 21.452; TBCA art. 5.01; DGCL §§ 251-58; see generally Curtis W. Huff, *The New Texas Business Corporation Act Merger Provisions*, 21 ST. MARY'S L.J. 109 (1989).

495 *Compare* TBOC §§ 21.452, 21.457, and TBCA art. 5.03(E), *with* DGCL § 251(c).

496 TBOC § 21.365(a); TBCA art. 2.28.

497 TBOC § 21.459; TBCA art. 5.03(G); DGCL § 251(f).

498 TBOC § 21.452(b)(2)(B) (Vernon 2006); TBCA art. 5.03(B)(1).

499 TBOC § 21.452(d); TBCA art. 5.03(B)(1).

be given the right to vote on a plan of merger but for fiduciary or other reasons the board has concluded that it would not be appropriate for the board to make a recommendation.[500] Delaware law has no similar provision and requires that the board approve the agreement of merger and declare its advisability, and then submit the merger agreement to the stockholders for the purpose of their adopting the agreement.[501] Delaware and Texas permit a merger agreement to contain a provision requiring that the agreement be submitted to the stockholders whether or not the board of directors determines at any time subsequent to declaring its advisability that the agreement is no longer advisable and recommends that the stockholders reject it.[502]

B. Management's Immediate Response.

Serious proposals for a business combination require serious consideration. The CEO and management will usually be called upon to make an initial judgment as to seriousness. A written, well developed proposal from a credible prospective acquiror should be studied. In contrast, an oral proposal, or a written one that is incomplete in material respects, should not require management efforts to develop the proposal further. In no event need management's response indicate any willingness to be acquired. In *Citron v. Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corp.*,[503] for example, the Delaware Supreme Court sanctioned behavior that included the CEO's informing an interested party that the corporation was not for sale, but that a written proposal, if made, would be submitted to the board for review. Additionally, in *Matador Capital Management Corp. v. BRC Holdings, Inc.*,[504] the Delaware Chancery Court found unpersuasive the plaintiff's claims that the board failed to consider a potential bidder because the board's decision to terminate discussion was "justified by the embryonic state of [the potential bidder's] proposal."[505] In particular, the Court stated that the potential bidder did not provide evidence of any real financing capability and conditioned its offer of its ability to arrange the participation of certain members of the target company's management in the transaction.[506]

C. The Board's Consideration.

"When a board addresses a pending takeover bid it has an obligation to determine whether the offer is in the best interests of the corporation and its shareholders."[507] Just as all proposals are not alike, board responses to proposals may differ. A proposal that is incomplete in material respects should not require serious board consideration. On the other hand, because more developed proposals may present more of an opportunity for shareholders, they ought to require more consideration by the board.[508]

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500 Byron F. Egan & Curtis W. Huff, *Choice of State of Incorporation – Texas versus Delaware: Is It Now Time To Rethink Traditional Notions?*, 54 SMU L. REV. 249, 282 (2001).

501 *See* DGCL § 251(b), (c) (2008).

502 DGCL § 146; TBOC § 21.452(f)-(g); TBCA art. 5.01(C)(3).

503 569 A.2d 53 (Del. 1989).

504 729 A.2d 280 (Del. Ch. 1998).

505 *Id*. at 292.

506 *Id*.

507 *Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petrol. Co.*, 493 A.2d 946, 954 (Del. 1985).

508 *See Desert Partners, L.P. v. USG Corp.*, 686 F. Supp. 1289, 1300 (N.D. Ill. 1988) (applying Delaware law) ("The Board did not breach its fiduciary duty by refusing to negotiate with Desert Partners to remove the coercive and

1. Matters Considered.

Where an offer is perceived as serious and substantial, an appropriate place for the board to begin its consideration may be an informed understanding of the corporation's value. This may be advisable whether the board's ultimate response is to "say no," to refuse to remove pre-existing defensive measures, to adopt new or different defensive measures or to pursue another strategic course to maximize shareholder value. Such a point of departure is consistent with *Van Gorkom* and *Unocal*. In *Van Gorkom*, the board was found grossly negligent, among other things, for not having an understanding of the intrinsic value of the corporation.[509] In *Unocal*, the inadequacy of price was recognized as a threat for which a proportionate response is permitted.[510]

That is not to say, however, that a board must "price" the corporation whenever a suitor appears. Moreover, it may be ill advised even to document a range of values for the corporation before the conclusion of negotiations. However, should the decision be made to sell or should a defensive reaction be challenged, the board will be well served to have been adequately informed of intrinsic value during its deliberations from the beginning.[511] In doing so, the board may also establish, should it need to do so under enhanced scrutiny, that it acted at all times to maintain or seek "the best value reasonably available to the stockholders."[512] This may also be advisable even if that value derives from remaining independent.

There are, of course, factors other than value to be considered by the board in evaluating an offer. The Delaware judicial guidance here comes from the sale context and the evaluation of competing bids, but may be instructive:

> In assessing the bid and the bidder's responsibility, a board may consider, among various proper factors, the adequacy and terms of the offer; its fairness and feasibility; the proposed or actual financing for the offer, and the consequences of that financing; questions of illegality; the impact of both the bid and the potential acquisition on other constituencies, provided that it bears some reasonable relationship to general shareholder interests; the risk of nonconsummation; the basic stockholder interests at stake; the bidder's identity, prior background and

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inadequate aspects of the offer. USG decided not to bargain over the terms of the offer because doing so would convey the image to the market place 'that (1) USG was for sale – when, in fact, it was not; and (2) $42/share was an 'in the ballpark' price - when, in fact, it was not.'"); *Citron*, 569 A.2d at 63, 66-67 (validating a board's action in approving one bid over another that, although higher on its face, lacked in specifics of its proposed back-end which made the bid impossible to value). *Compare Golden Cycle, LLC v. Allan*, C.A. No. 16301, 1998 WL 892631, at *15-16 (Del. Ch. Dec. 10, 1998) (a board is not required to contact competing bidder for a higher bid before executing a merger agreement where bidder had taken itself out of the board process, refused to sign a confidentiality agreement and appealed directly to the stockholders with a consent solicitation).

509 *Smith v. Van Gorkom*, 488 A.2d 858, 874 (Del. 1985).

510 *Unocal*, 493 A.2d at 955; *see also Unitrin, Inc. v. American Gen. Corp.*, 651 A.2d 1361, 1384 (Del. 1995) (noting as a threat "substantive coercion . . . the risk that shareholders will mistakenly accept an underpriced offer because they disbelieve management's representations of intrinsic value.").

511 *See Cede & Co. v. Technicolor, Inc.*, 634 A.2d 345, 368 (Del. 1993).

512 *Paramount Commc'ns Inc. v. QVC Network Inc.*, 637 A.2d 34, 45 (Del. 1994).

other business venture experiences; and the bidder's business plans for the corporation and their effects on stockholder interests.[513]

2. Being Adequately Informed.

Although there is no one blueprint for being adequately informed,[514] the Delaware courts do value expert advice, the judgment of directors who are independent and sophisticated, and an active and orderly deliberation.

a. Investment Banking Advice.

Addressing the value of a corporation generally entails obtaining investment banking advice.[515] The analysis of value requires the "techniques or methods which are generally considered acceptable in the financial community."[516] Clearly, in *Van Gorkom*, the absence of expert advice prior to the first Board consideration of a merger proposal contributed to the determination that the Board "lacked valuation information adequate to reach an informed business judgment as to the fairness [of the price]" and the finding that the directors were grossly negligent.[517] Although the Delaware Supreme Court noted that "fairness opinions by independent investment bankers are [not] required as a matter of law,"[518] in practice, investment banking advice is typically obtained for a decision to sell and often for a decision not to sell. In the non-sale context, such advice is particularly helpful where there may be subsequent pressure to sell or disclosure concerning the board's decision not to sell is likely. In either case, however, the fact that the board of directors relies on expert advice to reach a decision provides strong support that the Board acted reasonably.[519]

The advice of investment bankers is not, however, a substitute for the judgment of the directors.[520] As the Court pointed out in *Citron*, "in change of control situations, sole reliance on hired experts and management can 'taint the design and execution of the transaction.'"[521] In addition, the timing, scope and diligence of the investment bankers may affect the outcome of subsequent judicial scrutiny. The following cases, each of which involves a decision to sell,

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513 *Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, 559 A.2d 1261, 1282 n.29 (Del. 1988) (citations omitted).

514 *See Goodwin v. Live Entm't, Inc.*, C.A. No. 15765, 1999 WL 64265, at *21 (Del. Ch. 1999) (citing *Barkan v. Amsted Indus., Inc.*, 567 A.2d 1279, 1286 (1989)).

515 *See, e.g., In re Talley Indus., Inc. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 15961, 1998 WL 191939, at *11-12 (Del. Ch. 1998).

516 *Weinberger v. UOP, Inc.*, 457 A.2d 701, 713 (Del. 1985).

517 *Smith v. Van Gorkom*, 488 A.2d 858, 877-78 (Del. 1985).

518 *Id*. at 876.

519 *See Goodwin*, 1999 WL 64265, at *22 ("The fact that the Board relied on expert advice in reaching its decision not to look for other purchasers also supports the reasonableness of its efforts."); *In re Vitalink Commc'ns Corp. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 12085, 1991 WL 238816, at *12 (Del. Ch. 1991) (citations omitted) (relying on the advice of investment bankers supported a finding that the board had a "reasonable basis" to conclude that it obtained the best offer).

520 *See In re IXC Commc'ns, Inc. S'holders Litig.,* C.A. Nos. 17324 & 17334, 1999 Del. Ch. LEXIS 210 (Del. Ch. Oct. 27, 1999) ("No board is obligated to heed the counsel of any of its advisors and with good reason. Finding otherwise would establish a procedure by which this Court simply substitutes advise from Morgan Stanley or Merrill Lynch for the business judgment of the board charged with ultimate responsibility for deciding the best interests of shareholders.").

521 *Citron v. Fairchild Camera & Instrument Corp.*, 569 A.2d 53, 66 (Del 1989) (citation omitted).

nevertheless may be instructive for board deliberations concerning a transaction that does not result in a sale decision.

(1) In *Weinberger*,[522] the Delaware Supreme Court held that the board's approval of an interested merger transaction did not meet the test of fairness.[523] The fairness analysis prepared by the investment bankers was criticized as "hurried" where due diligence was conducted over a weekend and the price was slipped into the opinion by the banking partner (who was also a director of the corporation) after a quick review of the assembled diligence on a plane flight.[524]

(2) In *Macmillan*,[525] the Court enjoined defensive measures adopted by the board, including a lock-up and no-shop granted to an acquiror, to hinder competing bids from Mills. The Court questioned an investment bank's conclusion that an $80 per share cash offer was inadequate when it had earlier opined that the value of the company was between $72 and $80 per share and faulted the investment bankers, who were retained by and consulted with financially interested management, for lack of independence.[526]

(3) In *Technicolor*,[527] the Court faulted the valuation package prepared by the investment bankers because they were given limited access to senior officers and directors of Technicolor.

Often all or part of the investment banker's fee is payable only in the event of success in the transaction. If there is a contingent component in the banker's fee, the Board should recognize the possible effect of that incentive and, if a transaction is ultimately submitted for shareholder vote, include information about the contingent element among the disclosures to shareholders.[528]

b. Value of Independent Directors, Special Committees.

One of the first tasks of counsel in a takeover context is to assess the independence of the Board.[529] In a sale of control transaction, "the role of outside, independent directors becomes particularly important because of the magnitude of a sale of control transaction and the

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522 *Weinberger v. UOP, Inc.*, 457 A.2d 701 (Del. 1983).

523 *Id*. at 715.

524 *Id*. at 712.

525 *Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, 559 A.2d 1261 (Del. 1988).

526 *Id*. at 1271.

527 *Cede & Co. v. Technicolor, Inc.*, 634 A.2d 345 (Del. 1993).

528 *See Louisiana Municipal Police Employees' Retirement System v. Crawford*, 918 A.2d 1172, 1190 (Del. Ch. 2007); *Express Scripts, Inc. v. Crawford*, C.A. No. 2663-N, 2007 WL 707550 (Del. Ch. Feb. 23, 2007) (holding, in each case, that a postponement of the stockholder vote was necessary to provide the target stockholders with additional disclosure that the major part of the financial advisors' fee was contingent upon the consummation of a transaction by target with its merger partner or a third party). The target's proxy statement disclosure was found misleading because it did not clearly state that its financial advisors were entitled to the fee only if the initial merger was approved. The Court concluded that disclosure of these financial incentives to the financial advisors was material to the stockholder deliberations on the merger.

529 *See, e.g., Kahn v. MSB Bancorp, Inc.*, C.A. No. 14712 NC, 1998 WL 409355, at *3 (Del. Ch. 1998), *aff'd.* 734 A.2d 158 (Del. 1999) ("[T]he fact that nine of the ten directors are not employed by MSB, but are outside directors, strengthens the presumption of good faith.").

possibility, in certain cases, that management may not necessarily be impartial."[530] As pointed out by the Delaware Supreme Court in *Unocal*, when enhanced scrutiny is applied by the Court, "proof is materially enhanced . . . by the approval of a board comprised of a majority of outside independent directors who have acted [in good faith and after a reasonable investigation]."[531]

(1) *Characteristics of an Independent Director*. An independent director has been defined as a non-employee and non-management director.[532] To be effective, outside directors cannot be dominated by financially interested members of management or a controlling stockholder.[533] Care should also be taken to restrict the influence of other interested directors, which may include recusal of interested directors from participation in certain board deliberations.[534]

(2) *Need for Active Participation*. Active participation of the independent members of the board is important in demonstrating that the Board did not simply follow management. In *Time*,[535] the Delaware Supreme Court considered Time's actions in recasting its previously negotiated merger with Warner into an outright cash and securities acquisition of Warner financed with significant debt to ward off Paramount's surprise all-cash offer to acquire Time. Beginning immediately after Paramount announced its bid, the Time board met repeatedly to discuss the bid, determined the merger with Warner to be a better course of action, and declined to open negotiations with Paramount. The outside directors met independently, and the Board sought advice from corporate counsel and financial advisors. Through this process the Board reached its decision to restructure the combination with Warner. The Court viewed favorably the participation of certain of the Board's 12 independent directors in the analysis of Paramount's bid. The Time Board's process contrasts with *Van Gorkom*, where although one-half of Trans Union's Board was independent, an absence of any inquiry by those directors as to the basis of management's analysis and no review of the transaction documents contributed to the Court's finding that the board was grossly negligent in its decision to approve a merger.[536]

(3) *Use of Special Committee*. When directors or shareholders with fiduciary obligations have a conflict of interest with respect to a proposed transaction, the use of a special committee is recommended. A special committee is also recommended where there is the potential for a conflict to develop.[537] Accordingly, use of a special committee should be

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530 *Paramount Commc'ns Inc. v. QVC Network Inc.*, 637 A.2d 34, 44 (Del. 1994); *see also Macmillan*, 559 A.2d 1261.

531 *Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petrol. Co.*, 493 A.2d 946, 955 (Del 1985).

532 *Unitrin, Inc. v. Am. Gen. Corp.*, 651 A.2d 1361, 1375 (Del. 1995); *see supra* notes 248-264 and related text.

533 *See Macmillan*, 559 A.2d at 1266.

534 *See Cede & Co. v. Technicolor, Inc.*, 634 A.2d 345, 366 n.35 (Del 1993). *See also Brehm v. Eisner*, 746 A.2d 244, 257 (Del. 2000) (evaluating a charge that directors breached fiduciary duties in approving employment and subsequent severance of a corporation's president, the Delaware Supreme Court held that the "issues of disinterestedness and independence" turn on whether the directors were "incapable, due to personal interest or domination and control, of objectively evaluating" an action).

535 *Paramount Commc'ns, Inc. v. Time Inc.*, 571 A.2d 1140 (Del. 1989).

536 *Smith v. Van Gorkom*, 488 A.2d 858, 893 (Del 1985). *See also Kahn v. Tremont Corp.*, 694 A.2d 422, 429 (Del. 1997) (finding that the three member special committee of outside directors was not fully informed, not active, and did not appropriately simulate an arm's-length transaction, given that two of the three members permitted the other member to perform the committee's essential functions and one of the committee members did not attend a single meeting of the committee).

537 *See In re Western Nat'l Corp. S'holders Litig.*, No. 15927, 2000 WL 710192, at *26 (Del. Ch. May 22, 2000) (discussing the use of a special committee where the transaction involved a 46% stockholder; the Court ultimately held

considered in connection with any going-private transaction (i.e., management buy-outs or squeeze-out mergers), asset sales or acquisitions involving entities controlled by or affiliated with directors or controlling shareholders, or any other transactions with majority or controlling shareholders.[538] If a majority of the Board is disinterested and independent with respect to a proposed transaction (other than a freeze out merger proposal by a controlling stockholder), a special committee may not be necessary, since the Board's decision will be accorded deference under the business judgment rule (assuming, of course, that the disinterested directors are not dominated or otherwise controlled by the interested party(ies)).[539] In that circumstance, the disinterested directors may act on behalf of the company and the interested directors should abstain from deliberating and voting on the proposed transaction.[540]

Although there is no legal requirement under Delaware law that an interested Board make use of a special committee, the Delaware courts have indicated that the absence of such a committee in connection with an affiliate or conflict transaction may evidence the transaction's unfairness (or other procedural safeguards, such as a majority of minority vote requirement).[541]

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that because the 46% stockholder was not a controlling stockholder, the business judgment rule would apply: "[w]ith the aid of its expert advisors, the Committee apprised itself of all reasonably available information, negotiated . . . at arm's length and, ultimately, determined that the merger transaction was in the best interests of the Company and its public shareholders.").

538 *See In re Digex, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 789 A.2d 1176, 1193 (Del. Ch. 2000) (special committee of a company with a controlling corporate shareholder formed to consider potential acquisition offers); *Kohls v. Duthie*, 765 A.2d 1274, 1284 (Del. Ch. 2000) (special committee formed in connection with a management buyout transaction); *T. Rowe Price Recovery Fund, L.P. v. Rubin*, 770 A.2d 536 (Del. Ch. 2000) (special committee used to consider shared service agreements among corporation and its chief competitor, both of which were controlled by the same entity); *In re MAXXAM, Inc./Federated Dev. S'holders Litig.*, 1997 Del. Ch. LEXIS 51 (Del. Ch. Apr. 4, 1997) (special committee formed to consider a purchase of assets from the controlling stockholder); *Citron v. E.I. Du Pont de Nemours & Co.*, 584 A.2d 490 (Del. Ch. 1990) (majority shareholder purchase of minority shares); *Kahn v. Lynch Commc'n Sys., Inc.* ("*Lynch I*"), 638 A.2d 1110 (Del. 1984) (special committee formed for controlling shareholder's offer to purchase publicly held shares); *In re Resorts Int'l S'holders Litig.*, 570 A.2d 259 (Del. 1990) (special committee used to evaluate controlling shareholder's tender offer and competing tender offer); *Kahn v. Sullivan*, 594 A.2d 48, 53 (Del. 1991) (special committee formed to evaluate corporation's charitable gift to entity affiliated with the company's chairman and CEO); *Kahn v. Dairy Mart Convenience Stores, Inc.*, 1996 Del. Ch. LEXIS 38 (Del. Ch. March 29, 1996) (special committee formed to consider management LBO); *Kahn v. Roberts*, 679 A.2d 460, 465 (Del. 1996) (special committee formed to evaluate stock repurchase from 33% shareholder).

539 *See In re NYMEX Shareholder Litigation*, C.A. No. 3621-VCN (Del. Ch. Sept. 30, 2009), in which the Chancery Court wrote in granting the defendant directors' motion to dismiss:

> The claim that [the Chairman of the Board and the CEO] breached their fiduciary duties by being the sole negotiators with CME [the successful bidder] and not involving the SIC [Strategic Initiatives Committee] in the consideration or negotiation of the acquisition is dismissed. It is well within the business judgment of the Board to determine how merger negotiations will be conducted, and to delegate the task of negotiating to the Chairman and the Chief Executive Officer. Additionally, as the Court has already found that the Board was clearly independent, there was no requirement to involve an independent committee in negotiations, nor does the existence of such a committee mandate its use. The allegation that [the Chairman of the Board and the CEO] committed to CME that NYMEX would not renegotiate any of the economic terms of the acquisition is similarly not actionable, since Plaintiffs have not put forth any evidence for how [the Chairman of the Board and the CEO] were capable of binding NYMEX from seeking to modify the terms of the agreement had the Board wanted to. Slip Op. at 20-21.

540 *See* DGCL § 144 (providing that interested director transactions will not be void or voidable solely due to the existence of the conflict if certain safeguards are utilized, including approval by a majority of the disinterested directors, assuming full disclosure).

541 *See Seagraves v. Urstady Prop. Co.*, C.A. No. 10307, 1996 Del. Ch. LEXIS 36, at *16 (Del. Ch. Apr. 1, 1996) (lack of special committee or other procedural safeguards "evidences the absence of fair dealing"); *Jedwab v. MGM Grand*

(i) Formation of the Committee

Where a majority of the Board is disinterested, a special committee may be useful if there are reasons to isolate the deliberations of the noninterested directors.[542] Where a majority of the directors have some real or perceived conflict, however, and in the absence of any other procedural safeguards, the formation of a special committee is critical. Ideally, the special committee should be formed prior to the first series of negotiations of a proposed transaction, or immediately upon receipt of an unsolicited merger or acquisition proposal. Formation at a later stage is acceptable, however, if the special committee is still capable of influencing and ultimately rejecting the proposed transaction.[543] As a general rule, however, the special committee should be formed whenever the conflicts of fellow directors become apparent in light of a proposed or contemplated transaction. To the extent possible, the controlling stockholder or the CEO, if interested, should not select, or influence the selection of, the members of the special committee or its chairperson.[544]

(ii) Independence and Disinterestedness

In selecting the members of a special committee, care should be taken to ensure not only that the members have no financial interest in the transaction, but that they have no financial ties, or are otherwise beholden, to any person or entity involved in the transaction.[545] In other words,

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Hotels, Inc., 509 A.2d 584, 599 (Del. Ch. 1986) (lack of independent committee is pertinent factor in assessing whether fairness was accorded to the minority); *Boyer v. Wilmington Materials, Inc.*, C.A. No. 12549, 1997 Del. Ch. LEXIS 97, at *20 (Del. Ch. June 27, 1997) (lack of special committee is an important factor in a court's "overall assessment of whether a transaction was fair").

542 *See Spiegal v. Buntrock*, 571 A.2d 767, 776 n.18 (Del. 1990) ("Even when a majority of a board of directors is independent, one advantage of establishing a special litigation committee is to isolate the interested directors from material information during either the investigative or decisional process"); *Moore Bus. Forms, Inc. v. Cordant Holdings Corp.*, C.A. Nos. 13911, 14595, 1996 Del. Ch. LEXIS 56, at *18-19 (Del. Ch. June 4, 1996) (recommending use of a special committee to prevent shareholder's board designee's access to privileged information regarding possible repurchase of shareholder's preferred stock; "the special committee would have been free to retain separate legal counsel, and its communications with that counsel would have been properly protected from disclosure to [the shareholder] and its director designee"); *Kohls v. Duthie*, 765 A.2d 1274, 1285 (forming a special committee to isolate the negotiations of the noninterested directors from one director that would participate in a management buyout).

543 *See In re SS&C Technologies, Inc. S'holder Litig.*, 911 A.2d 816 (Del. Ch. 2006) (discussing the settlement of litigation challenging a management led cash-out merger that was disapproved in part because the Court was concerned that the buyer's proposal was solicited by the CEO without prior Board approval as part of informal "test the waters" process to find a buyer who would pay a meaningful premium while allowing the CEO to make significant investment in the acquisition vehicle and continue managing the target). After being satisfied with the buyer's proposal but before all details had been negotiated, the CEO advised the Board about the deal. The Board then formed special committee that hired independent legal and financial advisers and embarked on a program to solicit other buyers, but the Court was concerned that this process was perhaps too late to affect outcome. The Court expressed concern whether the CEO had misused confidential information and resources of corporation in talking to his selected buyer and engaging an investment banker before Board approval and whether the CEO's precommitment to a deal with the buyer and his conflicts (i.e., receiving cash plus an interest in the acquisition vehicle and continuing management role) prevented the Board from considering whether a sale should take place and, if so, to negotiating the best terms reasonably available. *See infra* note 928 and related text.

544 *See Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, 559 A.2d 1261, 1267 (Del. 1988) (noting that, in a case where a special committee had no burden-shifting effect, the interested CEO "hand picked" the members of the committee); *In re Fort Howard Corp. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 9991, 1988 WL 83147, at *12 (Del. Ch. 1988) ("It cannot . . . be the best practice to have the interested CEO in effect handpick the members of the Special Committee as was, I am satisfied, done here.").

545 *See Katell v. Morgan Stanley Group, Inc.*, C.A. No. 12343, 1995 Del. Ch. LEXIS 76, at * 21 (Del. Ch. June 15, 1995) ("When a special committee's members have no personal interest in the disputed transactions, this Court scrutinizes the

all committee members should be independent and disinterested. To be disinterested, the member cannot derive any personal (primarily financial) benefit from the transaction not shared by the stockholders.[546] To be independent, the member's decisions must be "based on the corporate merits of the subject before the [committee] rather than extraneous considerations or influences."[547] To establish non-independence, a plaintiff has to show that the committee members were "beholden" to the conflicted party or "so under [the conflicted party's] influence that their discretion would be sterilized."[548] In a recent case in which committee members appeared to abdicate their responsibilities to another member "whose independence was most suspect," the Delaware Supreme Court reemphasized "it is the care, attention and sense of individual responsibility to the performance of one's duties . . . that generally touches on independence."[549]

If a committee member votes to approve a transaction to appease the interested director/shareholder, to stay in the interested party's good graces, or because he/she is beholden to the interested party for the continued receipt of consulting fees or other payments, such committee member will not be viewed as independent.[550]

(iii) Selection of Legal and Financial Advisors

Although there is no legal requirement that a special committee retain legal and financial advisors, committees often retain advisors to help them carry out their duties.[551] The selection of advisors, however, may influence a court's determinations of the independence of the committee and the effectiveness of the process.[552]

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members' relationship with the interested directors"); E. Norman Veasey, *Duty of Loyalty: The Criticality of the Counselor's Role*, 45 BUS. LAW. 2065, 2079 ("[T]he members of the committee should not have unusually close personal or business relations with the conflicted directors . . . .").

546 *Pogostin v. Rice*, 480 A.2d 619, 624, 627 (Del. 1984) (overruled as to standard of appellate review).

547 *Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A.2d 805, 816 (Del. 19784) (overruled as to standard of appellate review); *In re MAXXAM, Inc./Federated Dev. S'holders Litig.*, 659 A.2d 760, 773 (Del. Ch. 1995) ("To be considered independent, a director must not be 'dominated or controlled by an individual or entity interested in the transaction.'") (*citing Grobow v. Perot*, 539 A.2d 180, 189 (Del. 1988) (overruled as to standard of appellate review)). *See also Grimes v. Donald*, 673 A.2d 1207, 1219 n.25 (Del. 1996) (describing parenthetically *Lynch I* as a case in which the "'independent committee' of the board did not act independently when it succumbed to threat of controlling stockholder") (overruled as to standard of appellate review).

548 *MAXXAM*, 659 A.2d at 773 (*quoting Rales v. Blasband*, 634 A.2d 927, 936 (Del. 1993)).

549 *Kahn v. Tremont Corp.*, 694 A.2d 422, 429-30 (Del. 1997) (citing *Aronson*, 473 A.2d at 816).

550 *Rales*, 634 A.2d at 936-37; *MAXXAM, Inc./Federated Dev. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 12111, 1997 Del. Ch. LEXIS 51, at *66-71 (Del. Ch. Apr. 4, 1997) (noting that special committee members would not be considered independent due to their receipt of consulting fees or other compensation from entities controlled by the shareholder who controlled the company); *Kahn v. Tremont Corp.*, 694 A.2d 422, 429-30 (Del. 1997) (holding that the special committee "did not function independently" because the members had "previous affiliations with [an indirect controlling shareholder, Simmons,] or companies which he controlled and, as a result, received significant financial compensation or influential positions on the boards of Simmons' controlled companies."); *Kahn v. Dairy Mart Convenience Stores, Inc.*, C.A. No. 12489, 1996 Del. Ch. LEXIS 38, at *18-19 (Del. Ch. Mar. 29, 1996) (noting that the special committee member was also a paid consultant for the corporation, raising concerns that he was beholden to the controlling shareholder).

551 *See*, *e.g.*, *Strassburger v. Earley*, 752 A.2d 557, 567 (Del. Ch. 2000) (criticizing a one-man special committee and finding it ineffective in part because it had not been "advised by independent legal counsel or even an experienced investment banking firm.").

552 *See Dairy Mart*, 1996 Del. Ch. LEXIS 38, at *22 n.6 (noting that a "critical factor in assessing the reliability and independence of the process employed by a special committee, is the committee's financial and legal advisors and how

Selection of advisors should be made by the committee after its formation. Although the special committee may rely on the company's professional advisors, perception of the special committee's independence is enhanced by the separate retention of advisors who have no prior affiliation with the company or interested parties.[553] Accordingly, the special committee should take time to ensure that its professional advisors have no prior or current, direct or indirect, material affiliations with interested parties.

Retention of legal and financial advisors by the special committee also enhances its ability to be fully informed. Because of the short timeframe of many of today's transactions, professional advisors allow the committee to assimilate large amounts of information more quickly and effectively than the committee could without advisors. Having advisors who can efficiently process and condense information is important where the committee is asked to evaluate proposals or competing proposals within days of its making.[554] Finally, a court will give some deference to the committee's selection of advisors where there is no indication that they were retained for an "improper purpose."[555]

(iv) The Special Committee's Charge: "Real Bargaining Power"

From a litigation standpoint, one of the most important documents when defending a transaction that has utilized a special committee is the board resolution authorizing the special committee and describing the scope of its authority.[556] Obviously, if the board has materially limited the special committee's authority, the work of the special committee will not be given great deference in litigation since the conflicted board will be viewed as having retained ultimate control over the process.[557] Where, however, the special committee is given broad authority and

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they were selected"); *In re Fort Howard Corp. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 9991, 1988 WL 83147 (Del. Ch. Aug. 8, 1988) (discussing that "no role is more critical with respect to protection of shareholder interests in these matters than that of the expert lawyers who guide sometimes inexperienced [committee members] through the process"). *See infra* note 578 and related text.

553 *See, e.g., Citron v. E.I. Du Pont de Nemours & Co.*, 584 A.2d 490, 494 (Del. Ch. 1990) (noting that to ensure a completely independent review of a majority stockholder's proposal the independent committee retained its own independent counsel rather than allowing management of the company to retain counsel on its behalf); *cf. In re Fort Howard*, 1988 WL 83147 (noting that the interested CEO had selected the committee's legal counsel; "[a] suspicious mind is made uneasy contemplating the possibilities when the interested CEO is so active in choosing his adversary"); *Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, 559 A.2d 1261, 1267-68 (Del. 1988) (noting that conflicted management, in connection with an MBO transaction, had "intensive contact" with a financial advisor who subsequently was selected by management to advise the special committee).

554 S*ee, e.g., In re KDI Corp. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 10278, 1990 Del. Ch. LEXIS 201, at *10, Fed. Sec. L. Rep. (CCH) 95727 (Del. Ch. Dec. 13, 1990) (noting that special committee's financial advisor contacted approximately 100 potential purchasers in addition to evaluating fairness of management's proposal).

555 *See Clements v. Rogers*, 790 A.2d 1222, 1228 (Del. Ch. 2001) (brushing aside criticism of choice of local banker where there was valid business reasons for the selection).

556 *See, e.g., In re Digex, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 789 A.2d 1176, 1183 (Del. Ch. 2000) (quoting board resolution which described the special committee's role); *Strassburger*, 752 A.2d at 567 (quoting the board resolution authorizing the special committee); *Kahn v. Sullivan*, 594 A.2d 48, 53 (Del. 1991) (quoting in full the board resolutions creating the special committee and describing its authority).

557 *See*, *e.g.*, *Strassburger*, 752 A.2d at 571 (noting that the "narrow scope" of the committee's assignment was "highly significant" to its finding that the committee was ineffective and would not shift the burden of proof).

permitted to negotiate the best possible transaction, the special committee's work and business decisions will be accorded substantial deference.[558]

The requisite power of a special committee was addressed initially in *Rabkin v. Olin Corp.*[559] In *Rabkin*, the Court noted that the "mere existence of an independent special committee" does not itself shift the burden of proof with respect to the entire fairness standard of review. Rather, the Court stated that at least two factors are required:

> First, the majority shareholder must not dictate the terms of the merger. Second, the special committee must have real bargaining power that it can exercise with the majority shareholder on an arms length basis. The Hunt special committee was given the narrow mandate of determining the monetary fairness of a non-negotiable offer. [The majority shareholder] dictated the terms of the merger and there were no arm's length negotiations. Unanimous approval by the apparently independent Hunt board suffers from the same infirmities as the special committee. The ultimate burden of showing by a preponderance of the evidence that the merger was entirely fair thus remains with the defendants.[560]

Even when a committee is active, aggressive and informed, its approval of a transaction will not shift the entire fairness burden of persuasion unless the committee is free to reject the proposed transaction.[561] As the Court emphasized in *Lynch I*:

> The power to say no is a significant power. It is the duty of directors serving on [an independent] committee to approve only a transaction that is in the best interests of the public shareholders, to say no to any transaction that is not fair to those shareholders and is not the best transaction available. It is not sufficient for such directors to achieve the best price that a fiduciary will pay if that price is not a fair price.[562]

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558 *Compare Kohls v. Duthie*, 765 A.2d 1274, 1285 (Del. Ch. 2000) (noting the bargaining power, active negotiations and frequent meetings of the special committee and concluding that the special committee process was effective and that defendants would likely prevail at a final hearing) *with International Telecharge, Inc. v. Bomarko, Inc.*, 766 A.2d 437, 440 (Del. 2000) (affirming the trial court's application of the entire fairness standard where the special committee was misinformed and did not engage in meaningful negotiations).

559 C.A. No. 7547, 1990 Del. Ch. LEXIS 50, at *18, Fed. Sec. L. Rep. (CCH) 95255 (Del. Ch. Apr. 17, 1990), *reprinted in* 16 DEL. J. CORP. L. 851 (1991), *aff'd*, 586 A.2d 1202 (Del. 1990) (*"Rabkin"*).

560 *Rabkin*, 1990 Del. Ch. LEXIS 50, at *18-19 (citations omitted); *see also Kahn v. Lynch Commc'n Sys., Inc.*, 669 A.2d 79, 82-83 (Del. 1995) (*"Lynch II"*) (noting the Delaware Supreme Court's approval of the *Rabkin* two-part test).

561 *Kahn v. Lynch Commc'n Systems, Inc.*, 638 A.2d 1110, 1120-21 (*"Lynch I"*) ("[p]articular consideration must be given to evidence of whether the special committee was truly independent, fully informed, and had the freedom to negotiate at arm's length"); *see also In re First Boston, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 10338, 1990 Del. Ch. LEXIS 74, at *20, Fed. Sec. L. Rep. (CCH) 95322 (Del. Ch. June 7, 1990) (holding that although the special committee's options were limited, it retained "the critical power: the power to say no").

562 *Lynch I*, 638 A.2d at 1119 (*quoting In re First Boston, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 1990 Del. Ch. LEXIS 74, at *20-21).

Accordingly, unless the interested party can demonstrate it has "replicated a process 'as though each of the contending parties had in fact exerted its bargaining power at arm's length,' the burden of proving entire fairness will not shift."[563]

Importantly, if there is any change in the responsibilities of the committee due to, for example, changed circumstances, the authorizing resolution should be amended or otherwise supplemented to reflect the new charge.[564]

(v) Informed and Active

A committee with real bargaining power will not cause the burden of persuasion to shift unless the committee exercises that power in an informed and active manner.[565] The concepts of being active and being informed are interrelated. An informed committee will almost necessarily be active and vice versa.[566]

To be informed, the committee necessarily must be knowledgeable with respect to the company's business and advised of, or involved in, ongoing negotiations. To be active, the committee members should be involved in the negotiations or at least communicating frequently with the designated negotiator. In addition, the members should meet frequently with their independent advisors so that they can acquire "critical knowledge of essential aspects of the [transaction]."[567]

Committee members need to rely upon, interact with, and challenge their financial and legal advisors. While reliance is often important and necessary, the committee should not allow an advisor to assume the role of ultimate decision-maker. For example, in *In re Trans World Airlines, Inc. Shareholders Litigation*, the Court determined, in connection with a preliminary injunction application, that substantial questions were raised as to the effectiveness of a special committee where the committee misunderstood its role and "relied almost completely upon the

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563 *Lynch I*, 638 A.2d at 1121 (*quoting Weinberger v. UOP Inc.*, 457 A.2d 701, 709-710 n.7 (Del 1983)). *See also In re Digex, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 789 A.2d 1176, 1208-09 (Del. Ch. 2000) (noting that the inability of a special committee to exercise real bargaining power concerning § 203 issues is fatal to the process).

564 *See, e.g., In re Resorts Int'l S'holders Litig.*, 570 A.2d 259 (Del. 1990) (discussing situation where special committee initially considered controlling shareholder's tender offer and subsequently a competing tender offer and proposed settlements of litigation resulting from offers); *Lynch I*, 638 A.2d at 1113 (noting that the board "revised the mandate of the Independent Committee" in light of tender offer by controlling stockholder).

565 *See*, *e.g.*, *Kahn v. Dairy Mart Convenience Stores, Inc.*, C.A. No. 12489, 1996 Del. Ch. LEXIS 38, at *7 (Del. Ch. March 29, 1996) (noting that despite being advised that its duty was "to seek the best result for the shareholders, the committee never negotiated for a price higher than $15"); *Strassburger v. Earley*, 752 A.2d 557, 567 (Del. Ch. 2000) (finding a special committee ineffective where it did not engage in negotiations and "did not consider all information highly relevant to [the] assignment"); *Clements v. Rogers*, 790 A.2d 1222, 1242 (Del. Ch. 2001) (criticizing a special committee for failing to fully understand the scope of the committee's assignment).

566 *Kahn v. Tremont Corp.*, 694 A.2d 422, 430 (Del. 1997).

567 *Id.* at 429-430 (committee member's "absence from all meetings with advisors or fellow committee members, rendered him ill-suited as a defender of the interests of minority shareholders in the dynamics of fast moving negotiations"). *See also Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, 559 A.2d 1261, 1268 n.9 (Del. 1988) (discussing case where special committee had no burden-shifting effect, and noting that one committee member "failed to attend a single meeting of the Committee"); *Strassburger*, 752 A.2d at 557, 571 (finding an ineffective committee where its sole member did not engage in negotiations and had less than complete information).

efforts of [its financial advisor], both with respect to the evaluation of the fairness of the price offered and with respect to such negotiations as occurred."[568]

Similarly, in *Mills Acquisition Co. v. MacMillan, Inc.*,[569] the Court criticized the independent directors for failing to diligently oversee an auction process conducted by the company's investment advisor that indirectly involved members of management. In this regard, the Court stated:

> Without board planning and oversight to insulate the self-interested management from improper access to the bidding process, and to ensure the proper conduct of the auction by truly independent advisors selected by, and answerable only to, the independent directors, the legal complications which a challenged transaction faces under [enhanced judicial scrutiny] are unnecessarily intensified.[570]

c. Significant Recent Process Cases.

(1) In *In re Tele-Communications, Inc. Shareholders Litigation*,[571] the Chancery Court denied defendant's motion for summary judgment on several claims arising out of the 1999 merger of Tele-Communications, Inc. ("*TCI*") with AT&T Corp. in large part because the defendants failed to adequately show that a special committee of the TCI board of directors formed to consider the merger proposal was truly independent, fully informed and had the freedom to negotiate at arm's length in a manner sufficient to shift the burden of proving entire fairness of a transaction providing a premium to a class or series of high-vote stock over a class or series of low-vote stock. Citing *FLS Holdings*[572] and *Reader's Digest*,[573] the Chancery Court in *Tele-Communications* found that entire fairness should apply because "a clear and significant benefit . . . accrued primarily . . . to such directors controlling such a large vote of the corporation, at the expense of another class of shareholders to whom was owed a fiduciary duty."[574] Alternatively, the Court concluded that a majority of the TCI directors were interested

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568 C.A. No. 9844, 1988 Del. Ch. LEXIS 139, at *12, *22 (Del. Ch. Oct. 21, 1988) *reprinted in* 14 DEL. J. CORP. L. 870 (1989).

569 559 A.2d at 1281.

570 *Id.* at 1282 (citing *Weinberger v. UOP, Inc.*, 457 A.2d 701, 709 n.7 (Del. 1983)).

571 C.A. No. 16470-CC, 2005 WL 3642727 (Del. Ch. Dec. 21, 2005, revised Jan. 10, 2006).

572 *In re FLS Holdings, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 1993 WL 104562 (Del. Ch. Apr. 21, 1993) *reprinted in* 19 DEL. J. CORP. L. 270 (1993).

573 *Levco Alternative Fund Ltd. v. Reader's Digest Ass'n, Inc.*, 803 A.2d 428 (Del. 2002).

574 *In re Tele-Communications*, 2005 WL 3642727; *In re LNR Property Corp. S'holder Litig.*, 896 A.2d 169 (Del. Ch. 2005) (holding that minority shareholders who were cashed out in a merger negotiated by the controlling shareholder – who also ended up with a 20 percent stake in the purchaser – stated allegations sufficient to warrant application of the entire-fairness standard of review and wrote: "When a controlling shareholder stands on both sides of a transaction, he or she is required to demonstrate his or her utmost good faith and most scrupulous inherent fairness of the bargain." The shareholders further alleged that LNR's board of directors breached its fiduciary duties by allowing the controlling stockholder and the CEO, who had "obvious and disabling conflicts of interest," to negotiate the deal. Although the board formed a special independent committee to consider the deal, plaintiffs alleged, the committee was a "sham" because it was "dominated and controlled" by the controlling stockholder and the CEO, and was not permitted to negotiate with the buyer or seek other deals. Additionally, the shareholders claimed that the committee failed to get an independent evaluation of the deal, but relied on a financial advisor that worked with the controlling stockholder and the CEO to negotiate the deal, and that stood to gain an $11 million commission when the transaction was completed).

in the transaction because they each received a material benefit from the premium accorded to the high vote shares.

In reaching the decision that the defendants failed to demonstrate fair dealing and fair price, the Chancery Court found, based on a review of the evidence in a light most favorable to the plaintiffs, the following special committee process flaws:

- *The Choice of Special Committee Directors*. The special committee consisted of two directors, one of whom held high vote shares and gained an additional $1.4 million as a result of the premium paid on those shares, to serve on the special committee. This flaw appears to be of particular importance to the Court's decision and contributed to the other flaws in the committee process.

- *The Lack of a Clear Mandate*. One committee member believed the special committee's job was to represent the interests of the holders of the low vote shares, while the other member believed the special committee's job was to protect the interests of all of the stockholders.

- *The Choice of Advisors*. The special committee did not retain separate legal and financial advisors, and chose to use the TCI advisors. Moreover, the Court criticized the contingent nature of the fee paid to the financial advisors, which amounted to approximately $40 million, finding that such a fee created "a serious issue of material fact, as to whether [the financial advisors] could provide independent advice to the Special Committee." While it agreed with TCI's assertion that TCI had no interest in paying advisor fees absent a deal, the Court wrote:

  > A special committee does have an interest in bearing the upfront cost of an independent and objective financial advisor. A contingently paid and possibly interested financial advisor might be more convenient and cheaper absent a deal, but its potentially misguided recommendations could result in even higher costs to the special committee's shareholder constituency in the event a deal was consummated.[575]

  Since the advisors were hired to advise TCI in connection with the transaction, a question arises as to whether the Court's concern about the contingent nature of the fee would have been mitigated if a special committee comprised of clearly disinterested and independent directors hired independent advisors and agreed to a contingent fee that created appropriate incentives.

- *Diligence of Research and Fairness Opinion.* The special committee lacked complete information about the premium at which the high vote shares historically traded and precedent transactions involving high vote stocks. The Court noted that the plaintiffs had presented evidence that showed that the high vote shares had traded at a 10% premium or

[575] *In re Tele-Communications*, 2005 WL 3642727 at *10.

more only for "a single five-trading day interval."[576] The Court did not find it persuasive that the financial advisor supported the payment of the premium by reference to a call option agreement between the TCI CEO and TCI that allowed TCI to purchase the TCI CEO's high vote shares for a 10% premium, expressing concern about the arm's length nature of that transaction. The Court stated that the special committee should have asked the financial advisor for more information about the precedent transactions, including information concerning the prevalence of the payment of a premium to high-vote stock over low-vote stock. By contrast, the Court noted that the plaintiffs had presented evidence suggesting that a significantly higher number of precedent transactions provided no premium for high-vote stock, and neither the special committee nor its financial advisors considered the fairness of the 10% premium paid on the high vote shares:

> In the present transaction, the Special Committee failed to examine, and [its financial advisors] failed to opine upon, the fairness of the [high vote] premium to the [low vote] holders. [The financial advisors] provided only separate analyses of the fairness of the respective exchange ratios to each corresponding class. The [*Reader's Digest*] Court mandated more than separate analyses that blindly ignore the preferences another class might be receiving, and with good intuitive reason: such a doctrine of separate analyses would have allowed a fairness opinion in our case even if the [high vote] holders enjoyed a 110% premium over the [low vote] holders, as long as the [low vote] holders enjoyed a thirty-seven percent premium over the market price. Entire fairness requires an examination of the fairness of such exorbitant premiums to the prices received by the [low vote] holders. This is not to say that the premium received by the [low vote] holders is irrelevant—obviously, it must be balanced with the fairness and magnitude of the 10% [high vote] premium.[577]

- *Result is Lack of Arm's Length Bargaining*. All of the above factors led to a flawed special committee process that created an "inhospitable" environment for arm's length bargaining. The Court found that the unclear mandate, the unspecified compensation plan and the special committee's lack of information regarding historical trading prices of the high vote shares and the precedent merger transactions were relevant to concluding that the process did not result in arm's length bargaining.

(2) In *Gesoff v. IIC Indus. Inc.*,[578] the Court of Chancery made clear that in evaluating whether a going private transaction is entirely fair (or whether the burden of proving entire fairness should be shifted to the plaintiff), it will examine the composition of, and the process undertaken by, an independent committee closely for indicators of fairness. In *Gesoff*, the board of CP Holdings Limited ("*CP*"), an English holding company owning approximately 80% of IIC Industries Inc. ("*IIC*"), determined IIC should be taken private by way of a tender offer followed by a short-form merger. The IIC board appointed a special committee consisting of one member, and formally authorized him to present a recommendation to the IIC board as to the CP tender

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576 *Id.* at *11.

577 *Id.* at *14.

578 902 A.2d 1130 (Del. Ch. 2006).

offer. After some review, the one-person committee approved the tender offer transaction, but the tender offer ultimately failed to provide CP with 90% of the outstanding stock, and CP thereafter instituted a long-form merger. Although no new fairness opinion was sought for the long-form merger, the special committee member supported the transaction. Following the consummation of the transaction, minority stockholders sued, claiming the transaction was not entirely fair and also seeking appraisal.

The Chancery Court evaluated the formation and actions of the special committee to determine whether the process taken with regard to the tender offer and merger was entirely fair. The Chancery Court stated that members of such a committee must be independent and willing to perform their job throughout the entire negotiation, and further indicated that committees should typically be composed of more than one director.

The Chancery Court also reiterated the importance of a committee's mandate, stating that a committee should have a clear understanding of its duties and powers, and should be given the power not only to fully evaluate the transaction, but also to say "no" to the transaction. Although the language of the resolution granting the committee member power in this case was fairly broad (he was given the authority to appoint outside auditors and counsel, and was further authorized to spend up to $100,000 for a fairness opinion), the Chancery Court stated that the evidence indicated that his authority was closely circumscribed and that he was deeply confused regarding the structure of the transaction.

The Chancery Court was also critical of the committee's choice of financial and legal advisors, as these advisors were essentially handpicked by CP and the conflicted IIC board. The committee member accepted the appointment of a lawyer recommended by CP management who also served as IIC's outside counsel, was beholden for his job to a board dominated by CP, and had been advising CP on the tender offer. The Chancery Court stated that no reasonable observer would have believed that this attorney was appropriate independent counsel.

Evidence at trial showed that the investment bank retained by the independent committee pitched itself to the committee member prior to his receipt of authority to hire advisors, and that a member of CP's management (who had a prior relationship with the banker) emailed the banker saying he was close to having the bank "signed up" as an advisor to the committee. The committee member, relying on advice of his conflicted legal counsel, then appointed the banker without speaking to any other candidates for the position. Moreover, throughout negotiations, the banker kept CP informed of all of the committee's private valuations, essentially giving the company the upper hand in negotiations. The Chancery Court was also particularly troubled by an email between the committee's lawyer and banker and CP's management describing an orchestrated negotiation process that foreshadowed the negotiation structure that eventually occurred, and found this to be clear evidence that the negotiations were constructed by CP and were thus not at arm's-length.

Having found the process unfair, the Chancery Court then determined that the price paid was also unfair, but found that the committee member was protected by the limitation of liability provision found in IIC's charter (as permitted by DGCL § 102(b)(7)).

(3) The importance of procedural safeguards was again emphasized in *Oliver v. Boston University*,[579] and in particular, the Delaware Court of Chancery focused on the lack of a representative for the minority stockholders in merger negotiations. Boston University ("*BU*") was the controlling stockholder of Seragen, Inc. ("*Seragen*"), a financially troubled biotechnology company. After going public in 1992, Seragen entered into a number of transactions in order to address its desperate need for capital, and eventually agreed to a merger with Ligand Pharmaceuticals, Inc. ("*Ligand*"). A group of minority stockholders brought a series of claims challenging the transactions preceding the merger and the process by which the merger proceeds were allocated to the respective classes.

The Chancery Court discussed whether the potential derivative claims arising from various transactions preceding the merger were properly valued by the defendants in merger negotiations. Noting that Seragen's board effectively ignored these claims and that the negotiations and approval of these transactions were procedurally flawed because no safeguards were employed to protect the minority, the Court nonetheless found that these potential claims had no actual value.

The Chancery Court then turned to whether the allocation of merger proceeds was entirely fair, focusing on the company's failure to take steps to protect the minority, and stated:

> The Director Defendants treated the merger allocation negotiations with a surprising degree of informality, and, as with many of Seragen's transactions reviewed here, no steps were taken to ensure fairness to the minority common shareholders. More disturbing is that, although representatives of all of the priority stakeholders were involved to some degree in the negotiations, no representative negotiated on behalf of the minority common shareholders. . . . Clearly the process implementing these negotiations was severely flawed and no person acted to protect the interests of the minority common shareholders.[580]

Although the derivative claims had been found to have no value, the Chancery Court held that the allocation of merger proceeds was unfair due to both the lack of procedures to ensure its fairness and because the price was also found to be unfair. After so holding, the Chancery Court went on to dispose of the plaintiffs' disclosure, voting power dilution, and aiding and abetting claims.

(4) *In re Loral Space and Communications Inc. Consolidated Litigation* involved the issuance of preferred stock to the owner of 35.9% of Loral's common stock in a transaction structured to avoid triggering either requirements for a stockholder vote on the transaction or Board duties under *Revlon*.[581] Loral had emerged from bankruptcy with a large stockholder, defendant MHR Fund Management LLC, whose business model involved taking control of distressed companies and positioning itself to reap the benefits of control for itself and its investors. MHR soon used its influence at Loral to place one of its advisors as Loral's CEO with the goal of having MHR make a substantial equity investment into Loral that would permit Loral

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579 C.A. No. 16570, 2006 WL 1064169 (Del. Ch. Apr. 14, 2006).

580 *Id.* at 27.

581 C.A. No. 2808-VCS, 2008 WL 4293781 (Del. Ch. Sept. 19, 2008).

to pursue acquisitions and invest in growing its existing business lines. Almost as soon as the CEO assumed his position, he proposed that MHR make an investment of $300 million into Loral, an investment that would represent over half of Loral's existing stock market capitalization.

The Loral Board did not consider a sale of the company as a whole. Instead, a "Special Committee" of the Board was formed with a narrow mandate to raise $300 million in equity capital fast through a deal with MHR. The Special Committee's chair was a close friend of MHR's creator, served on three boards at the instance of MHR, and was touted by MHR as one of its investment advisors.

The Special Committee never made a market check to see whether capital was available on better terms than MHR was offering. Instead, the Special Committee, which hired an outgunned financial advisor with far less experience than MHR's advisor, did nothing substantial to test the market, and blew off an expression of interest by Goldman Sachs to invest in Loral because Goldman would only provide up to $100 million of the desired $300 million in capital.

The Special Committee struck the basic economic terms of its deal with MHR after less than two weeks of work and after conducting no market check. The deal gave MHR convertible preferred stock with a high dividend rate and low conversion rate compared to the market comparables identified by the Special Committee's advisor. The deal gave MHR extraordinary class voting rights over any action of the Loral Board that could "adversely affect" the holders of the preferred or the common stock into which it was converted, the right to put the convertible preferred to Loral in a Change of Control for a value of at least $450 million, and the potential to acquire a total of 63% of Loral's equity. Although the terms of the "MHR Financing" capped MHR's common stock voting power at 39.99% in an attempt to avoid a change in control which would invoke *Revlon* duties, the class voting rights MHR acquired gave MHR a unilateral veto over any strategic initiative Loral undertook.

Despite the fact that the process dragged on as the final terms of the preferred stock were negotiated, the Special Committee never used that breathing space to subject the MHR Financing to a real market check. Similarly, even though the MHR Financing gave MHR a veto over the company's future, the Special Committee never considered whether Loral should be exposed to a hot market for corporate control, in which private equity buyers were using the availability of easy credit to purchase companies. Instead, the Special Committee simply dealt with MHR, which drove a bargain that left MHR with terms that were better than market.

Vice Chancellor Strine found that if MHR was willing to backstop a public offering of securities, Loral had the chance to raise substantial capital in the public markets, but that MHR refused to consider any deal in which it received anything other than all of the securities Loral was offering. Throughout the process of negotiating the preferred stock issuance, Loral was involved in considering a strategic acquisition of another satellite corporation. The day after the MHR financing documents were signed, Loral put in a bid for that company and within two months had landed it.

The public announcement of the MHR financing outraged Loral investors. The plaintiffs owned a substantial number of Loral shares and alleged "that the MHR Financing was a conflicted, unfair deal approved by an inept and outwitted Special Committee."[582]

The Court concluded that the MHR financing was unfair to Loral. Using its effective control, MHR set in motion a process in which the only option that the Special Committee considered was a deal with MHR itself. Rather than acting as an effective agent for the public stockholders by aggressively demanding a market check or seeking out better-than-market terms from MHR in exchange for no market check, the Special Committee gave MHR terms that were highly favorable to MHR, in comparison to comparable convertible preferred transactions identified by its own advisor. These terms gave MHR a chokehold on Loral's future and 63% of its equity. The negotiation process was also marred by the conduct of its chairman and financial advisor, who undercut Loral's own negotiating position and, during the Special Committee process, was seeking to have MHR invest in his own business.

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582 *Id.* at *2.

Holding that *Revlon* was applicable to the transaction[583] and that MHR had failed to meet

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583 The Court explained its *Revlon* analysis as follows:

> Although much of the parties' back-and-forth about the applicability of [the entire fairness] standard focuses on whether MHR was a controlling stockholder, a more mundane reality should not be overlooked. As pointed out earlier, MHR itself told the world that a majority of the Loral board was affiliated with MHR. MHR directly controlled three of Loral's eight directors …. Furthermore, two additional Loral directors, the two directors most responsible for negotiating the MHR Financing, Special Committee Chairman Harkey and CEO Targoff cannot be deemed to be independent of MHR. Targoff was made CEO largely at MHR's instance, going straight from MHR's rent-free tenant and "advisor" to Loral's CEO, and brought with him a plan to have MHR substantially deepen its investment in Loral. Given MHR's "control" position and "dominant role" at Loral, Targoff knew that his continuance as CEO depended in large measure on keeping in MHR's good graces. Not only that, Targoff and Rachesky were so close that Targoff felt free to seek having Rachesky (and Harkey) invest with him and other "friends" in an opportunity that arose during the Special Committee process.
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> Likewise, Harkey cannot be considered as independent of MHR. His business and personal ties to MHR and Rachesky are too material, as is evidenced by Harkey's status alongside Targoff as one of MHR's "Selected Investment Advisors." Harkey and Rachesky were business school classmates and remain close friends. Harkey was on the boards of three public companies precisely because of his relationship with MHR and Rachesky. Like Targoff, Harkey solicited investments in both his own company and another potential transaction from MHR during the Special Committee process. Beyond just the close personal and professional relationships with MHR and Rachesky, Harkey and Targoff were aware that MHR knew how to use its clout to get its way. After all, they were both advisors to MHR, a firm that, as noted, boasted that it "is unusually well-positioned to extract significant control premiums through [among other things] bringing to bear the Managing Principals' wealth of knowledge and experience in effectuating control and influence."
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> Thus, regardless of whether MHR was a controlling stockholder of Loral, the MHR Financing was an interested transaction, and a majority of the Loral board – five of the eight members at the time the Securities Purchase Agreement was signed – was affiliated with MHR. Given that reality, the entire fairness standard presumptively applies.
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> Moreover, MHR's belated protestations that it was not a controlling stockholder after all are not convincing. In determining whether a blockholder who has less than absolute voting control over the company is a controlling stockholder such that the entire fairness standard is invoked, the question is whether the blockholder, "as a practical matter, possesses a combination of stock voting power and managerial authority that enables him to control the corporation, if he so wishes." MHR possessed such practical power over Loral, and that power shaped the process for considering and approving the MHR Financing.
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> Outside of this litigation, MHR and Loral have consistently and publicly maintained that MHR controls Loral. Moreover, even at trial, Targoff admitted that he "would use [the] term" controlling stockholder to describe MHR and that MHR "control[s] de facto in some respects." These admissions comport with the facts regarding MHR's practical power over Loral.
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> MHR seated a majority of Loral directors affiliated with itself, and touted that fact publicly. Rachesky assumed the Chairmanship himself and was also a member of the two-person Compensation Committee. He installed his MHR advisor Targoff as CEO. With 36% of the votes, MHR hardly feared a proxy fight, and although it did not have the power to unilaterally vote in charter changes or effect a merger, it had substantial blocking power. Not only that, MHR had blocking power over Loral's ability to redeem the Skynet Notes and had at least some power to control Loral's ability to conduct an underwritten offering for its own benefit. Both factors played a role in shaping the negotiation of the MHR Financing.
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> And at the level of basic strategy, it is evident that MHR controlled Loral's decision to pursue the growth strategy that necessitated additional capital financing and the time table for obtaining that capital.
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> Indeed, early on in the process, when Rachesky and Targoff were causing Loral to embark on the process of considering a large equity investment in MHR, the Loral board recognized that the interested nature of the transaction and MHR's clout would likely subject any resulting transaction to entire fairness review. To address that, the Special Committee was formed with the hope that that device would, at the very least, shift the burden of persuasion as to the issue of fairness.
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> Given MHR's practical control over Loral and the presence of an MHR-affiliated board majority, I therefore have little difficulty in concluding that the entire fairness standard applies in the first instance

its burden of proving the entire fairness of the transaction (i.e. both fair dealing and fair price), Vice Chancellor Strine entered a remedy reforming the MHR financing to convert MHR's convertible preferred into non-voting common stock using a price that took into account MHR's access to inside information, its insulation of itself from market pressures and its attainment of an unfair $6.75 million fee for placing securities with itself,[584] and that also gave substantial weight to Loral's actual stock trading price. This remedy left MHR with shares of Loral non-voting common stock in place of the preferred stock representing 57% of the total equity of Loral, but remaining at MHR's prior level of voting power (35.9%). This gave MHR both effective control of Loral, and the liquidity option of the market for corporate control. The nature of this remedy made it unnecessary for the Court to undertake a director-by-director liability assessment.[585]

(5) In *McPadden v. Sidhu*, Chancellor Chandler held that a DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision would protect directors against charges that they breached their fiduciary duties in authorizing a sale of a subsidiary for inadequate consideration.[586] In June 2005 the Board of i2 Technologies, Inc. approved the sale for $3 million of a wholly owned subsidiary that it previously purchased with a related company for $100 million to a management team led by an

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> to the MHR Financing. Furthermore, given the performance of the Special Committee, there is no need to consider some of the more intricate, interstitial standard of review issues that might have arisen had the Special Committee process been less desultory.

Id. at *20-21.

584 The Court found that MHR's receiving a placement fee for a transaction that it sought out and prevented others from participating in was unfair and overreaching. To ensure that MHR did not benefit from the fee for placing securities with its own controlled company, the Court took the fees into account in fixing the amount of non-voting common stock MHR would receive in the reformed transaction, but did not require any offset for MHR's advisor fees as a payment by Loral for those fees in a fair deal would not have been eyebrow raising.

585 The Court explained why it did not reach plaintiffs' request for a damage award against culpable directors:

> The entire fairness test is one designed to address a transaction's sustainability, against any party other than the interested party, the test is, in itself, not adequate to determine liability for breach of duty. For example, being a non-independent director who approved a conflict transaction found unfair does not make one, without more, liable personally for harm caused. Rather, the court must examine that director's behavior in order to assess whether the director breached her fiduciary duties and, if a § 102(b)(7) clause is in effect, acted with the requisite state of mind to have committed a non-exculpated loyalty breach. Because the remedy is one that can be effected as between MHR and Loral, there is no need to make findings about the extent to which the individual directors would be subject to liability if I awarded Loral monetary damages.

C.A. No. 2808-VCS, 2008 WL 4293781 (Del. Ch. Sept. 19, 2008), at *33. In footnote 163 the Court further commented:

> Given the presence of an exculpatory charter provision, I would have to find that the Special Committee members Harkey and Simon acted in bad faith by approving the Securities Purchase Agreement knowing that it was unfairly advantageous to MHR or engaged in some other conscious misconduct. 8 *Del. C.* § 102(b)(7). As to defendants Rachesky, Goldstein, and Devabhaktuni, who were high-ranking MHR officials, the record provides strong reason to infer that they knew they were extracting unfair value from a less-than-adroit Loral Special Committee. Defendant [CEO] Targoff presents a very interesting question because he largely set the process off on its unproductive course but then seems to have recognized that MHR was getting too sweet a deal and attempted, without any large success, to ameliorate the outcome. Rather than tag these defendants with individual liability at this time, I prefer to rest my judgment on a finding that the MHR Financing was unfair and to impose a fitting remedy against the party who benefited. If MHR or another party has my judgment overturned and the Supreme Court returns the case to me for the entry of a damages award, I can address the individual responsibility of these defendants then. Because the plaintiffs never made a serious effort to address the liability of defendants Olmstead and Stenbit, I do, however, dismiss the claims against them.

Id. at *33 n.163.

586 964 A.2d 1262 (Del. Ch. 2008).

i2 vice president. Two years later, after rejecting an $18.5 million bid six months after the sale, the management team sold the subsidiary for $25 million. The defendants were i2's directors and the vice president involved in the buy-out.

The Court questioned the Board's reliance on the vice president to orchestrate the sales process and produce the projections and other information on which it relied in approving the transaction. The Court questioned why the vice president did not contact the subsidiary's competitors, which seemed likely buyers, and commented that the Board engaged in little to no oversight of the sale process, providing no check on the vice president's half hearted or worse efforts in seeking to maximize the value received for the subsidiary. Although the Board did get a fairness opinion on the sale, plaintiff pointed out numerous deficiencies and questioned its reliability. As the *McPadden* case did not involve a change in control of i2, *Revlon* duties were not implicated in the Court's decision.

Although it found the Board was grossly negligent in approving the sale, it concluded that there was inadequate pleading that the directors had acted in bad faith through a conscious disregard for their duties and, thus, that the directors' alleged gross negligence was exculpated by the DGCL § 102(b)(7) charter provision.[587] The vice president's motion to dismiss, however, was denied because only directors are entitled to exculpation under DGCL § 102(b)(7).

d. Lyondell and Progeny.

In *Lyondell Chemical Company v. Ryan*,[588] the Delaware Supreme Court, in an *en banc* decision reversing a Chancery Court decision, rejected post-merger stockholder class action claims that independent directors failed to act in good faith in selling the company after only a week of negotiations with a single bidder, even accepting plaintiff's allegations that the directors did nothing to prepare for an offer which might be expected from a recent purchaser of an 8% block and did not even consider conducting a market check before entering into a merger agreement (at a "blow-out" premium price) containing a no-shop provision (with a fiduciary out) and a 3% break-up fee.[589] In *Lyondell* the plaintiff alleged that the defendant directors failed to act in good faith in conducting the sale of Lyondell to an unaffiliated third party, which would have precluded exculpation under Lyondell's DGCL § 102(b)(7) charter provision and left the directors exposed to personal liability (and possible monetary damages) for their conduct.[590] In *Lyondell* ten of eleven directors were disinterested and independent (the CEO was the other director).

Facts. Basell AF first expressed interest in acquiring Lyondell in April 2006, sending a letter proposing a price of $26.50 to $28.50 per share. At that time, Lyondell was not for sale and

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587 The Court wrote that "Delaware's current understanding of gross negligence is conduct that constitutes reckless indifference or actions that are without the bounds of reason." *Id.* at 1274.

588 970 A.2d 235 (Del. 2009).

589 *Ryan v. Lyondell Chemical Company*, C.A. No. 3176-VCN, 2008 WL 2923427 (Del. Ch. July 29, 2008) ("*Lyondell I*") and on denial of certification of interlocutory appeal 2008 WL 4174038 (Del. Ch. August 29, 2008) ("*Lyondell II*"); *see* J. Travis Laster and Steven M. Haas, *Reactions and Overreactions to Ryan v. Lyondell Chemical Co.*, 22 INSIGHTS No. 9, 9 (Sept. 2008).

590 *See supra* notes 278-281 and related text.

was in good financial condition. The Board determined that this price was inadequate and that such a transaction would not be in the best interests of Lyondell or its stockholders.

In the spring of 2007, Basell acquired the right to purchase Occidental Petroleum Corporation's approximately 8% stake in Lyondell. A Basell affiliate subsequently filed a Schedule 13D with the SEC, disclosing its right to purchase the shares held by Occidental and Basell's intent to discuss various transactions with Lyondell. The Board met to discuss this development, but even though the Schedule 13D filing may have effectively put Lyondell in play, the Board did not engage an investment banker, endeavor to determine the value of Lyondell or endeavor to determine alternatives that might be available to Lyondell and decided to wait to see if any suitors would appear and how its stockholders would react.

Apollo Management, L.P., a private equity buyer active in the commodity chemicals segment, contacted Lyondell's CEO to test his interest in a management led leveraged buyout transaction. The CEO rejected the overture, viewing such a transaction as fraught with conflicts for management and the Board. No others suitors emerged.

In early June 2007, Lyondell's CEO conducted preliminary negotiations with Basell's CEO where Basell suggested a purchase price of $40 per share and the CEO suggested a willingness to consider a sale of Lyondell at a price of $48 per share. The Board was unaware of these negotiations. Ultimately Basell made an offer of $48 per share contingent on Lyondell signing a merger agreement within a week and agreeing to a $400 million break-up fee. This offer represented a 45% premium over the closing share price on May 10, 2007, the last trading day before public knowledge of Basell's interest in the Company, and a 20% premium over the closing price on the day before the merger was publicly announced.

At a special meeting of the Board on July 10, 2007, the offer was announced and discussed for 50 minutes. At the conclusion of this meeting, the Board asked the CEO to seek a written offer from Basell and recessed discussions until July 11. At the subsequent discussion between the CEO's of Lyondell and Basel, the latter promised a written offer but requested a firm indication of interest from the Board by July 11 because it was considering acquiring another company in the industry. At a 45-minute meeting on July 11, 2007, the Board authorized the CEO to negotiate with Basell on its proposal, but did not seek to participate actively and directly in negotiations. The CEO requested several concessions from Basell, including an increase in the offer price and a go-shop provision, which Basell's CEO vehemently rejected on the ground that he had made Basell's best offer in accordance with the discussions with Lyondell's CEO, although Basell did agree to a reduction in the break-up fee to $385 million (3% of the transaction value and 2% of Lyondell's enterprise value).

At a subsequent Board meeting, the Board obtained legal and financial advice, including a fairness opinion from Deutsche Bank Securities, Inc., which was retained by the Board only after the final terms of the deal had been set. Deutsche Bank opined that the $48 per share price was fair. The Board voted unanimously to approve the merger and to recommend it to the Company's stockholders. The merger was announced on July 17, 2007, seven days after the Board began its review of Basell's offer. At the special meeting held to consider the merger, 99.33% of the Company's stockholders who voted on the matter voted to approve the merger.

Director Option Acceleration Does Not Compromise Director Independence. The Chancery Court rejected plaintiff's arguments that the independent members of the Board breached their fiduciary duty of loyalty because they stood to gain financially through the early vesting of their stock options, holding that "the vesting of stock options in connection with a merger does not create a per se impermissible interest in the transaction."[591] Furthermore, the Chancery Court noted that directors are considered interested only when they receive a financial interest that is not equally shared by other stockholders. In this case, no such unequal financial interest existed since "accelerated vesting does not confer a special benefit"; on the contrary, stock options are designed to align the interests of the directors with those of the stockholders. Thus, the Chancery Court granted summary judgment to the defendants on all of the plaintiff's general duty of loyalty claims.

Chancery Court Opinion on *Revlon* Claims. The plaintiff claimed that the Board failed to adequately fulfill its duty of care under *Revlon* by (1) engaging in a hasty deliberative process that rendered the Board unable to inform itself as to the Company's value or as to the propriety of the transaction, (2) failing to conduct a market check or to shop the Company and (3) agreeing to unreasonable deal protection devices that served to discourage competing bids.

In the Chancery Court the defendant directors' motion for summary judgment was partially denied, with the Chancery Court emphasizing that *Revlon*[592] requires robust Board involvement in sale of control transactions to confirm that, even at arguably a "blowout" market premium,[593] the stockholders are getting the best price reasonably available. The Chancery Court had determined that genuine issues of material fact existed as to (1) whether the independent directors engaged in a satisfactory sale process to acquire the highest available value for stockholders as required by *Revlon* and (2) whether the directors' decision to agree to typical deal protections was reasonable in view of the weakness in the process. In a case reminiscent of *Smith v. Van Gorkom*[594] in that the Board acted quickly on a merger proposal negotiated by an informed CEO without Board involvement, the Chancery Court found that the directors' conduct could implicate the good faith component of the duty of loyalty.

The Chancery Court explained that although a Board's actions in managing a business are ordinarily protected from post hoc judicial review by the business judgment rule, in cases of sales of control, directors must fulfill their *Revlon* duties, which require a "singular focus on seeking and attaining the highest value available."[595] In evaluating the Board's performance, the Chancery Court examines "the adequacy [of the Board's] decision-making process [and its] actions in light of the circumstances then existing."[596] The Chancery Court said that in many cases, a Board's *Revlon* duties are fulfilled by active involvement in a contest with multiple

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591 *Lyondell*, 2008 WL 2923427, at *10.

592 *Revlon, Inc. v. MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings, Inc.*, 506 A.2d 173 (Del. 1986). *See supra* notes 469–470 and related text.

593 45% over market on the day before the bidder's interest became known and 20% above the closing price the day before the merger was announced.

594 *Smith v. Van Gorkom*, 488 A. 2d 858 (Del. 1985); *see supra* notes 460, 517–518 and related text; *see Bernard S. Sharfman, Being Informed Does Matter: Fine Tuning Gross Negligence Twenty Plus Years After Van Gorkom*, 62 Bus. Law. 135 (Nov. 2006).

595 *Lyondell*, 2008 WL 2923427, at *2.

596 *Id.* at *12.

bidders; however, in a one-bidder sale process without a canvass of the market, the Board must show that it had reliable evidence, through either experience or a robust prior knowledge of the market, that it had obtained the best price reasonably available or had negotiated for a post-signing market check.[597] A substantial premium over the pre-deal market price and a fairness opinion are no substitute for process.[598]

The Chancery Court found evidence in the record to suggest that the Board was sophisticated and generally aware of Lyondell's value. This knowledge stemmed from the Board's routine briefings on the company's financial outlook, its relatively recent negotiations for the purchase of its refining joint venture, its awareness of the private equity group Apollo Management, L.P.'s negotiations with other companies in the industry, and its knowledge of the position of other players and potential buyers in the market.

However, the Chancery Court faulted the Board for the speed with which the deal was negotiated, vetted and signed. The Board's decision-making process occurred over the course of seven days, with six to seven hours devoted to discussing the deal and half of that time devoted to discussing the final terms of the merger agreement and obtaining Board approval. The Chancery Court noted that, perhaps because the CEO had engaged in most of his negotiations with Basell without the Board's knowledge, the Board itself did not actually negotiate on the proposal nor did it actively participate in the sale process. The Chancery Court also criticized the Board for not involving a financial advisor until after the terms had been agreed upon. In sum, the Chancery Court found that despite a likelihood that the Board was sufficiently abreast of the market and was therefore sufficiently certain that it was obtaining a reasonable price and that no other suitors would emerge, as an issue for summary judgment, the process utilized by the Board did not inspire sufficient confidence that the Board had adequately considered all of the alternatives available to the Company.

Ultimately, although the Board may have had sufficient market knowledge and experience to avail itself of the one-bidder strategy, in the execution, the Board was possibly too removed from the process and too hasty in its decision-making to eliminate any genuine issue of material fact as to the fulfillment of its *Revlon* duties.

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597 *See infra* notes 657–662 and related text (discussing *Barkan*).

598 The Vice Chancellor emphasized that a premium over the pre-deal market price and a fairness opinion are no substitute for process in determining whether directors have fulfilled their *Revlon* duties to seek the best price reasonably available:

> The directors have not suggested that they did not understand that the well-settled value maximization principles of *Revlon* and its progeny would govern the discharge of their fiduciary obligations in this context. Implicit in their flogging of the premium price that happened to land in their laps in July 2007, however, is the directors' apparent belief that they should be relieved of those obligations based upon their disinterest, a premium price, a fairness opinion, and the mere passage of time after the deal is announced. In the case of a board, such as this, that has no "traditional" loyalty conflicts (e.g., improper motive or impermissible pecuniary interest) that argument may have considerable appeal, but that is not the present state of our law. As the Court reads our *Revlon* jurisprudence and understands the principles of a fiduciary relationship, the directors' obligations in connection with a sale of the corporate enterprise do not ebb and flow on the fortuities of an offered deal premium and the ability to secure an expensive fairness opinion that (Quelle surprise!) concludes that the offer is "fair" to the shareholders.

Ryan v. Lyondell Chem. Co., C.A. 3176-VCN, 2008 WL 4174038 at *1 n.12 (Del. Ch. Aug. 29, 2008) ("*Lyondell II*").

Chancery Court Opinion on Deal Protection Measures. The merger agreement contained typical deal protection measures, including a $385 million break-up fee (3% of the transaction value and 2% of Lyondell's enterprise value), a no-shop clause with the requisite fiduciary out, matching rights for Basell, and a carve-out amendment to Lyondell's poison pill to permit the merger. While acknowledging that these measures were perhaps not objectionable standing alone, plaintiff argued that in the aggregate they precluded other bids for Lyondell.

Although it found that the deal protections in this case were not atypical, the Chancery Court questioned whether the Board was reasonable in tying its hands with such restrictive deal protections in light of the fact that the deal had not been adequately vetted in the pre-signing stage. Interestingly, the Chancery Court distinguished between a "fiduciary out" provision where other suitors approach the company of their own accord and a "go-shop" provision where the company could proactively discharge its obligations by reaching out to possible suitors.[599] Although the Chancery Court rejected the argument that the stockholders were left with no choice, it found that for purposes of summary judgment, it could exclude neither the inference that the deal protections were unreasonable nor the inference that they served no purpose other than to suppress the possibility of a competing bid. Thus, the Chancery Court denied the defendants' motion for summary judgment on the deal protection claim.

Chancery Court Opinion that *Revlon* Shortcomings Suggest Lack of Good Faith and Preclude DGCL § 102(b)(7) Exculpation. The Chancery Court concluded that all of these procedural shortcomings could add up to an overall failure to act in good faith, an element of a Board's duty of loyalty, since the Board members appear not to have become fully engaged in an active *Revlon* process. In explaining in *Lyondell II* why the Chancery Court had not granted defendant's motion for summary judgment based on Lyondell's DGCL § 102(b)(7) charter exculpation provision, the Vice Chancellor explained:

> In *Disney*, the Delaware Supreme Court approved of the Chancellor's formulation of one possible definition of director misconduct amounting to bad faith—"intentional dereliction of duty, a conscious disregard for one's responsibilities." The Supreme Court was clear, however, that liability in those instances is *not* predicated upon the breach of the fiduciary duty of care; rather, liability results from the breach of the separate and distinct duty of good faith. The Supreme Court further explained that although it could demarcate three points in the spectrum of fiduciary conduct deserving of a "'bad faith' pejorative label," the historical and statutory distinction between a violation of the duty of care and a violation of the duty to act in good faith (even though both can be said to fall within the realm of "bad faith") was important because of the potential consequences flowing from that distinction.
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> In the context of a motion for summary judgment, it is not necessary (or prudent) for the Court to determine precisely where, on these facts, the line falls between exculpable, "bad faith" conduct (i.e., gross negligence amounting only to

[599] *See infra* notes 767–774 and related text.

a violation of the duty of care) and a non-exculpable, knowing disregard of the directors' known fiduciary obligations in a sale scenario. It suffices that, on this limited record, there exists apparent and unexplained director inaction despite their knowing that the Company was "in play" and their knowing that *Revlon* and its progeny mandated certain conduct or impeccable knowledge of the market in pursuit of the best transaction reasonably available to the stockholders in a sale scenario. As a result of that apparent and unexplained inaction in the face of a well-settled and well-known duty to act, the Court finds itself somewhere in the intermediate grey area of conduct identified by the Delaware Supreme Court as deserving of the "bad faith pejorative label." * * *

Under the Defendants' self-serving view of the record, where one simply ignores (1) the fact of the 13D filing in May 2007, (2) the fact the directors acknowledge that the 13D put the Company in play, and (3) the (apparent) fact of the directors' subsequent two months of slothful indifference despite *knowing* that the Company was in play, the Court probably would have to agree that "on [that] record there is simply no issue whatsoever of material fact about intentional or conscious wrongdoing by the Lyondell board." Unfortunately, and notwithstanding Defendants' wishes to the contrary and their trumpeting of the "blowout" premium in an effort to distract from those important facts, that is *not* the record that presently exists. In the sale of control context, no case under Delaware law has yet recognized the Lyondell directors' (apparent) "do nothing, hope for an impressive-enough premium, and buy a fairness opinion" approach to discharging a director's fiduciary obligations when selling the corporate enterprise; perhaps, under the circumstances, that process, eventually, will be deemed "reasonable" on a more complete record, but there is nothing in Delaware's corporate law that renders the process so self-evidently reasonable that the directors are per force deemed to have acted in good faith and entitled to summary judgment on what amounts to nothing more than a barebones preliminary injunction record.

The directors, in essence, seek to rely exclusively on the fortuity of an offered deal premium and an after-the-fact fairness opinion to sustain their conduct under the circumstances or, at the very least, their entitlement to exculpation for money damages. They argue that, under the deadline imposed by Basell, they made a reasonable effort to inform themselves about the offer and that, even if they lacked complete knowledge to properly judge the adequacy of the offer, they violated only their duty of care. In the seven days during which the board considered Basell's offer, the Defendants' argument may be correct that only their duty of care is implicated. The problem, however, is that there was a two month window in which the directors knew (or should have known) that the Company was on the market and that they might receive an offer at any time. It is during those two months where they apparently chose not to take any specific action to prepare for a possible offer and sale.

Moreover, after remaining passive for two months while knowing that the Company was "in play," when Basell finally delivered its offer, the directors did

> nothing (or virtually nothing) to verify the superiority of Basell's offer (aside from recognizing an obvious premium and obtaining a fairness opinion). Thus, when one views the totality of the directors' conduct on this record, that leads the Court to question whether they may have disregarded a known duty to act and may not have faithfully engaged themselves in the sale process in a manner consistent with the teachings of *Revlon* and its progeny.[600]

Delaware Supreme Court Opinion. In reversing and holding that summary judgment for the defendant directors should have been granted, the Delaware Supreme Court wrote that the Vice Chancellor had reviewed the record under a mistaken view of Delaware law in three critical respects:

> First, the trial court imposed *Revlon* duties on the Lyondell directors before they either had decided to sell, or before the sale had become inevitable. Second, the court read *Revlon* and its progeny as creating a set of requirements that must be satisfied during the sale process. Third, the trial court equated an arguably imperfect attempt to carry out *Revlon* duties with a knowing disregard of one's duties that constitutes bad faith.[601]

The Delaware Supreme Court noted that the Chancery Court had identified the following undisputed facts that would have supported summary judgment for the defendant directors:

> [T]he directors were "active, sophisticated, and generally aware of the value of the Company and the conditions of the markets in which the Company operated." They had reason to believe that no other bidders would emerge, given the price Basell [the buyer] had offered and the limited universe of companies that might be interested in acquiring Lyondell's unique assets. [Lyondell CEO] Smith negotiated the price up from $40 to $48 per share — a price that Deutsche Bank [Lyondell's investment banker] opined was fair. Finally, no other acquiror expressed interest during the four months between the merger announcement and the stockholder vote.[602]

The Delaware Supreme Court noted that the Chancery Court had focused on the following in finding the allegations of bad faith sufficient to preclude summary judgment:

> After the Schedule 13D was filed [by buyer two months before the sale process began], the directors apparently took no action to prepare for a possible acquisition proposal. The merger was negotiated and finalized in less than one week, during which time the directors met for a total of only seven hours to consider the matter. The directors did not seriously press [buyer]for a better price, nor did they conduct even a limited market check. Moreover, although the deal protections were not unusual or preclusive, the trial court was troubled by "the

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600 *Lyondell II*, 2008 WL 4174038, at *2-5.

601 *Lyondell Chem. Co. v. Ryan*, 970 A.2d 235 (Del. 2009).

602 *Id.* at *5.

Board's decision to grant considerable protection to a deal that may not have been adequately vetted under *Revlon*."

> The trial court found the directors' failure to act during the two months after the filing of the Basell Schedule 13D critical to its analysis of their good faith. The court pointedly referred to the directors' "two months of slothful indifference despite knowing that the Company was in play," and the fact that they "languidly awaited overtures from potential suitors ...." In the end, the trial court found that it was this "failing" that warranted denial of their motion for summary judgment.[603]

The Delaware Supreme Court then explained why these factors were not determinative under a proper application of *Revlon* in relation to the applicable good faith standards:

> The problem with the trial court's analysis is that *Revlon* duties do not arise simply because a company is "in play." The duty to seek the best available price applies only when a company embarks on a transaction — on its own initiative or in response to an unsolicited offer — that will result in a change of control. Basell's Schedule 13D did put the Lyondell directors, and the market in general, on notice that Basell was interested in acquiring Lyondell. The directors responded by promptly holding a special meeting to consider whether Lyondell should take any action. The directors decided that they would neither put the company up for sale nor institute defensive measures to fend off a possible hostile offer. Instead, they decided to take a "wait and see" approach. That decision was an entirely appropriate exercise of the directors' business judgment. The time for action under *Revlon* did not begin until July 10, 2007, when the directors began negotiating the sale of Lyondell.
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> The Court of Chancery focused on the directors' two months of inaction, when it should have focused on the one week during which they considered Basell's offer. During that one week, the directors met several times; their CEO tried to negotiate better terms; they evaluated Lyondell's value, the price offered and the likelihood of obtaining a better price; and then the directors approved the merger. The trial court acknowledged that the directors' conduct during those seven days might not demonstrate anything more than lack of due care. But the court remained skeptical about the directors' good faith — at least on the present record. That lingering concern was based on the trial court's synthesis of the *Revlon* line of cases, which led it to the erroneous conclusion that directors must follow one of several courses of action to satisfy their *Revlon* duties.
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> There is only one *Revlon* duty — to "[get] the best price for the stockholders at a sale of the company." No court can tell directors exactly how to accomplish that goal, because they will be facing a unique combination of circumstances, many of which will be outside their control. As we noted in *Barkan v. Amsted Industries, Inc.*, "there is no single blueprint that a board must

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603 *Id.*

follow to fulfill its duties." That said, our courts have highlighted both the positive and negative aspects of various boards' conduct under *Revlon*. The trial court drew several principles from those cases: directors must "engage actively in the sale process," and they must confirm that they have obtained the best available price either by conducting an auction, by conducting a market check, or by demonstrating "an impeccable knowledge of the market."

The Lyondell directors did not conduct an auction or a market check, and they did not satisfy the trial court that they had the "impeccable" market knowledge that the court believed was necessary to excuse their failure to pursue one of the first two alternatives. As a result, the Court of Chancery was unable to conclude that the directors had met their burden under *Revlon*. In evaluating the totality of the circumstances, even on this limited record, we would be inclined to hold otherwise. But we would not question the trial court's decision to seek additional evidence if the issue were whether the directors had exercised due care. Where, as here, the issue is whether the directors failed to act in good faith, the analysis is very different, and the existing record mandates the entry of judgment in favor of the directors.

As discussed above, bad faith will be found if a "fiduciary intentionally fails to act in the face of a known duty to act, demonstrating a conscious disregard for his duties." The trial court decided that the *Revlon* sale process must follow one of three courses, and that the Lyondell directors did not discharge that "known set of [*Revlon*] 'duties'." But, as noted, there are no legally prescribed steps that directors must follow to satisfy their *Revlon* duties. Thus, the directors' failure to take any specific steps during the sale process could not have demonstrated a conscious disregard of their duties. More importantly, there is a vast difference between an inadequate or flawed effort to carry out fiduciary duties and a conscious disregard for those duties.

Directors' decisions must be reasonable, not perfect. "In the transactional context, [an] extreme set of facts [is] required to sustain a disloyalty claim premised on the notion that disinterested directors were intentionally disregarding their duties." The trial court denied summary judgment because the Lyondell directors' "unexplained inaction" prevented the court from determining that they had acted in good faith. But, if the directors failed to do all that they should have under the circumstances, they breached their duty of care. Only if they knowingly and completely failed to undertake their responsibilities would they breach their duty of loyalty. The trial court approached the record from the wrong perspective. Instead of questioning whether disinterested, independent directors did everything that they (arguably) should have done to obtain the best sale price, the inquiry should have been whether those directors utterly failed to attempt to obtain the best sale price.

Viewing the record in this manner leads to only one possible conclusion. The Lyondell directors met several times to consider Basell's premium offer. They were generally aware of the value of their company and they knew the

> chemical company market. The directors solicited and followed the advice of their financial and legal advisors. They attempted to negotiate a higher offer even though all the evidence indicates that Basell had offered a "blowout" price. Finally, they approved the merger agreement, because "it was simply too good not to pass along [to the stockholders] for their consideration." We assume, as we must on summary judgment, that the Lyondell directors did absolutely nothing to prepare for Basell's offer, and that they did not even consider conducting a market check before agreeing to the merger. Even so, this record clearly establishes that the Lyondell directors did not breach their duty of loyalty by failing to act in good faith. In concluding otherwise, the Court of Chancery reversibly erred.[604]

Lessons from Delaware Supreme Court in Lyondell. The Delaware Supreme Court's opinion should be read in its context of an opinion on a denial of a motion for summary judgment on post-merger damage claims where there were some uncontested facts in the record before the court (rather than a motion to dismiss where the facts alleged in plaintiff's pleadings must be accepted as true). The opinion should also be read as a strong statement that the Delaware courts will give deference to the decision of disinterested and independent directors when faced with a perceived need to act quickly on a proposal from an unaffiliated, serious bidder that reasonably appears to the directors to be in the best interests of the stockholders. More specific lessons from the opinion are:

- *Revlon* duties do not arise until the Board starts a negotiation to sell the company and do not arise simply because the Board has facts that give the Board reason to believe that a third party will make an acquisition proposal. In the Supreme Court's words: "Revlon duties do not arise simply because a company is 'in play.' The duty to seek the best available price applies only when a company embarks on a transaction . . . that will result in a change of control."[605] *Revlon* does not require a Board to obtain a valuation of the company, commence an auction or implement defensive measures just because the company is "in play." A Board can exercise its business judgment to "wait and see" when a Schedule 13D has been filed that suggests a bid for the company is reasonably to be expected.

- When the *Revlon* duties become applicable, there is no single blueprint that a Board must follow to satisfy its *Revlon* duties. In the words of the Delaware Supreme Court: no "court can tell directors exactly how to accomplish [the *Revlon* goal to get the best price for the company], because they will be facing a unique combination of circumstances."[606] Because there are no mandated steps, directors' failure to take any specific steps cannot amount to the conscious disregard of duties required for a finding of bad faith.

- Since there are no specific steps a Board must take to satisfy its *Revlon* duties, directors do not fail in their duty of good faith to the shareholders if they do not seek competing bids, when they have a fairness opinion and reason to believe that

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604 *Id.* at *6-7.

605 *Id.* at *6.

606 *Id.*

no topping bid is likely, and instead try (albeit unsuccessfully) to extract a higher price from the bidder. The directors do not have to succeed in negotiating a post-signing market check. Rather, the Delaware Supreme Court said directors fail in their duty of good faith: "Only if [the directors] knowingly and completely failed to undertake their responsibilities would they breach their duty of loyalty. * * * Instead of questioning whether disinterested, independent directors did everything that they (arguably) should have done to obtain the best sale price, the [Chancery Court's] inquiry should have been whether those directors utterly failed to attempt to obtain the best sale price."[607] While a flawed process may be enough for a breach of the duty of care, it is not enough to establish the "conscious disregard" of known fiduciary duties required for a lack of good faith. The Delaware Supreme Court's opinion does not measure the directors' conduct on a duty of care scale, although the Supreme Court did comment that it "would not question the trial court's decision to seek additional evidence if the issue were whether the directors had exercised due care."[608]

- Directors do not breach their duty of good faith by agreeing to reasonable deal protection provisions in the absence of an auction.

- Concluding merger negotiations in a one week period is not bad faith.

Progeny of *Lyondell*. While *Lyondell* did clarify the requirements of *Revlon*, the holding in favor of the defendant directors was in the context of a post closing damage action against directors who had the benefit of a DGCL § 102(b)(7) provision which required plaintiff to establish that the directors acted in bad faith. In *Lyondell*, the Delaware Supreme Court commented that "we would not question the trial court's decision to seek additional evidence if the issue were whether the directors exercised due care." Chancellor Chandler did precisely that in *Police & Fire Retirement System of the City of Detroit v. Bernal*,[609] in which the plaintiff shareholder of Data Domain, Inc. moved for expedited proceedings in connection with its motion to enjoin certain provisions of the agreement and plan of merger between Data Domain and NetApp, Inc. In March 2009, the Data Domain Board had commenced discussions with NetApp regarding a potential business combination. On May 11, 2009, the Data Domain Board was informed during a meeting to continue discuss a combination with NetApp that EMC Corporation wanted to meet with Data Domain. Although a meeting with EMC was scheduled for May 27, 2009, on May 20 Data Domain and NetApp entered into the Merger Agreement whereby Data Domain would be acquired by NetApp for a combination of cash and NetApp stock worth approximately $25 per Data Domain share.

The plaintiff in *Bernal* complained about the "deal protection mechanisms" in the merger agreement, including: (1) a "matching right" that gives NetApp five business days to revise its proposal in response to a proposal from a third party bidder; (2) a "no solicitation" clause that prevents Data Domain from soliciting the submission or announcement of another offer to acquire Data Domain; and (3) a termination fee. Further, the Board and executive officers of

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607 *Id.* at *7.

608 *Id.* at *6.

609 C.A. No. 4663-CC, 2009 WL 1873144 (Del. Ch. June 26, 2009).

Data Domain entered into a voting agreement whereby they pledged to vote their 20% of Data Domain's outstanding shares in favor of the NetApp merger. Plaintiff argued that these measures locked up the deal between Data Domain and NetApp and dissuade interested parties from making an offer for the company. Plaintiff further alleged that Data Domain's officers and directors would receive benefits separate and apart from Data Domain's other shareholders, including: (1) assumption and conversion of their Data Domain options, (2) indemnification from liability for matters arising from the completion of the merger, and (3) for certain individuals, positions with the company after the merger.

On June 1, EMC launched an all cash tender offer for Data Domain at a tender price of $30 per share. Then, on June 3, NetApp in¬creased the cash component of the merger consideration by $5, raising the overall value of its offer to $30 per share, and Data Domain's Board agreed to the revised offer. The Data Domain Board stated that it was unable to negotiate with EMC because of the deal protection provisions of the merger agreement, and that if it failed to reject the EMC bid, Data Domain would be at risk of losing the NetApp transaction.

Plaintiff contended that Data Domain's directors violated their *Revlon* duties in the context of a sale of control of the company by failing to take any steps to secure the best price reasonably available, by granting preclusive deal protection measures that deter any other bidders, and by failing to inform themselves about the possibilities for greater value to be obtained for Data Domain shareholders through the EMC bid.

In holding that plaintiff had stated a sufficiently *colorable* claim to justify proceeding on an expedited schedule, the Chancellor wrote in *Bernal*:

> It is well established that there is no blueprint that a board must follow to fulfill its duties in a change of control transaction. The board, however, must exercise its duties in service of obtaining the maximum price reasonably available for the company. Plaintiff has alleged facts that state a colorable claim that the Data Domain board is favoring one bidder over others, thereby deterring bids from third parties that could provide greater value to Data Domain shareholders. Moreover, on a motion for a preliminary injunction, the plaintiff does not have to overcome the hurdle of an exculpatory provision that, as permitted by 8 *Del. C.* § 102(b)(7), exculpates directors from personal liability for *monetary damages* for certain breaches of fiduciary duty.
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> Plaintiff has also established a sufficient likelihood of irreparable injury. Plaintiff alleges that the deal protection measures in the Merger Agreement are currently having an adverse impact on Data Domain shareholders by deterring potential bidders, including EMC. Harm resulting from such deterrence is incalculable. Moreover, it would be impossible to "unscramble the eggs" by attempting to unwind the merger once it has been completed. Defendants argue that plaintiff is not threatened with irreparable harm because the shareholders will have an opportunity to vote on the NetApp merger. The opportunity for a shareholder vote sometime in the future, however, does not address the alleged current deterrent effect of the deal protection measures.

> Finally, I note that injunctive relief may be the only relief reasonably available to shareholders for certain breaches of fiduciary duty in connection with a sale of control transaction, particularly where the company has adopted a provision exculpating its directors from personal liability for monetary damages for breaches of the duty of care. As explained in Lyondell Chemical Co. v. Ryan, a plaintiff faces a significant burden in showing that a board acted in bad faith by failing to reasonably inform themselves or otherwise carry out their fiduciary duties in a sale of control. Thus, in cases such as this one, the shareholders' only realistic remedy for certain breaches of fiduciary duty in connection with a sale of control transaction may be injunctive relief.

Shortly after *Bernal*, in *Wayne County Employees' Ret. Sys. v. Corti*,[610] the Court of Chancery dismissed all claims brought by a former stockholder of video game maker Activision, Inc. in connection with its combination with Vivendi Games, Inc., whereby Vivendi became the majority stockholder in the combined entity. The Plaintiff challenged the conduct of the Activision directors in negotiating and approving the combination, alleging that two Activision inside directors controlled both the sale process and Activision's advisors and favored their personal interests above the interests of Activision's other stockholders. The plaintiff further alleged that the remaining directors breached their fiduciary duties by allowing the insiders to control the negotiations and the advisors and by failing to obtain a "control premium" for stockholders.

The Chancery Court determined that although management entrenchment can be a concern, the plaintiff had made no factual allegations that the insiders were motivated by entrenchment. Importantly, Vivendi assumed from the start of negotiations that the insiders would retain positions in the new company, and there were no allegations that there was a bidder threatening to take over Activision and replace management or that the insiders would be removed from their positions if Activision did not pursue a transaction with Vivendi. Nor had the plaintiff alleged facts sufficient to support its allegation that the insiders favored their own "interests in creating and reigning over [a] combined empire." To support such a claim, a plaintiff would have to show that the insiders' primary purpose for pursuing the transaction was a desire to increase the size of the company for the insiders' benefit, which would be a difficult showing to make. Largely for these reasons, the Court also determined that the remaining directors had not abdicated their duties in permitting the insiders to be involved actively in the negotiations.

The remaining fiduciary duty claims turned on whether the directors had failed to act in good faith (as defined in *Lyondell*) by having "knowingly and completely failed to undertake their responsibilities" to obtain the best sale price. The Board had formed a Special Committee of outside directors to oversee the sale process, and the Board and the Special Committee along with its financial advisor met several times in the month leading up to the transaction, the Board regularly evaluated financial reports and analyses, and no alternative bidder emerged in the roughly seven-month period between the signing and closing of the transaction. Further, prior to approving the transaction, the Activision Board received a fairness opinion from its financial advisor, which had been advising the Board throughout this process. Given that no "blueprint"

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610 C.A. No. 3534-CC (Del. Ch. July 24, 2009).

must be followed in a sale of control, the Court said that there is no requirement that a Board probe for alternatives, as the plaintiff had argued.

Likewise, there is no requirement that the Board obtain separate consideration identified as a "control premium." Rather, any "control premium" received by the selling company would be included in the consideration received by the stockholders in exchange for what is given to the acquirer, including voting control. Focusing on the Board's decision-making process rather than making an independent judgment of whether consideration received was adequate, the Court concluded that the plaintiff's allegations were merely veiled attacks on the adequacy of the price obtained in the sale of control, and that if directors fulfill their fiduciary duties in the sale of control process, the Court will "not second guess the business decision of the Board."

Finally and although conceding that under DGCL § 122(17) a corporation may renounce in its certificate of incorporation any interest or expectancy in a corporate opportunity, the plaintiff sought a declaration that the DGCL § 122(17) provision in the combined company's certificate of incorporation relating to corporate opportunities was invalid and unenforceable because it did not specify the renounced corporate opportunities, as required by DGCL § 122(17). The Court determined that this claim was not ripe for adjudication because the mere existence of the charter provision did not pose sufficient harm to stockholders to outweigh concerns associated with rendering a hypothetical opinion.

D. Value of Thorough Deliberation.

The Delaware cases repeatedly emphasize the importance of the process followed by directors in addressing a takeover proposal. The Delaware courts have frowned upon board decision-making that is done hastily or without prior preparation. Counsel should be careful to formulate and document a decision-making process that will withstand judicial review from this perspective.

Early in the process the board should be advised by counsel as to the applicable legal standards and the concerns expressed by the courts that are presented in similar circumstances. Distribution of a memorandum from counsel can be particularly helpful in this regard. Management should provide the latest financial and strategic information available concerning the corporation and its prospects. If a sale is contemplated or the corporation may be put "in play," investment bankers should be retained to advise concerning comparable transactions and market conditions, provide an evaluation of the proposal in accordance with current industry standards, and, if requested, render a fairness opinion concerning the transaction before it is finally approved by the board. The board should meet several times, preferably in person, to review reports from management and outside advisors, learn the progress of the transaction and provide guidance. Directors should receive reports and briefing information sufficiently before meetings so that they can be studied and evaluated. Directors should be active in questioning and analyzing the information and advice received from management and outside advisors. A summary of the material provisions of the merger agreement should be prepared for the directors and explained by counsel.[611]

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[611] *See, e.g.*, *Moore Corp. Ltd. v. Wallace Computer Servs., Inc.*, 907 F. Supp. 1545 (D. Del. 1995) for an in depth description of a decision-making process that withstood review under enhanced scrutiny.

(1) In *Smith v. Van Gorkom*,[612] the Trans Union board approved the proposed merger at a meeting without receiving notice of the purpose of the meeting, no investment banker was invited to advise the board, and the proposed agreement was not available before the meeting and was not reviewed by directors. This action contributed to the Court's conclusion that the board was grossly negligent.

(2) In *Cede & Co. v. Technicolor, Inc.*,[613] notice of a special board meeting to discuss and approve an acquisition proposal involving interested management was given to members of the board only one day prior to the meeting, and it did not disclose the purpose of the meeting. Board members were not informed of the potential sale of the corporation prior to the meeting, and it was questioned whether the documents were available for the directors' review at the meeting.

(3) In contrast is *Paramount Communications, Inc. v. Time, Inc.*,[614] where the board met often to discuss the adequacy of Paramount's offer and the outside directors met frequently without management, officers or directors.[615]

E. The Decision to Remain Independent.

A board may determine to reject an unsolicited proposal. It is not required to exchange the benefits of its long-term corporate strategy for short-term gain. However, like other decisions in the takeover context, the decisions to "say no" must be adequately informed. The information to be gathered and the process to be followed in reaching a decision to remain independent will vary with the facts and circumstances, but in the final analysis the board should seek to develop reasonable support for its decision.

A common ground for rejection is that the proposal is inadequate. Moreover, the proposal may not reflect the value of recent or anticipated corporate strategy. Another ground is that continued independence is thought to maximize shareholder value. Each of these reasons seems founded on information about the value of the corporation and points to the gathering of information concerning value.

A decision based on the inadequacy of the proposal or the desirability of continuing a pre-existing business strategy is subject to the business judgment rule, in the absence of the contemporaneous adoption of defensive measures or another response that proposes an

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612 488 A.2d 858 (Del. 1985).

613 634 A.2d 345 (Del. 1993).

614 571 A.2d 1140 (Del. 1989).

615 *See also Moran v. Household Int'l, Inc.*, 500 A.2d 1346 (Del. 1985) (discussing situation where (i) before considering a rights plan as a preventative mechanism to ward off future advance, the board received material on the potential takeover problem and the proposed plan, (ii) independent investment bankers and counsel attended the board meeting to advise the directors, and (iii) ten of the board's sixteen members were outside directors); *see also Kahn v. MSB Bancorp*, C.A. No. 14712-NC, 1998 WL 409355 (Del. Ch. July 16, 1998) (discussing situation where during the period in question, the board met weekly, considered the offers, consulted with its legal and financial advisors, and then made its conclusion as to which offer to pursue). *See also* Diane Holt Frankle, *Counseling the Board of Directors in Exploring Alternatives*, 1101 PLI/CORP. 261 (1998) (summarizing guidelines for counsel to develop a suitable process for the board's deliberations).

alternative means to realize shareholder value.[616] Defensive measures are subject to enhanced scrutiny, with its burden on the directors to demonstrate reasonableness. An alternative transaction can raise an issue as to whether the action should be reviewed as essentially a defensive measure. Moreover, the decision not to waive the operation of a poison pill or the protection of a state business combination statute such as DGCL § 203 can be viewed as defensive.[617] A merger agreement that requires the merger to be submitted to shareholders, even if the board has withdrawn its recommendation of the merger, as permitted by DGCL § 146, may also be analyzed as defensive. In any case, and especially where it is likely that the suitor or a shareholder will turn unfriendly, the authorized response should be based on a developed record that demonstrates its reasonableness.

1. Judicial Respect for Independence.

Delaware cases have acknowledged that directors may reject an offer that is inadequate or reach an informed decision to remain independent. In a number of prominent cases, the Delaware courts have endorsed the board's decision to remain independent.

a. In *Time*,[618] the Delaware Supreme Court validated the actions of Time's board in the face of an all-shares cash offer from Paramount. The board had concluded that the corporation's purchase of Warner "offered a greater long-term value for the stockholders and, unlike Paramount's offer, did not pose a threat to Time's survival and its 'culture'."[619] In approving these actions, the Court determined that the board, which "was adequately informed of the potential benefits of a transaction with Paramount," did not have to abandon its plans for corporate development in order to provide the shareholders with the option to realize an immediate control premium.[620] "Time's board was under no obligation to negotiate with Paramount."[621] According to the Court, this conclusion was consistent with long-standing Delaware law: "We have repeatedly stated that the refusal to entertain an offer may comport with a valid exercise of a board's business judgment."[622]

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616 Whether the standards of review for a decision to remain independent are the same in the face of a cash bid that potentially involves "Revlon duties" or a stock transaction that does not is unsettled. *Compare, e.g.*, Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, *Takeover Law and Practice*, 1212 PLI/CORP. 801, 888 (citing no authority: "If the proposal calls for a transaction that does not involve a change in control within the meaning of *QVC*, it would appear that the traditional business judgment rule would apply to the directors' decision. If the acquisition proposal calls for a transaction that would involve a change within the meaning of *QVC*, the enhanced-scrutiny *Unocal* test would apply."). Such a conclusion would subject all director decisions to a reasonableness standard merely because of what transaction has been proposed. In *Time*, however, the Delaware Supreme Court suggested that a well-informed, fully independent board ought to be accorded more deference than this where it has not initiated a sale, even though the consideration for the sale presents advantages that are reasonable. 571 A.2d 1140. On the other hand, in practice, it may be difficult to avoid the defensive responses to a proposal, which would involve a reasonableness review, where the bidder is persistent.

617 *See e.g., Moore Corp. Ltd. v. Wallace Computer Servs., Inc.*, 907 F. Supp. 1545, 1556 (D. Del. 1995) (failure to redeem poison pill defensive).

618 571 A.2d 1140.

619 *Id*. at 1149.

620 *Id*. at 1154.

621 *Id.* (citing *Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petrol. Co.*, 493 A.2d 946, 954-55 (Del. 1985).

622 *Id*. at 1152 (citing *Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, 559 A.2d 1261, 1285 n.35 (Del. 1988); *Van Gorkom*, 488 A.2d 858, 881 (Del. 1985); and *Pogostin v. Rice*, 480 A.2d 619, 627 (Del. 1984).

b. In *Unitrin Inc. v. American Gen. Corp.*,[623] the Delaware Supreme Court considered defensive actions taken by Unitrin's board in response to American General's overtures. The board rejected the offer as financially inadequate and presenting antitrust complications, but did not adopt defensive measures to protect against a hostile bid until American General issued a press release announcing the offer.[624] Unitrin's board viewed the resulting increase in Unitrin's stock price as a suggestion that speculative traders or arbitrageurs were buying up Unitrin stock and concluded that the announcement constituted a "hostile act designed to coerce the sale of Unitrin at an inadequate price."[625] In response, the board adopted a poison pill and an advance notice bylaw provision for shareholder proposals.[626] The directors then adopted a repurchase program for Unitrin's stock.[627] The directors owned 23% of the stock and did not participate in the repurchase program.[628] This increased their percentage ownership and made approval of a business combination with a shareholder without director participation more difficult.[629] The Delaware Court of Chancery ruled that the poison pill was a proportionate defensive response to American General's offer, but that the repurchase plan exceeded what was necessary to protect shareholders from a low bid. The poison pill was not directly at issue when the Delaware Supreme Court reviewed the case. The Delaware Supreme Court determined that the Court of Chancery used an incorrect legal standard and substituted its own business judgment for that of the board.[630] The Delaware Supreme Court remanded to the Court of Chancery to reconsider the repurchase plan and determine whether it, along with the other defensive measures, was preclusive or coercive and, if not, "within the range of reasonable defensive measures available to the Board."[631]

c. In *Revlon*,[632] the Delaware Supreme Court looked favorably on the board's initial rejection of Pantry Pride's offer and its adoption of a rights plan in the face of a hostile takeover at a price it deemed inadequate.[633] The Court did not suggest that Revlon's board had a duty to negotiate or shop the company before it "became apparent to all that the break-up of the company was inevitable" and the board authorized negotiation of a deal, thus recognizing that the company was for sale.[634]

d. In *Desert Partners*,[635] the Court approved the USG board's refusal to redeem a poison pill to hinder an inadequate hostile offer and noted that the board had no duty to negotiate where it had neither put the company up for sale nor entertained a bidding contest.[636] "Once a

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623 651 A.2d 1361.

624 *Id*. at 1370.

625 *Id*.

626 *Id*.

627 *Id*. at 1370-71.

628 *Id*. at 1370.

629 *Id*. at 1371-72.

630 *Id*. at 1389.

631 *Id*. at 1390.

632 506 A.2d 173.

633 *Id*. at 180-81.

634 *Id*. at 182.

635 *Desert Partners L.P. v. USG Corp.*, 686 F. Supp. 1289 (N.D. Ill. 1988) (applying Delaware law).

636 *Id*. at 1300.

Board decides to maintain a company's independence, Delaware law does not require a board of directors to put their company on the auction block or assist a potential acquiror to formulate an adequate takeover bid."[637]

e. In *MSB Bancorp*,[638] the Delaware Chancery Court upheld the Board's decision to purchase branches of another bank in furtherance of its long-held business strategy rather than to negotiate an unsolicited merger offer that would result in short-term gain to the shareholders.[639] In reaching its conclusion, the Chancery Court applied the business judgment rule because it determined that there was no defensive action taken by the Board in merely voting not to negotiate the unsolicited merger offer which did not fit within its established long-term business plan.[640]

2. Defensive Measures.

When a Board makes a decision to reject an offer considered inadequate, the Board may adopt defensive measures in case the suitor becomes unfriendly. Such a response will be subjected to the proportionality test of *Unocal*, that the responsive action taken is reasonable in relation to the threat posed.[641] This test was further refined in *Unitrin* to make clear that defensive techniques that are "*coercive*" or "*preclusive*" will not be considered to satisfy the proportionality test:

> An examination of the cases applying Unocal reveals a direct correlation between findings of proportionality or disproportionality and the judicial determination of whether a defensive response was draconian because it was either coercive or preclusive in character. In *Time*, for example, [the Delaware Supreme Court] concluded that the Time board's defensive response was reasonable and proportionate since it was not aimed at "cramming down" on its shareholders a management-sponsored alternative, i.e., was not coercive, and because it did not preclude Paramount from making an offer for the combined Time-Warner Company, i.e., was not preclusive.[642]

In *Moran*,[643] the Delaware Supreme Court considered a shareholder rights plan adopted by Household International not during a takeover contest, "but as a preventive mechanism to ward off future advances."[644] The Court upheld the pre-planned poison pill but noted that the approval was not absolute.[645] When the board "is faced with a tender offer and a request to redeem the [rights plan], they will not be able to arbitrarily reject the offer. They will be held to

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637 *Id.*

638 *Kahn v. MSB Bancorp, Inc.*, No. C.A. 14712-NC, 1998 WL 409355 (Del. Ch. 1998).

639 *Id*. at *4.

640 *Id*. at *3.

641 *See, e.g., Quickturn Design Sys., Inc. v. Shapiro*, 721 A.2d 1281, 1290 (Del. 1998).

642 *Unitrin, Inc. v. Am. Gen. Corp.*, 651 A.2d 1361, 1387 (Del 1995) (citations omitted).

643 *Moran v. Household Int'l, Inc.*, 500 A.2d 1346 (Del. 1985).

644 *Id*. at 1349.

645 *Id*. at 1354.

the same fiduciary standards any other board of directors would be held to in deciding to adopt a defensive mechanism."[646]

F. The Pursuit of a Sale.

When a board decides to pursue a sale of the corporation (involving a sale of control within the meaning of *QVC*), whether on its own initiative or in response to a friendly suitor, it must "seek the best value reasonably available to the stockholders."[647] As the Delaware Supreme Court stated in *Technicolor*: "[I]n the review of a transaction involving a sale of a company, the directors have the burden of establishing that the price offered was the highest value reasonably available under the circumstances."[648]

1. Value to Stockholders.

In *Revlon*, the Delaware Supreme Court imposed an affirmative duty on the Board to seek the highest value reasonably available to the shareholders when a sale became inevitable.[649] The duty established in *Revlon* has been considered by the Delaware courts on numerous occasions, and was restated in *QVC*. According to the Delaware Supreme Court in *QVC*, the duty to seek the highest value reasonably available is imposed on a board in the following situations:

> Under Delaware law there are, generally speaking and without excluding other possibilities, two circumstances which may implicate Revlon duties. The first, and clearer one, is when a corporation initiates an active bidding process seeking to sell itself or to effect a business reorganization involving a clear break-up of the company. However, Revlon duties may also be triggered where, in response to a bidder's offer, a target abandons its long-term strategy and seeks an alternative transaction involving the break-up of the company.[650]

> [W]hen a corporation undertakes a transaction which will cause: (a) a change in corporate control; or (b) a break-up of the corporate entity, the directors' obligation is to seek the best value reasonably available to the stockholders.[651]

The principles of *Revlon* are applicable to corporations which are not public companies.[652] Directors' *Revlon* duties to secure the highest value reasonably attainable apply not only in the context of break-up, but also in a change in control.[653]

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646 *Id*. *See also Moore Corp. Ltd. v. Wallace Computer Servs. Inc.*, 907 F. Supp. 1545 (D. Del. 1995); *Desert Partners, L.P. v. USG Corp.*, 686 F. Supp. 1289 (N.D. Ill. 1988); *Unitrin*, 651 A.2d 1361; *Ivanhoe Partners v. Newmont Mining Corp.,* 535 A.2d 1334 (Del. 1987); *Revlon, Inc. v. MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings, Inc.*, 506 A.2d 173 (Del 1986) (considering favorably a board's defensive measures to protect its decision to remain independent).

647 *Paramount Commc'ns, Inc. v. QVC Network, Inc.*, 637 A.2d 34, 48 (Del. 1994); *see also Matador Capital Mgmt. Corp. v. BRC Holdings, Inc.*, 729 A.2d 280, 290 (Del Ch. 1998).

648 *Cede & Co. v. Technicolor, Inc.*, 634 A.2d 345, 361 (Del. 1993).

649 *See Revlon*, 506 A.2d 173; *Elloway v. Pate*, 238 S.W.3d 882, 890 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2007, no pet. h.).

650 *QVC*, 637 A.2d at 47 (citation omitted).

651 *Id*. at 48.

652 *See Cirrus Holding v. Cirrus Ind.*, 794 A.2d 1191 (Del Ch. 2001).

2. Ascertaining Value.

When the *Revlon* decision was first announced by the Delaware Supreme Court, many practitioners read the decision to mandate an auction by a target company in order to satisfy the board's fiduciary duties (the so-called "*Revlon duties*").[654] After interpreting *Revlon* in *Barkan, Macmillan, Time, Technicolor*, and *QVC*, however, the Delaware Supreme Court has clearly indicated that an auction is not the only way to satisfy the board's fiduciary duties. As the Court in *Barkan* stated:

> Revlon does not demand that every change in the control of a Delaware corporation be preceded by a heated bidding contest. Revlon is merely one of an unbroken line of cases that seek to prevent the conflicts of interest that arise in the field of mergers and acquisitions by demanding that directors act with scrupulous concern for fairness to shareholders.[655]

One court has noted that when the board is negotiating with a single suitor and has no reliable grounds upon which to judge the fairness of the offer, a canvas of the market is necessary to determine if the board can elicit higher bids.[656] However, the Delaware Supreme Court held in *Barkan* that when the directors "possess a body of reliable evidence with which to evaluate the fairness of a transaction, they may approve that transaction without conducting an active survey of the market."[657]

The following cases indicate situations in which a board was not required to engage in an active survey of the market. Most involve one-on-one friendly negotiations without other bidders, although in some the target had earlier discussions with other potential bidders.

a. In *Barkan*,[658] the corporation had been put "in play" by the actions of an earlier bidder.[659] Instead of taking an earlier offer, the corporation instituted a management buyout (the "*MBO*") through an employee stock ownership program.[660] In holding that the board did not have to engage in a market survey to meet its burden of informed decision-making in good faith, the Court listed the following factors: (i) potential suitors had ten months to make some sort of offer (due to early announcements), (ii) the MBO offered unique tax advantages to the corporation that led the board to believe that no outside offer would be as advantageous to the shareholders, (iii) the board had the benefit of the advice of investment bankers, and (iv) the trouble the corporation had financing the MBO, indicating that the corporation would be

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653 *Id.*; *McMillan v. Intercargo Corp.*, 768 A.2d 492, 502 (Del. Ch. 2000); *see also Krim v. ProNet, Inc.*, 744 A.2d 523 (Del. 1999) (Delaware law requires that once a change of control of a company is inevitable the board must assume the role of an auctioneer in order to maximize shareholder value).

654 *See* McBride, *Revisiting Delaware Law and Mergers and Acquisitions: The Impact of QVC v. Paramount*, *in* 2 PLI COURSE HANDBOOK, 26TH ANN. INST. ON SEC. REG. 86 (1994).

655 *Barkan v. Amsted Indus., Inc.*, 567 A.2d 1279, 1286 (Del. 1989).

656 *In re Fort Howard Corp. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 9991, 1988 WL 83147 (Del. Ch. 1988).

657 *Barkan*, 567 A.2d at 1287.

658 567 A.2d 1279.

659 *Id*. at 1287.

660 *Id*. at 1282-83.

unattractive to potential suitors.[661] In holding that an active market check was not necessary, however, the Court sounded a note of caution:

> The evidence that will support a finding of good faith in the absence of some sort of market test is by nature circumstantial; therefore, its evaluation by a court must be open-textured. However, the crucial element supporting a finding of good faith is knowledge. It must be clear that the board had sufficient knowledge of relevant markets to form the basis for its belief that it acted in the best interests of the shareholders. *The situations in which a completely passive approach to acquiring such knowledge is appropriate are limited*.[662]

b. In *In re Vitalink*,[663] Vitalink entered a merger agreement with Network Systems Corporation.[664] While Vitalink had also conducted earlier discussions with two other companies, the Court found that Vitalink had not discussed valuation with those two companies, and thus did not effectively canvas the market.[665] In holding that the Vitalink board nevertheless met its burden of showing that it acted in an informed manner in good faith, the Court looked at the following factors: (i) no bidder came forward in the 45 days that passed between the public announcement of the merger and its closing; (ii) the parties negotiated for a number of months; (iii) the board had the benefit of a fairness opinion from its investment banker; and (iv) the investment banker's fee was structured to provide it an incentive to find a buyer who would pay a higher price.[666]

As the Delaware Supreme Court noted in *Van Gorkom*, failure to take appropriate action to be adequately informed as to a transaction violates the board's duty of due care. Without a firm blueprint to build adequate information, however, the passive market check entails a risk of being judged as "doing nothing" to check the market or assess value.[667]

c. *In re MONY Group Inc. Shareholder Litigation*[668] involved stockholders seeking a preliminary injunction against a stockholder vote on the merger of MONY with AXA. The stockholders of MONY alleged that the defendant Board, having decided to put MONY up for sale, did not fulfill its *Revlon* duty to seek the best transaction reasonably available to the stockholders by forgoing a pre-agreement auction in favor of a process involving a single-bidder negotiation followed by a post-agreement market check. The stockholders challenged (i) the Board's decision that the resulting negotiated merger proposal was the best proposal reasonably available, (ii) the adequacy of the market check utilized and (iii) the adequacy of disclosures made in a proxy statement sent to the stockholders seeking their approval of the merger. The Court granted a limited injunction relating solely to proxy statement disclosures concerning

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661 *Id*. at 1287-88.

662 *Id*. at 1288 (emphasis added).

663 *In re Vitalink Commc'ns Corp. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 12085, 1991 WL 238816 (Del Ch. 1991).

664 *Id*. at *3-4.

665 *Id*. at *7.

666 *Id*. at *11-12.

667 *See Barkan*, 567 A.2d at 1287 (holding there is no single method that a board must employ to become informed).

668 *In re MONY Group Inc. S'holder Litig.*, 852 A.2d 9 (Del. Ch. 2004).

payments under certain change-in-control agreements, but denied the request for a preliminary injunction on the allegations as to the failure to get the best transaction.

The MONY Board had recognized that MONY had a number of problems and had received a report from its investment banker listing a number of companies, including AXA, that might acquire MONY. The Board considered and rejected the idea of publicly auctioning MONY out of concern that a failed auction would expose MONY's weaknesses and provide competitors with information they could use to raid MONY's insurance agents. Accordingly, the Board instructed the CEO to quietly explore merger opportunities. After hearing the MONY CEO's report of his meeting with the AXA CEO and of prior discussions with other potential partners, the MONY Board authorized solicitations of interest from AXA, but not from any other potential bidder.

AXA initially proposed a price of $26 to $26.50 per MONY share, which led to negotiations over several months that involved allowing AXA access to confidential information under a confidentiality agreement. During these negotiations, the MONY CEO had advised AXA the MONY change in control agreements would cost the survivor about $120 million. After a period of negotiation, AXA proposed to acquire MONY for $28.50 per share, an aggregate of about $1.368 billion, but later AXA determined that the change in control agreements would actually cost about $163 million, not $120 million, and it lowered its offer to $26.50 per share or $1.272 billion. At the end of these negotiations, the MONY Board rejected a stock-for-stock merger with AXA that purported to reflect the $26.50 per share price by a fixed share exchange ratio that was collared between $17 and $37 per MONY share. The Board also concluded that the change in control agreements were too rich and that AXA's offer price would have been higher if it had not been for the change in control agreements.

Shortly after the AXA offer was rejected, the MONY Board engaged a compensation consultant to analyze the change in control agreements and received a report that change in control agreements costs typically range from 1% to 3% of a proposed transaction price (and sometimes up to 5%), but that MONY's change in control agreements represented 15% of the previously proposed AXA merger price. Ultimately, the Board informed senior management that it would not renew the change in control agreements when they expired, and offered management new change in control agreements that lowered the payout provisions to between 5% and 7% of the AXA transaction's value, which the management parties accepted.

Two months later, the AXA CEO contracted the MONY CEO to ask if MONY would be interested in an all-cash transaction, but the Board would not permit the MONY CEO to engage in sale negotiations until the change in control agreements had been amended, thus postponing the talks. When the AXA CEO then made an offer of $29.50 cash per MONY share, the MONY CEO informed him that the change in control agreements had been modified and that the offer should be $1.50 higher to reflect the change. At the end of this round of negotiations, a merger agreement was signed providing for the payment of $31 cash for each MONY share and a negotiated provision allowing MONY to pay a dividend of $0.25 per share before the merger was consummated. The merger consideration reflected a 7.3% premium to MONY's then-current trading price, as well as valuing MONY's equity at $1.5 billion and the total transaction (including liabilities assumed) at $2.1 billion.

MONY accepted a broad "window shop" provision and a fiduciary-out termination clause which required MONY to pay AXA a termination fee equal to 3.3% of the equity value and 2.4% of the transaction value. In the several months following the announcement of the merger agreement no one made a competing proposal, although there was one expression of interest if the AXA deal failed.

The plaintiff stockholders claimed that the MONY board breached its fiduciary duties under *Revlon* by failing to procure the best possible price for MONY, presumably through a public auction. Citing *Revlon* and *QVC*, the Court found that the consequences of a sale of control imposed special obligations on the directors, particularly the obligation of acting reasonably to seek the transaction offering the best value reasonably available for stockholders (i.e., getting the best short-term price for stockholders), but that these requirements did not demand that every change of control be preceded by a heated bidding contest, noting that a board could fulfill its duty to obtain the best transaction reasonably available by entering into a merger agreement with a single bidder, establishing a "floor" for the transaction, and then testing the transaction with a post-agreement market check. The Court wrote that the traditional inquiry was whether the board was adequately informed and acted in good faith. Furthermore, in the sale of control context this inquiry was heightened such that the directors had the burden of proving that they were adequately informed and acted reasonably, with the Court scrutinizing the adequacy of the decision-making process, including the information on which the directors based their decision and the reasonableness of the directors' action in light of the circumstances then existing. The question was whether the directors made a reasonable decision, not a perfect decision. If a Board selected one of several reasonable alternatives, the court should not second-guess that choice even though it might have decided otherwise or subsequent events might have cast doubt on the board's determination.

The plaintiffs argued that the Board relied too much upon the MONY CEO to determine and explore alternatives, and in doing so that it had breached its fiduciary duties, since the CEO and other members of MONY senior management stood to gain excessive payments under the change in control agreements if MONY was sold. With respect to the plaintiff stockholders argument that the Board should have established a special committee to continue negotiations with AXA, the Court held that a board could rely on the CEO to conduct negotiations and that the involvement of an investment bank in the negotiations was not required, particularly since the Board actively supervised the CEO's negotiations and the CEO had acted diligently in securing improvements for MONY. The Court further noted that the Board had repeatedly demonstrated its independence and control, first in rejecting the stock for stock transaction and second in reducing the insiders' change in control agreements benefits.

In addressing the contention that there should have been a public auction, the Court concluded that a single-bidder approach offered the benefits of protecting against the risk that an auction would fail and avoiding a premature disclosure to the detriment of MONY's then-ongoing business, and noted that the Board had taken into consideration a number of company and industry specific factors in deciding not to pursue a public auction or active solicitation process and not to make out-going calls to potentially interested parties after receiving AXA's cash proposal. The Court noted that the Board members were financially sophisticated, knowledgeable about the insurance and financial services industry, and knew the industry and the potential strategic partners available to MONY. The Board had been regularly briefed on

MONY's strategic alternatives and industry developments over recent years. The Board was also advised as to alternatives to the merger. The Court wrote that this "financially sophisticated Board engaged CSFB for advice in maximizing stockholder value [and] . . . obtained a fairness opinion from CSFB, itself incentivized to obtain the best available price due to a fee that was set at 1% of transaction value . . . ," noting that CSFB was not aware of any other entity that had an interest in acquiring MONY at a higher price.[669] One witness testified that CSFB did not participate directly in the negotiations due to a reasonable concern that CSFB's involvement could cause AXA to get its own investment banker, which MONY believed would increase the risk of leaks and might result in a more extensive due diligence process to its detriment. The Court found that using these resources and the considerable body of information available to it, the Board had determined that, because MONY and AXA shared a similar business model, AXA was a strategic fit for MONY and thus presented an offer that was the best price reasonably available to stockholders.

Under the market check provisions which the Court found reasonable and adequate, MONY could not actively solicit offers after announcement of the transaction and before the stockholder vote, but could, subject to a reasonable termination fee, pursue inquiries that could be reasonably expected to lead to a business combination more favorable to stockholders. The Court found the five-month period while the transaction pended after it was announced (for SEC filing clearance and vote solicitation) was an adequate time for a competing bidder to emerge and complete its due diligence.

The Court concluded that the termination fee (3.3% of MONY's total equity value and 2.4% of the total transaction value) was within the range of reasonableness. Moreover, the Court said that the change in control agreements were "bidder neutral" in that they would affect any potential bidder in the same fashion as they affected AXA.[670] Thus, the Court found the five-month market check more than adequate to determine if the price offered by AXA was the best price reasonably available, which supported a conclusion that the board acted reasonably and had satisfied its *Revlon* duties.

The plaintiffs alleged that the proxy statement was misleading because it failed to disclose the percentage of transaction value of aggregate payments to be made under the amended change in control agreements as compared to payments in similar transactions. The MONY Board's expert showed that the mean change-in-control payment (as a percentage of deals for selected financial services industry transactions) was 3.37%, with the 25th and 75th percentile for such transactions being 0.94% and 4.92%, respectively. The base case under the original change in control agreements for MONY would have been over 15% of the original offer and the amended change in control agreements lowered that to 6%, which was still well above the 75th percentile. The Court noted the history of AXA's bidding as showing that there was essentially a 1:1 ratio between the value of the change in control agreements and the amount per share offered. Because the change in control agreements' value was above the amount paid in change in control agreements in more than 75% of comparable transactions, the Court was persuaded that the proxy statement needed to include disclosure of information available to the board about the size of the change in control agreements payments as compared to comparable

669 *Id.* at 22.

670 *Id.* at 23.

transactions, noting that the materiality of such disclosure was heightened by the Board's rejection of the original offer, at least in part because of the original outsized change in control agreements' payment obligations. The Court concluded the shareholders were entitled to know that the change in control agreements remained unusually large when deciding whether to vote to approve the $31 per share merger price or vote "no" or demand appraisal under statutory merger appraisal procedures. Moreover, the Court said that more disclosure about comparative information was made necessary to the extensive disclosure that was in the proxy statement about steps the Board had taken to lower the payments under the change in control agreements since that disclosure had created the strong impression that the amended change in control agreements were in line with those in comparable transactions. The Court said that the proxy statement had misleadingly implied that the payments under the change in control agreements were consistent with current market practice when they were in fact considerably more lucrative than was normal. The Court ordered the additional disclosure about the change in control agreements.

After the initial decision in the *MONY Group* case, the board of MONY reset and pushed back the record date for the vote on the merger by several months. The same court held in another decision that the directors did not breach their duties to existing stockholders in so doing even though the extended record date included additional stockholders (arbitrageurs) who had recently purchased shares and who were likely to vote in favor of the merger.[671]

3. Process Changes.

In re Toys "R" Us, Inc. Shareholder Litigation[672] involved a motion to enjoin a vote of the stockholders of Toys "R" Us, Inc. to consider approving a merger with an acquisition vehicle formed by a group led by Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co. ("*KKR*") that resulted from a lengthy, publicly-announced search for strategic alternatives and presented merger consideration constituting a 123% premium over the per share price when the strategic process began 18 months previously. During the strategic process, the Toys "R" Us board of directors, nine of whose ten members were independent, had frequent meetings to explore the company's strategic options with an open mind and with the advice of expert advisors.

Eventually, the Board settled on the sale of the company's most valuable asset, its toy retailing business, and the retention of the company's baby products retailing business, as its preferred option after considering a wide array of options, including a sale of the whole company. The company sought bids from a large number of the most logical buyers for the toy business, and it eventually elicited attractive expressions of interest from four competing bidders who emerged from the market canvass. When due diligence was completed, the Board put the bidders through two rounds of supposedly "final bids" for the toys business. In this process, one of the bidders expressed a serious interest in buying the whole company. The Board was presented with a bid that was attractive compared with its chosen strategy in light of the valuation evidence that its financial advisors had presented, and in light of the failure of any strategic or financial buyer to make any serious expression of interest in buying the whole company despite the Board's openly expressed examination of its strategic alternatives.

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671 *In re MONY Group, Inc. Shareholders Litigation,* 853 A.2d 661 (Del. Ch. 2004).

672 877 A.2d 975 (Del. Ch. 2005).

Recognizing that the attractive bids it had received for the toys business could be lost if it extended the process much longer, the Executive Committee of the Board, acting in conformity with direction given to it by the whole Board, approved the solicitation of bids for the entire company from the final bidders for the toys business, after a short period of due diligence.

When those whole company bids came in, the winning bid of $26.75 per share from KKR topped the next most favorable bid by $1.50 per share. After a thorough examination of its alternatives and a final reexamination of the value of the company, the Board decided that the best way to maximize stockholder value was to accept the $26.75 bid.

In its proposed merger agreement containing the $26.75 offer, KKR asked for a termination fee of 4% of the implied equity value of the transaction to be paid if the company terminated to accept another deal, as opposed to the 3% offered by the company in its proposed draft of merger agreement. Knowing that the only other bid for the company was $1.50 per share or $350 million less, the company's negotiators nonetheless bargained the termination fee down to 3.75% the next day, and bargained down the amount of expenses KKR sought in the event of a naked no vote.

The plaintiffs faulted the Board for failing to fulfill its duty to act reasonably in pursuit of the highest attainable value for the company's stockholders, complaining that the Board's decision to conduct a brief auction for the full company from the final bidders for the toy business was unreasonable and that the Board should have taken the time to conduct a new, full-blown search for buyers and that the Board unreasonably locked up the deal by agreeing to draconian deal termination measures that precluded any topping bid. The Chancery Court rejected those arguments, finding that the Board made reasonable choices in confronting the real world circumstances it faced, was supple in reacting to new circumstances and was adroit in responding to a new development that promised greater value to the stockholders.

Likewise, the Chancery Court found the choice of the Board's negotiators not to press too strongly for a reduction of KKR's desired 4% termination fee all the way to 3% initially proposed by the company was reasonable, given that KKR had topped the next best bid by such a big margin and the Board's negotiators did negotiate to reduce the termination fee from 4% to 3.75%. Furthermore, the size of the termination fee and the presence in the merger agreement of a provision entitling KKR to match any competing bid received did not act as a serious barrier to any bidder willing to pay materially more than KKR's price.

In rejecting the plaintiffs' *Revlon* arguments and finding the Board's decision to negotiate with four bidders who had previously submitted bids to buy part of the company, rather than conduct a wide auction, was reasonable and *Revlon*-compliant, the Chancery Court wrote:

> The plaintiffs, of course, argue that the Toys "R" Us board made a hurried decision to sell the whole Company, after feckless deliberations, rushing headlong into the arms of the KKR Group when a universe of worthier, but shy, suitors were waiting to be asked to dance. The M & A market, as they view it, is comprised of buyers of exceedingly modest and retiring personality, too genteel to make even the politest of uninvited overtures: a cotillion of the reticent.

For that reason, the Company's nearly year long, publicly announced search for strategic alternatives was of no use in testing the market. Because that announced process did not specifically invite offers for the entire Company from buyers, the demure M & A community of potential Cyranos, albeit ones afraid to even speak through front men, could not be expected to risk the emotional blow of rejection by Toys "R" Us. Given its failure to appreciate the psychological barriers that impeded possible buyers from overcoming the emotional paralysis that afflicts them in the absence of a warm, outreached hand, the Company's board wrongly seized upon the KKR Group's bid, without reasonable basis (other than, of course, its $350 million superiority to the Cerberus bid and its attractiveness when compared to the multiple valuations that the board reviewed).

The plaintiffs supplement this dubious big-picture with a swarm of nits about several of the myriad of choices directors and their advisors must make in conducting a thorough strategic review. Rather than applaud the board's supple willingness to change direction when that was in the stockholders' best interest, the plaintiffs instead trumpet their arguable view that the directors and their advisors did not set out on the correct course in the first instance. Even the reasonable refusal of the Company to confirm or deny rumors in the Wall Street Journal is flown in to somehow demonstrate the board's failure to market the Company adequately.

It is not hyperbole to say that one could spend hundreds of pages swatting these nits out of the air. In the fewer, but still too numerous, pages that follow, I will attempt to explain in a reader-friendly fashion why the board's process for maximizing value cannot reasonably be characterized as unreasonable.

I begin by noting my disagreement with the plaintiffs about the nature of players in the American M & A markets. They are not like some of us were in high school. They have no problem with rejection. The great takeover cases of the last quarter century — like *Unocal, QVC*, and — oh, yeah — *Revlon* — all involved bidders who were prepared, for financial advantage, to make hostile, unsolicited bids. Over the years, that willingness has not gone away.

Given that bidders are willing to make unsolicited offers for companies with an announced strategy of remaining independent, boards like Toys "R" Us know that one way to signal to buyers that they are open to considering a wide array of alternatives is to announce the board's intention to look thoroughly at strategic alternatives. By doing that, a company can create an atmosphere conducive to offers of a non-public and public kind, while not putting itself in a posture that signals financial distress.

In that regard, the defendants plausibly argue that if the Company's board had put a "for sale" sign on Toys "R" Us when its stock price was at $12.00 per share, the ultimate price per share it would have received would likely have begun with a "1" rather than a "2" and not have been anywhere close to $26.75 per share. The board avoided that risk by creating an environment in which it

simultaneously recognized the need to unlock value and signaled its openness to a variety of means to accomplish that desirous goal, while at the same time notifying buyers that no emergency required a sale.

By this method, I have no doubt that Toys "R" Us caught the attention of every retail industry player that might have had an interest in a strategic deal with it. That is, in fact, what triggered calls from PETsMART, Home Depot, Office Depot, Staples, and Best Buy, all of whom potentially wanted to buy some of the Company's real estate.

In a marketplace where strategic buyers have not felt shy about "jumping" friendly deals crafted between their industry rivals, the board's open search for strategic alternatives presented an obvious opportunity for retailers, of any size or stripe, who thought a combination with all or part of the Company made sense for them, to come forward with a proposal. That they did not do so, early or late in the process, is most likely attributable to their inability to formulate a coherent strategy that would combine the Company's toy and baby store chains into another retail operation. The plaintiffs' failure to identify, or cite to any industry analyst touting the existence of, likely synergistic combinations is telling.

The approach that the board took not only signaled openness to possible buyers, it enabled the board to develop a rich body of knowledge regarding the value not only of the Company's operations, but of its real estate assets. That body of knowledge provided the board with a firm foundation to analyze potential strategic options and constituted useful information to convince buyers to pay top dollar.[673]

The Chancery Court further found no fault in the Board's willingness to allow two of the bidders to present a joint bid:

Likewise, the decision to accede to KKR and Vornado/Bain's request to present a joint bid cannot be deemed unreasonable. The Cerberus consortium had done that earlier, as to the Global Toys business only. Had First Boston told KKR and Vornado/Bain "no," they might not have presented any whole Company bid at all. Their rationale for joining together, to spread the risk that would be incurred by undertaking what the plaintiffs have said is the largest retail acquisition by financial buyers ever, was logical and is consistent with an emerging practice among financial buyers. By banding together, these buyers are able to make bids that would be imprudent, if pursued in isolation. The plaintiffs' continued description of the KKR Group's bid as "collusive," is not only linguistically imprecise, it is a naked attempt to use inflammatory words to mask a weak argument. The "cooperative" bid that First Boston permitted the KKR Group to make gave the Company a powerful bidding competitor to the Cerberus consortium, which included, among others, Goldman Sachs.[674]

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673 *Id.* at 1006-08.

674 *Id.* at 1009.

In rejecting plaintiffs' other major argument that the Board acted unreasonably because the merger agreement with KKR included deal protection measures that, in the plaintiffs' view, precluded other bidders from making a topping offer, the Chancery Court wrote:

> It is no innovation for me to state that this court looks closely at the deal protection measures in merger agreements. In doing so, we undertake a nuanced, fact-intensive inquiry [that] does not presume that all business circumstances are identical or that there is any naturally occurring rate of deal protection, the deficit or excess of which will be less than economically optimal. Instead, that inquiry examines whether the board granting the deal protections had a reasonable basis to accede to the other side's demand for them in negotiations. In that inquiry, the court must attempt, as far as possible, to view the question from the perspective of the directors themselves, taking into account the real world risks and prospects confronting them when they agreed to the deal protections. As *QVC* clearly states, what matters is whether the board acted reasonably based on the circumstances then facing it.
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> * * *
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> As the plaintiffs must admit, neither a termination fee nor a matching right is per se invalid. Each is a common contractual feature that, when assented to by a board fulfilling its fundamental duties of loyalty and care for the proper purpose of securing a high value bid for the stockholders, has legal legitimacy.
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> * * *
>
> Contributing to this negotiating dynamic, no doubt, were prior judicial precedents, which suggested that it would not be unreasonable for the board to grant a substantial termination fee and matching rights to the KKR Group if that was necessary to successfully wring out a high-value bid. Given the Company's lengthy search for alternatives, the obvious opportunity that unsolicited bidders had been afforded to come forward over the past year, and the large gap between the Cerberus and the KKR Group bids, the board could legitimately give more weight to getting the highest value bid out of the KKR Group, and less weight to the fear that an unlikely higher-value bid would emerge later. After all, anyone interested had had multiple chances to present, however politely, a serious expression of interest — none had done so.
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> Nor was the level of deal protection sought by the KKR Group unprecedented in magnitude. In this regard, the plaintiffs ignore that many deals that were jumped in the late 1990s involved not only termination fees and matching rights but also stock option grants that destroyed pooling treatment, an additional effect that enhanced the effectiveness of the barrier to prevent a later-emerging bidder.
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> * * *

> In view of this jurisprudential reality, the board was not in a position to tell the KKR Group that they could not have any deal protection. The plaintiffs admit this and therefore second-guess the board's decision not to insist on a smaller termination fee, more like 2.5% or 3%, and the abandonment of the matching right. But that, in my view, is precisely the sort of quibble that does not suffice to prove a *Revlon* claim.
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> * * *
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> It would be hubris in these circumstances for the court to conclude that the board acted unreasonably by assenting to a compromise 3.75% termination fee in order to guarantee $26.75 per share to its stockholders, and to avoid the substantial risk that the KKR Group might somehow glean the comparatively large margin by which it had outbid Cerberus.
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> * * *
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> The central purpose of *Revlon* is to ensure the fidelity of fiduciaries. It is not a license for the judiciary to set arbitrary limits on the contract terms that fiduciaries acting loyally and carefully can shape in the pursuit of their stockholders' interest.
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> * * *
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> This is not to say that this court is, or has been, willing to turn a blind eye to the adoption of excessive termination fees, such as the 6.3% termination fee in *Phelps Dodge* that Chancellor Chandler condemned, that present a more than reasonably explicable barrier to a second bidder, or even that fees lower than 3% are always reasonable. But it is to say that *Revlon*'s purpose is not to set the judiciary loose to enjoin contractual provisions that, upon a hard look, were reasonable in view of the benefits the board obtained in the other portions of an integrated contract.[675]

In finding that the board's process passed muster and after noting the scrupulous way in which management refused to even discuss future employment prospects with any bidder (or even meet with a bidder in the absence of its financial adviser), the Chancery Court noted that the financial adviser had introduced an unnecessary issue by agreeing (after the merger agreement was signed and with the permission of the board) to provide buy-side financing for KKR:

> First Boston did create for itself, and therefore its clients, an unnecessary issue. In autumn 2004, First Boston raised the possibility of providing buy-side financing to bidders for Global Toys. First Boston had done deals in the past with many of the late-round financial buyers, most notably with KKR. The board promptly nixed that idea. At the board's insistence, First Boston had, therefore, refused to discuss financing with the KKR Group, or any bidder, before the

[675] *Id.* at 1015-22.

merger was finalized. But, when the dust settled, and the merger agreement was signed, the board yielded to a letter request by First Boston to provide financing on the buy-side for the KKR Group.

That decision was unfortunate, in that it tends to raise eyebrows by creating the appearance of impropriety, playing into already heightened suspicions about the ethics of investment banking firms. Far better, from the standpoint of instilling confidence, if First Boston had never asked for permission, and had taken the position that its credibility as a sell-side advisor was too important in this case, and in general, for it to simultaneously play on the buy-side in a deal when it was the seller's financial advisor. In that respect, it might have been better, in view of First Boston's refusal to refrain, for the board of the Company to have declined the request, even though the request came on May 12, 2005, almost two months after the board had signed the merger agreement.

My job, however, is not to police the appearances of conflict that, upon close scrutiny, do not have a causal influence on a board's process. Here, there is simply no basis to conclude that First Boston's questionable desire to provide buy-side financing ever influenced it to advise the board to sell the whole Company rather than pursue a sale of Global Toys, or to discourage bidders other than KKR, or to assent to overly onerous deal protection measures during the merger agreement negotiations.[676]

4. Disparate Treatment of Stockholders.

In a merger there are often situations where it is desired to treat shareholders within the same class differently. For example, a buyer may not want to expose itself to the costs and delays that may be associated with issuing securities to shareholders of the target who are not "*accredited investors*" within the meaning of Rule 501(a) of Regulation D under the Securities Act of 1933. In such a situation, the buyer may seek to issue shares only to accredited investors and pay equivalent value on a per share basis in cash to unaccredited investors.

DGCL § 251(b) provides, in relevant part, that "[an] agreement of merger shall state: . . . (5) the manner, if any, of converting the shares of each of the constituent corporations into shares or other securities of the corporation surviving or resulting from the merger or consolidation, or of cancelling some or all of such shares, and, if any shares of any of the constituent corporations are not to remain outstanding, to be converted solely into shares or other securities of the surviving or resulting corporation, or to be cancelled, the cash, property, rights or securities of any other corporation or entity which the holders of such shares are to receive in exchange for, or upon conversion of such shares and the surrender of any certificates evidencing them, which cash, property, rights or securities of any other corporation or entity may be in addition to or in lieu of shares or other securities of the surviving or resulting corporation."[677] Similarly, TBOC § 10.002 provides that "[a] plan of merger must include . . . the manner and basis of converting any of the ownership or membership interests of each organization that is a party to the merger

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676 *Id.* at 1005-06.

677 8 Del. C. § 251(b).

into: (A) ownership interests, membership interests, obligations, rights to purchase securities, or other securities of one or more of the surviving or new organizations; (B) cash; (C) other property, including ownership interests, membership interests, obligations, rights to purchase securities, or other securities of any other person or entity; or (D) any combination of the items described by Paragraphs (A)-(C)."[678] Further, "[i]f the plan of merger provides for a manner and basis of converting an ownership or membership interest that may be converted in a manner or basis different than any other ownership or membership interest of the same class or series of the ownership or membership interest, the manner and basis of conversion must be included in the plan of merger in the same manner as provided by Subsection (a)(5)."[679]

DGCL § 251(b)(5) and the Texas Corporate Statues do not by their literal terms require that all shares of the same class of a constituent corporation in a merger be treated identically in a merger effected in accordance therewith.[680] Certain Delaware court decisions provide guidance. In *Jedwab v. MGM Grand Hotels, Inc.*,[681] a preferred stockholder of MGM Grand Hotels, Inc. ("*MGM*") sought to enjoin the merger of MGM with a subsidiary of Bally Manufacturing Corporation whereby all stockholders of MGM would receive cash. The plaintiff challenged the apportionment of the merger consideration among the common and preferred stockholders of MGM. The controlling stockholder of MGM apparently agreed, as a facet of the merger agreement, to accept less per share for his shares of common stock than the other holders of common stock would receive on a per share basis in respect of the merger. While the primary focus of the opinion in *Jedwab* was the allocation of the merger consideration between the holders of common stock and preferred stock, the Court also addressed the need to allocate merger consideration equally among the holders of the same class of stock. In this respect, the Court stated that "should a controlling shareholder for whatever reason (to avoid entanglement in litigation as plaintiff suggests is here the case or for other personal reasons) elect to sacrifice some part of the value of his stock holdings, the law will not direct him as to how what amount is to be distributed and to whom."[682] According to the Court in *Jedwab*, therefore, there is no per se statutory prohibition against a merger providing for some holders of a class of stock to receive less than other holders of the same class if the holders receiving less agree to receive such lesser amount.[683]

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678 TBOC § 10.002(a)(5); *see also* TBCA art. 5.01(B).

679 TBOC § 10.002(c); *see also* TBCA art. 5.01(B).

680 *Compare Beaumont v. American Can Co.,* 538 N.Y.S.2d 136 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 1991) (determining that unequal treatment of stockholders violates the literal provisions of N.Y. Bus. Corp. Law § 501(C), which requires that "each share shall be equal to every other share of the same class"); see DAVID A. DREXLER ET AL., *DELAWARE CORPORATION LAW AND PRACTICE* § 35.04[1], at 35-11 (1997).

681 509 A.2d 584 (Del. Ch. 1986).

682 *Id.* at 598.

683 See *Emerson Radio Corp. v. Int'l Jensen Inc.*, C.A. No. 15130, slip op. at 33-34 (Del. Ch. Apr. 30, 1996); R. FRANKLIN BALOTTI & JESSE A. FINKELSTEIN, *THE DELAWARE LAW OF CORPORATIONS AND BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS* § 9.10 (2d ed. 1997); DAVID A. DREXLER ET AL., *DELAWARE CORPORATION LAW AND PRACTICE* § 35.04[1] (1997); *see also In re Reading Co.*, 711 F.2d 509, 517 (3d Cir. 1983) (applying Delaware law, the Court held that stockholders may be treated less favorably with respect to dividends when they consent to such treatment); *Schrage v. Bridgeport Oil Co., Inc.*, 71 A.2d 882, 883 (Del. Ch. 1950) (holding, in enjoining the implementation of a plan of dissolution, that the plan could have provided for the payment of cash to certain stockholders apparently by means of a cafeteria-type plan in lieu of an in-kind distribution of the corporation's assets).

In *Jackson v. Turnbull*,[684] plaintiffs brought an action pursuant to DGCL § 225 to determine the rightful directors and officers of L'Nard Restorative Concepts, Inc. ("*L'Nard*") and claimed, among other things, that a merger between Restorative Care of America, Inc. ("*Restorative*") and L'Nard was invalid. The merger agreement at issue provided that the L'Nard common stock held by certain L'Nard stockholders would be converted into common stock of the corporation surviving the merger and that the common stock of L'Nard held by certain other L'Nard stockholders would be converted into the right to receive a cash payment. The plaintiffs argued that the merger violated DGCL § 251(b)(5) by, *inter alia*, forcing stockholders holding the same class of stock to accept different forms of consideration in a single merger. The Court in *Jackson* ultimately found the merger to be void upon a number of grounds, including what it found to be an impermissible delegation of the L'Nard directors' responsibility to determine the consideration payable in the merger. In respect of the plaintiffs' claims that the merger was void under DGCL § 251, the Chancery Court rejected such a claim as not presenting a statutory issue. The clear implication of the Court's decision in *Jackson* is the decision to treat holders of shares of the same class of stock in a merger differently is a fiduciary, not a statutory, issue.

Even though a merger agreement providing for different treatment of stockholders within the same class appears to be authorized by both DGCL and the Texas Corporate Statues, the merger agreement may still be challenged on grounds that the directors violated their fiduciary duties of care, good faith and loyalty in approving the merger. In *In re Times Mirror Co. Shareholders Litigation*,[685] the Court approved a proposed settlement in connection with claims pertaining to a series of transactions which culminated with the merger of The Times Mirror Company ("*Times Mirror*") and Cox Communications, Inc. The transaction at issue provided for: (i) certain stockholders of Times Mirror related to the Chandler family to exchange (prior to the merger) outstanding shares of Times Mirror Series A and Series C common stock for a like number of shares of Series A and Series C common stock, respectively, of a newly formed subsidiary, New TMC Inc. ("*New TMC*"), as well as the right to receive a series of preferred stock of New TMC; and (ii) the subsequent merger whereby the remaining Times Mirror stockholders (i.e., the public holders of Times Mirror Series A and Series C common stock) would receive a like number of shares of Series A and Series C common stock, respectively, of New TMC and shares of capital stock in the corporation surviving the merger. Although holders of the same class of stock were technically not being disparately treated in respect of a merger since the Chandler family was to engage in the exchange of their stock immediately prior to the merger (and therefore *Times Mirror* did not present as a technical issue a statutory claim under DGCL § 251(b)(5)), the Court recognized the somewhat differing treatment in the transaction taken as a whole. As the Court inquired, "[i]s it permissible to treat one set of shareholders holding a similar security differently than another subset of that same class?"[686] The Court in *Times Mirror* was not required to finally address the issue of disparate treatment of stockholders since the proceeding was a settlement proceeding. Therefore, the Court was merely required to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the claims being settled. The Court nonetheless noted that "[f]or a long time I think that it might have been said that [the discriminatory treatment of stockholders] was not permissible," but then opined that "I am inclined to think that [such

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684 C.A. No. 13042, 1994 WL 174668 (Del. Ch. Feb. 8, 1994), *aff'd*, 653 A.2d 306 (Del. 1994).

685 C.A. No. 13550, 1994 WL 1753203 (Del. Ch. Nov. 30, 1994) (Bench Ruling).

686 *Id.*

differing treatment] is permissible."[687] In addition to noting that *Unocal v. Mesa Petroleum Co.*,[688]-- which permitted a discriminatory stock repurchase as a response to a hostile takeover bid -- would be relevant in deciding such issue, the Court noted that an outright prohibition of discriminatory treatment among holders of the same class of stock would be inconsistent with policy concerns. In this respect, the Court noted "that a controlling shareholder, so long as the shareholder is not interfering with the corporation's operation of the transaction, is itself free to reject any transaction that is presented to it if it is not in its best interests as a shareholder."[689] Therefore, if discriminatory treatment among holders of the same class of stock were not permitted in certain circumstances:

> [T]hen you might encounter situations in which no transaction could be done at all. And it is not in the social interest – that is, the interest of the economy generally – to have a rule that prevents efficient transactions from occurring.
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> What is necessary, and I suppose what the law is, is that such a discrimination can be made but it is necessary in all events that both sets of shareholders be treated entirely fairly.[690]

5. Protecting the Merger.

During the course of acquisition negotiations, it may be neither practicable nor possible to auction or actively shop the corporation. Moreover, even when there has been active bidding by two or more suitors, it may be difficult to determine whether the bidding is complete. In addition, there can remain the possibility that new bidders may emerge that have not been foreseen. In these circumstances, it is generally wise for the board to make some provision for further bidders in the merger agreement. Such a provision can also provide the board with additional support for its decision to sell to a particular bidder if the agreement does not forestall competing bidders, permits the fact gathering and discussion sufficient to make an informed decision and provides meaningful flexibility to respond to them. In this sense, the agreement is an extension of, and has implications for, the process of becoming adequately informed.

In considering a change of control transaction, a board should consider:

> [W]hether the circumstances afford a disinterested and well motivated director a basis reasonably to conclude that if the transactions contemplated by the merger agreement close, they will represent the best available alternative for the corporation and its shareholders. This inquiry involves consideration *inter alia* of the nature of any provisions in the merger agreement tending to impede other offers, the extent of the board's information about market alternatives, the content of announcements accompanying the execution of the merger agreement, the

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687 *Id.*

688 493 A.2d 946 (Del. 1985).

689 *Id.*

690 *In re Times Mirror*, 1994 WL 1753203.

> extent of the company's contractual freedom to supply necessary information to competing bidders, and the time made available for better offers to emerge.[691]

Management will, however, have to balance the requirements of the buyer against these interests in negotiating the merger agreement. The buyer will seek assurance of the benefit of its bargain through the agreement, especially the agreed upon price, and the corporation may run the risk of losing the transaction if it does not accede to the buyer's requirements in this regard. The relevant cases provide the corporation and its directors with the ability, and the concomitant obligation in certain circumstances, to resist.

The assurances a buyer seeks often take the form of a "no-shop" clause, a "lock-up" agreement for stock or assets, a break-up fee, or a combination thereof. In many cases, a court will consider the effect of these provisions together. Whether or not the provisions are upheld may depend, in large measure, on whether a court finds that the board has adequate information about the market and alternatives to the offer being considered. The classic examples of no-shops, lock-ups and break-up fees occur, however, not in friendly situations, where a court is likely to find that such arrangements provide the benefit of keeping the suitor at the bargaining table, but rather in a bidding war between two suitors, where the court may find that such provisions in favor of one suitor prematurely stop an auction and thus do not allow the board to obtain the highest value reasonably attainable.

The fact that a buyer has provided consideration for the assurances requested in a merger agreement does not end the analysis. In *QVC*, the Delaware Supreme Court took the position that provisions of agreements that would force a board to violate its fiduciary duty of care are unenforceable. As the Court stated:

> Such provisions, whether or not they are presumptively valid in the abstract, may not validly define or limit the directors' fiduciary duties under Delaware law or prevent the . . . directors from carrying out their fiduciary duties under Delaware law. To the extent such provisions are inconsistent with those duties, they are invalid and unenforceable.[692]

Although this language provides a basis for directors to resist unduly restrictive provisions, it may be of little comfort to a board that is trying to abide by negotiated restrictive provisions in an agreement and their obligations under Delaware law, especially where the interplay of the two may not be entirely clear.

a. No-Shops

The term "*no-shop*" is used generically to describe both provisions that limit a corporation's ability to actively canvas the market (the "no shop" aspect) or to respond to overtures from the market (more accurately, a "*no talk*" provision). No-shop clauses can take different forms. A strict no-shop allows no solicitation and also prohibits a target from facilitating other offers, all without exception. Because of the limitation that a strict no-shop

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691 *Roberts v. General Instrument Corp.*, C.A. No. 11639, 1990 WL 118356, at *8 (Del. Ch. Aug. 13, 1990).

692 *Paramount Commc'ns Inc. v. QVC Network Inc.*, 637 A.2d 34, 48 (Del. 1994).

imposes on the board's ability to become informed, such a provision is of questionable validity.[693] A customary, and limited, no-shop clause contains some type of "*fiduciary out*," which allows a board to take certain actions to the extent necessary for the board to comply with its fiduciary duties to shareholders.[694] Board actions permitted can range from supplying confidential information about the corporation to unsolicited suitors, to negotiating with unsolicited suitors and terminating the existing merger agreement upon payment of a break-up fee, to actively soliciting other offers.[695] Each action is tied to a determination by the board, after advice of counsel, that it is required in the exercise of the board's fiduciary duties. Such "fiduciary outs," even when restrictively drafted, will likely be interpreted by the courts to permit the board to become informed about an unsolicited competing bid. "[E]ven the decision not to negotiate . . . must be an informed one. A target can refuse to negotiate [in a transaction not involving a sale of control] but it should be informed when making such refusal."[696]

*See ACE Limited v. Capital Re Corp*oration[697] for a discussion of restrictive "no shop" provisions. In *ACE*, which did not involve a change in control merger, the Court interpreted a "no-talk" provision of a "no-shop" to permit the board to engage in continued discussions with a continuing bidder, notwithstanding the signing of a merger agreement, when not to do so was tantamount to precluding the stockholders from accepting a higher offer. The Court wrote:

> *QVC* does not say that directors have no fiduciary duties when they are not in "Revlon-land." ...Put somewhat differently, *QVC* does not say that a board can, in all circumstances, continue to support a merger agreement not involving a change of control when: (1) the board negotiated a merger agreement that was tied to voting agreements ensuring consummation if the board does not terminate the agreement; (2) the board no longer believes that the merger is a good transaction for the stockholders; and (3) the board believes that another available transaction is more favorable to the stockholders. The fact that the board has no *Revlon* duties does not mean that it can contractually bind itself to set idly by and allow an unfavorable and preclusive transaction to occur that its own actions have brought about. The logic of *QVC* itself casts doubts on the validity of such a contract.[698]

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693 *See Phelps Dodge Corp. v. Cypress Amax Minerals Co.*, C.A. Nos. 17383, 17398, 17427, 1999 WL 1054255, (Del. Ch. Sept. 27, 1999); *ACE Ltd. v. Capital Re Corp*., 747 A. 2d 95 (Del. Ch. 1999) (expressing view that certain no-talk provisions are "particularly suspect"); but *see In re IXC Commc'ns, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. Nos. 17324 & 17334, 1999 Del. Ch. LEXIS 210 (Del. Ch. Oct. 27, 1999) (no talk provisions "are common in merger agreements and do not imply some automatic breach of fiduciary duty"); *see* Mark Morton, Michael Pittenger & Mathew Fischer, *Recent Delaware Law Developments Concerning No-Talk Provisions: From "Just Say No" to "Can't Say Yes*, V DEAL POINTS No. 1 (Mar. 2000) (discussing these cases in the News-Letter of the ABA Bus. L. S. Committee on Negotiated Acquisitions).

694 *See, e.g., Matador Capital Mgmt. Corp. v. BRC Holdings*, 729 A.2d 280, 288-89 (Del Ch. 1998); William T. Allen, *Understanding Fiduciary Outs: The What and Why of an Anomalous Concept*, 55 BUS. LAW. 653 (2000).

695 *See* Allen, *supra* note 694.

696 *Phelps Dodge Corp. v. Cypress Amax Minerals Co.*, C.A. Nos. 17383, 17398, 17427, 1999 WL 1054255 (Del. Ch. Sept. 27, 1999).

697 747 A.2d. 95 (Del. Ch. 1999).

698 *Id*. at 107-08.

See also *Cirrus Holding v. Cirrus Ind.*,[699] in which the Court wrote in denying the petition by a purchaser who had contracted to buy from a closely held issuer 61% of its equity for a preliminary injunction barring the issuer from terminating the purchase agreement and accepting a better deal that did not involve a change in control:

> As part of this duty [to secure the best value reasonably available to the stockholders], directors cannot be precluded by the terms of an overly restrictive "no-shop" provision from all consideration of possible better transactions. Similarly, directors cannot willfully blind themselves to opportunities that are presented to them, thus limiting the reach of "no talk" provisions. The fiduciary out provisions also must not be so restrictive that, as a practical matter, it would be impossible to satisfy their conditions. Finally, the fiduciary duty did not end when the Cirrus Board voted to approve the SPA. The directors were required to consider all available alternatives in an informed manner until such time as the SPA was submitted to the stockholders for approval.[700]

Although determinations concerning fiduciary outs are usually made when a serious competing suitor emerges, it may be difficult for a board or its counsel to determine just how much of the potentially permitted response is required by the board's fiduciary duties.[701] As a consequence, the board may find it advisable to state the "fiduciary out" in terms that do not only address fiduciary duties, but also permit action when an offer, which the board reasonably believes to be "superior," is made.

As the cases that follow indicate, while in some more well-known situations no-shops have been invalidated, the Delaware courts have on numerous occasions upheld different no-shop clauses as not impeding a board's ability to make an informed decision that a particular agreement provided the highest value reasonably obtainable for the shareholders.

b. Lock-ups

Lock-ups can take the form of an option to buy additional shares of the corporation to be acquired, which benefits the suitor if the price for the corporation increases after another bidder emerges and discourages another bidder by making the corporation more expensive or by giving the buyer a head start in obtaining the votes necessary to approve the transaction.[702] Lock-ups

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699 794 A.2d 1191 (Del. Ch. 2001).

700 *Id.* at 1207.

701 *See* John F. Johnston, *Recent Amendments to the Merger Sections of the DGCL Will Eliminate Some - But Not All - Fiduciary Out Negotiation and Drafting Issues*, 1 Mergers & Acquisitions L. Rep. (BNA) 777 (1998):

> [I]n freedom-of-contract jurisdictions like Delaware, the target board will be held to its bargain (and the bidder will have the benefit of its bargain) only if the initial agreement to limit the target board's discretion can withstand scrutiny under applicable fiduciary duty principles. The exercise of fiduciary duties is scrutinized up front -- at the negotiation stage. If that exercise withstands scrutiny, fiduciary duties will be irrelevant in determining what the target board's obligations are when a better offer, in fact, emerges; at that point its obligations will be determined solely by the contract.

Id. at 779.

702 Such an option is issued by the corporation, generally to purchase newly issued shares for up to 19.9% of the corporation's outstanding shares at the deal price. The amount is intended to give the bidder maximum benefit without crossing limits established by the New York Stock Exchange (see Rule 312.03, NYSE Listed Company Manual) or NASD (see Rule 4310(c)(25)(H)(i), NASD Manual – The NASDAQ Stock Market) that require shareholder approval

can also take the form of an option to acquire important assets (a company's "*crown jewels*") at a price that may or may not be a bargain for the suitor, which may so change the attractiveness of the corporation as to discourage or preclude other suitors. "[L]ock-ups and related agreements are permitted under Delaware law where their adoption is untainted by director interest or other breaches of fiduciary duty."[703] The Delaware Supreme Court has tended to look askance at lock-up provisions when such provisions, however, impede other bidders or do not result in enhanced bids. As the Delaware Supreme Court stated in *Revlon*,

> Such [lock-up] options can entice other bidders to enter a contest for control of the corporation, creating an auction for the company and maximizing shareholder profit. . . . However, while those lock-ups which draw bidders into the battle benefit shareholders, similar measures which end an active auction and foreclose further bidding operate to the shareholders detriment.[704]

As the cases that follow indicate, the Delaware courts have used several different types of analyses in reviewing lock-ups. In active bidding situations, the courts have examined whether the lock-up resulted in an enhanced bid (in addition to the fact that the lock-up ended an active auction).[705] In situations not involving an auction, the courts have examined whether the lock-up impeded other potential suitors, and if an active or passive market check took place prior to the grant of the lock-up.[706]

c. Break-Up Fees.

Break-up fees generally require the corporation to pay consideration to its merger partner should the corporation be acquired by a competing bidder who emerges after the merger agreement is signed to compensate the merger partner for the opportunity lost when the competing bidder disrupts the agreed transaction and for effectively acting as a stalking horse. As with no-shops and lock-ups, break-up fees are not invalid unless they are preclusive or an impediment to the bidding process.[707] As the cases that follow indicate, however, break-up fees

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for certain large stock issuances. Such an option should be distinguished from options granted by significant shareholders or others in support of the deal. Shareholders may generally grant such options as their self-interest requires. See *Mendel v. Carroll*, 651 A.2d 297, 306 (Del. Ch. 1994). However, an option involving 15% or more of the outstanding shares generally will trigger DGCL § 203, which section restricts certain transactions with shareholders who acquire such amount of shares without board approval. Any decision to exempt such an option from the operation of DGCL § 203 involves the board's fiduciary duties.

703 *Revlon, Inc. v. MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings, Inc.*, 506 A.2d 173, 176 (Del 1986).

704 *Id.* at 183.

705 *See id.* at 173; *Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, 559 A.2d 1261 (Del. 1989).

706 *See Matador Capital Mgmt. Corp. v. BRC Holdings*, 729 A.2d 280, 291 (Del. Ch. 1998); *Rand v. Western Air Lines, Inc.*, C.A. No. 8632, 1994 WL 89006 (Del. Ch. Feb. 25, 1994); *Roberts v. Gen. Instrument Corp.*, C.A. No. 11639, 1990 WL 118356 (Del. Ch. Aug. 13, 1990). For a further discussion of the analytical approaches taken by the Delaware courts, *see* Fraidin and Hanson, *Toward Unlocking Lock-ups*, 103 Yale L.J. 1739, 1748-66 (1994).

707 Alternatively, if parties to a merger agreement expressly state that the termination fee will constitute liquidated damages, Delaware courts will evaluate the termination fee under the standard for analyzing liquidated damages. For example, in *Brazen v. Bell Atlantic Corp.*, Bell Atlantic and NYNEX entered into a merger agreement which included a two-tiered termination fee of $550 million, which represented about 2% of Bell Atlantic's market capitalization and would serve as a reasonable measure for the opportunity cost and other losses associated with the termination of the merger. 695 A.2d 43, 45 (Del. 1997). The merger agreement stated that the termination fee would "constitute liquidated damages and not a penalty." *Id.* at 46. Consequently, the Court found "no compelling justification for treating the termination fee in this agreement as anything but a liquidated damages provision, in light of the express

are not as disliked by the Delaware courts, and such fees that bear a reasonable relation to the value of a transaction so as not to be preclusive have been upheld.[708] Delaware courts generally consider a 3% break-up fee to be reasonable.[709] In practice, counsel are generally comfortable with break-up fees that range up to 4% of the equity value of the transaction and a fee of up to 5% may be justified in connection with certain smaller transactions. A court, when considering the validity of a fee, will consider the aggregate effect of that fee and all other deal protections.[710] As a result, a 5% fee may be reasonable in one case and a 2.5% fee may be unreasonable in another case. A termination fee may be based on either equity or enterprise value.[711] For this purpose, the value of any lock-up given by the corporation to the bidder should be included.

6. Specific Cases Where No-Shops, Lock-ups, and Break-Up Fees Have Been Invalidated.

a. In *Revlon*,[712] the Court held that the no-shop along with a lock-up agreement and a break-up fee effectively stopped an active bidding process and thus was invalid.[713] The Court noted that the no-shop is impermissible under *Unocal* if it prematurely ends an active bidding process because the "board's primary duty [has become] that of an auctioneer responsible for selling the company to the highest bidder."[714] *Revlon* had also granted to Forstmann a "crown jewel" asset lock-up representing approximately 24% of the deal value (and apparently the crown jewel was undervalued), and a break-up fee worth approximately 1.2% of the deal. The Court invalidated the lock-up and the break-up fee, noting that Forstmann "had already been drawn into the contest on a preferred basis, so the result of the lock-up was not to foster bidding, but to destroy it."[715]

b. In *Macmillan*,[716] the directors of the corporation granted one of the bidders a lock-up agreement for one of its "crown jewel" assets.[717] As in *Revlon*, the Court held that the lock-

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intent of the parties to have it so treated." *Id.* at 48. Rather than apply the business judgment rule, the Court followed "the two-prong test for analyzing the validity of the amount of liquidated damages: 'Where the damages are uncertain and the amount agreed upon is reasonable, such an agreement will not be disturbed.'" *Id.* at 48 (citation omitted). Ultimately, the Court upheld the liquidated damages provision. *Id.* at 50. The Court reasoned in part that the provision was within the range of reasonableness "given the undisputed record showing the size of the transaction, the analysis of the parties concerning lost opportunity costs, other expenses, and the arms-length negotiations." *Id.* at 49.

708 In upholding a 3% of equity or transaction value termination fee, Vice Chancellor Parsons wrote in *In re Cogent, Inc. Shareholder Litigation*, Consolidated C.A. No. 5780-VCP (Del. Ch. Oct. 5, 2010): "A termination fee of 3% is generally reasonable." *See Goodwin v. Live Entm't, Inc.,* C.A. No. 15765, 1999 WL 64265, at *23 (Del Ch. Jan. 25, 1999); *Matador*, 729 A.2d at 291 n.15 (discussing authorities).

709 *In re Cogent, Inc. Shareholder Litigation*, Consolidated C.A. No. 5780-VCP (Del. Ch. Oct. 5, 2010).

710 *Paramount Commc'ns Inc. v. QVC Network Inc.*, 637 A.2d 34 (Del. 1994).

711 *In re Cogent, Inc. Shareholder Litigation*, Consolidated C.A. No. 5780-VCP (Del. Ch. Oct. 5, 2010); *see infra* notes 763-766 and related text; *cf. In re Pennaco Energy, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 787 A. 2d 691, 702 n.16 (Del. Ch. 2001) (noting that "Delaware cases have tended to use equity value as a benchmark for measuring the termination fee" but adding that "no case has squarely addressed which benchmark is appropriate").

712 *Revlon, Inc. v. MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings, Inc.*, 506 A.2d 173, 176 (Del. 1986).

713 *Id*. at 182.

714 *Id*. at 184.

715 *Id*. at 183.

716 *Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, 559 A.2d 1261 (Del. 1989).

717 *Id*. at 1286.

up had the effect of ending the auction, and held that the lock-up was invalid. The Court also noted that if the intended effect is to end an auction, "at the very least the independent members of the board must attempt to negotiate alternative bids before granting such a significant concession."[718]

> In this case, a lock-up agreement was not necessary to draw any of the bidders into the contest. Macmillan cannot seriously contend that they received a final bid from KKR that materially enhanced general stockholder interests. . . . When one compares what KKR received for the lock-up, in contrast to its inconsiderable offer, the invalidity of the [lock-up] becomes patent.[719]

The Court was particularly critical of the "crown jewel" lock-up. "Even if the lock-up is permissible, when it involves 'crown jewel' assets careful board scrutiny attends the decision. . . . Thus, when directors in a *Revlon* bidding contest grant a crown jewel lock-up, serious questions are raised, particularly where, as here, there is little or no improvement in the final bid."[720]

c. In *QVC*,[721] which like *Revlon* involved an active auction, the no-shop provision provided that Paramount would not:

> [S]olicit, encourage, discuss, negotiate, or endorse any competing transaction unless: (a) a third party "makes an unsolicited written, bona fide proposal, which is not subject to any material contingencies relating to financing"; and (b) the Paramount board determines that discussions or negotiations with the third party are necessary for the Paramount Board to comply with its fiduciary duties.[722]

The break-up fee arrangement provided that Viacom would receive $100 million (between 1% and 2% of the front-end consideration) if: (i) Paramount terminated the merger agreement because of a competing transaction, (ii) Paramount's stockholders did not approve the merger, or (iii) Paramount's board recommended a competing transaction.[723] In examining the lock-up agreement between Paramount and Viacom (for 19.9% of the stock of Paramount), the Court emphasized two provisions of the lock-up as being both "unusual and highly beneficial" to Viacom: "(a) Viacom was permitted to pay for the shares with a senior subordinated note of questionable marketability instead of cash, thereby avoiding the need to raise the $1.6 billion purchase price" and "(b) Viacom could elect to require Paramount to pay Viacom in cash a sum equal to the difference between the purchase price and the market price of Paramount's stock."[724] The court held that the lock-up, no-shop and break-up fee were "impeding the realization of the best value reasonably available to the Paramount shareholders."[725]

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718 *Id*.

719 *Id*.

720 *Id*.

721 *Paramount Commc'ns Inc. v. QVC Network Inc.*, 637 A.2d 34 (Del. 1994).

722 *Id*. at 39 (citations omitted).

723 *Id*.

724 *Id*.

725 *Id*. at 50.

d. In *In re Holly Farms Corporation Shareholders Litigation*,[726] the board of Holly Farms entered into an agreement to sell the corporation to ConAgra which included a lock-up option on Holly Farms' prime poultry operations and a $15 million break-up fee plus expense reimbursement.[727] Tyson Foods was at the same time also negotiating to purchase Holly Farms. In invalidating the lock-up and the break-up fee, the Court noted that "[w]hile the granting of a lock up may be rational where it is reasonably necessary to encourage a prospective bidder to submit an offer, lock-ups 'which end an active auction and foreclose further bidding operate to the shareholders' detriment' are extremely suspect."[728] The Court further stated that "the lock up was nothing but a 'show stopper' that effectively precluded the opening act."[729] The Court also invalidated the break-up fee, holding that it appeared likely "to have been part of the effort to preclude a genuine auction."[730]

7. Specific Cases Where No-Shops, Lock-ups and Break-Up Fees Have Been Upheld.

a. In *Goodwin*,[731] the plaintiff shareholder argued that the board of Live Entertainment violated its fiduciary duties by entering into a merger agreement with Pioneer Electronics.[732] The merger agreement contained a 3.125% break-up fee.[733] While the plaintiff did not seek to enjoin the transaction on the basis of the fee and did not attack any other aspect of the merger agreement as being unreasonable, the Court noted "this type of fee is commonplace and within the range of reasonableness approved by this court in similar contexts."[734] Ultimately, the Chancery Court upheld the merger agreement.

b. In *Matador*,[735] Business Records Corporation entered into a merger agreement with Affiliated Computer Services which contained four "defensive" provisions, including a no-shop provision with a fiduciary out and termination fee.[736] Three BRC shareholders also entered into lock-up agreements with ACS to tender their shares to ACS within five days of the tender offer of ACS.[737] The Chancery Court upheld these provisions reasoning that "these measures do not foreclose other offers, but operate merely to afford some protection to prevent disruption of the Agreement by proposals from third parties that are neither bona fide nor likely to result in a higher transaction."[738] The Court also noted that because the termination fee is not "invoked by the board's receipt of another offer, nor is it invoked solely because the board decides to provide

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726 *In re Holly Farms Corp. Shareholders Litig.*, 564 A. 2d 342 (Del. Ch. 1989).

727 *Id*. at *2.

728 *Id*. at *6 (citations omitted).

729 *Id*.

730 *Id*.

731 *Goodwin v. Live Entm't, Inc.*, C.A. No. 15765, 1999 WL 64265, at *1 (Del. Ch. Jan. 25, 1999).

732 *Id*. at *21.

733 *Id*. at *23.

734 *Id*.

735 *Matador Capital Mgmt. Corp. v. BRC Holdings, Inc.*, 729 A.2d 280 (Del. Ch. 1998).

736 *Id*. at 289.

737 *Id*.

738 *Id*. at 291.

information, or even negotiates with another bidder," it can hardly be said that it prevents the corporation from negotiating with other bidders.[739]

c. In *Rand v. Western Air Lines, Inc.*,[740] Western had been considering opportunities for fundamental changes in its business structure since late 1985.[741] In the spring of 1986, Western had discussions with both American and Delta, as well as other airlines.[742] When Western entered into a merger agreement with Delta in September 1986, the agreement contained a no-shop clause providing that Western could not "initiate contact with, solicit, encourage or participate in any way in discussions or negotiations with, or provide an information or assistance to, or provide any information or assistance to, any third party . . . concerning any acquisition of . . . [Western]."[743] Western also granted Delta a lock-up agreement for approximately 30% of Western's stock. The Court stated that the market had been canvassed by the time the merger agreement was signed, and that by having a lock-up and a no-shop clause Western "gained a substantial benefit for its stockholders by keeping the only party expressing any interest at the table while achieving its own assurances that the transaction would be consummated."[744]

d. In *Vitalink*,[745] the Court held that the break-up fee, which represented approximately 1.9% of the transaction, did not "prevent[] a canvass of the market."[746] The merger agreement in Vitalink also contained a no-shop which prohibited the target from soliciting offers, and a lock-up for NSC to purchase 19.9% of the shares of Vitalink.[747] In upholding the no-shop clause, the Court noted that the no-shop clause "was subject to a fiduciary out clause whereby the Board could shop the company so as to comply with, among other things, their *Revlon* duties (i.e., duty to get the highest price reasonably attainable for shareholders)."[748] The Court also held that the lock-up at issue "did not constitute a real impediment to an offer by a third party."[749]

e. In *Roberts*,[750] General Instrument entered into a merger agreement with a subsidiary of Forstmann Little & Co.[751] The merger agreement contained a no-shop clause providing that the corporation would not "solicit alternative buyers and that its directors and officers will not participate in discussions with or provide any information to alternative buyers except to the extent required by the exercise of fiduciary duties."[752] General Instrument could

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739 *Id*. at 291 n.15.

740 C.A. No. 8632, 1994 WL 89006 (Del. Ch. Feb. 25, 1994).

741 *Id*. at *1.

742 *Id*.

743 *Id*. at *2.

744 *Id*. at *7.

745 *In re Vitalink Commc'ns Corp.*, C.A. No. 12085, 1991 WL 238816 (Del. Ch. 1991).

746 *Id*. at *7.

747 *Id*. at *3.

748 *Id*. at *7.

749 *Id*.

750 *Roberts v. Gen. Instrument Corp.*, C.A. No. 11639, 1990 WL 118356 (Del. Ch. Aug, 13, 1990).

751 *Id*. at *6.

752 *Id*.

terminate the merger agreement if it determined that a third party's offer was more advantageous to the shareholders than Forstmann's offer.[753] Forstmann also agreed to keep the tender offer open for 30 business days, longer than required by law, to allow time for alternative bidders to make proposals. General Instrument was contacted by two other potential acquirors, and provided them with confidential information pursuant to confidentiality agreements.[754] Neither made offers. The Court held that the no-shop did not impede any offers, noting that the merger agreement contained a sufficient fiduciary out.[755] The transaction in *Roberts* also included a $33 million break-up fee in the event that the General Instrument board chose an unsolicited bid over that of the bidder in the exercise of the board's fiduciary duties.[756] The Court held that the break-up fee was "limited", approximately 2% of the value of the deal, and would not prevent the board from concluding that it had effected the best available transaction.[757]

f. In *Fort Howard*,[758] the board decided to enter into a merger agreement with a subsidiary of the Morgan Stanley Group. The agreement contained a no-shop clause that allowed Fort Howard to respond to unsolicited bids and provide potential bidders with information. Fort Howard received inquiries from eight potential bidders, all of whom were provided with information.[759] None of the eight made a bid.[760] The agreement also contained a break-up fee of approximately 1% of the consideration. The Court believed that Fort Howard conducted an active market check, noting that the:

> [A]lternative "market check" that was achieved was not so hobbled by lock-ups, termination fees or topping fees, so constrained in time or so administered (with respect to access to pertinent information or manner of announcing "window shopping" rights) as to permit the inference that this alternative was a sham designed from the outset to be ineffective or minimally effective.[761]

The Court noted that it was "particularly impressed with the [window shopping] announcement in the financial press and with the rapid and full-hearted response to the eight inquiries received."[762]

g. *In re Cogent, Inc. Shareholder Litigation*[763] involved a merger agreement entered into after a vigorous two year strategic alternatives exploration process that included various deal protection provisions and a reasonable fiduciary out clause.[764] The merger agreement contained

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753 *Id*.

754 *Id*.

755 *Id*. at *9.

756 *Id*. at *6.

757 *Id*. at *9.

758 *In re Fort Howard Corp. S'holders Litig*., C.A. No. 9991, 1988 WL 83147 (Del. Ch. Aug. 8, 1988).

759 *Id*. at *8.

760 *Id*. at *8-9.

761 *Id*. at *13.

762 *Id*.

763 Consolidated C.A. No. 5780-VCP (Del. Ch. Oct. 5, 2010).

764 The Court found that the merger agreement allowed the target to engage with any bidder who makes an offer that the Board determines in good faith "would reasonably be expected to result in or lead to, a Superior Proposal."

a termination fee of 3% of "equity value,"[765] which equaled 6.6% of "enterprise value" because the target had a large cash position and no material debt. The plaintiffs argued that the termination fee was too high. In holding that the 3% of equity fee was reasonable, the Court explained:

> A termination fee of 3% is generally reasonable.[766] In fact, Plaintiffs effectively concede that point by focusing their effort on establishing that enterprise value is the correct metric to use here. Ultimately, I conclude that it was not unreasonable for the Board to assent to a Termination Fee of 3% of the equity or transaction value in this case. Termination fees are not unusual in corporate sale or merger contexts, and, as Plaintiffs recognize, the reasonableness of such a fee "depends on the particular facts surrounding the transaction." Nothing in the record suggests that the Termination Fee here has deterred or will deter any buyer. . . . In addition, numerous Delaware cases have found reasonable termination fees of 3% or more of the equity or transaction value of a deal.

8. Post Signing Market Check/"Go-Shop".

A "go-shop" is a provision in a merger agreement that permits a target company, after executing a merger agreement, to continue to actively solicit bids and negotiate with other potential bidders for a defined period of time:

> A typical go-shop provision permits a target company to solicit proposals and enter into discussions or negotiations with other potential bidders during a limited period of time (typically 30-50 days) following the execution of the merger agreement. The target company is permitted to exchange confidential information with a potential bidder, subject to the execution of a confidentiality agreement with terms and conditions substantially the same as the terms and conditions of the confidentiality agreement executed by the initial bidder. Any non-public information provided or made available to a competing bidder typically must also be provided or made available to the initial bidder.
>
> Increasingly, go-shops also provide for a bifurcated termination fee – a lower fee payable if the target terminates for a competing bidder who is identified

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765 The Court defined "equity value" and "enterprise value" as follows:

> "Equity value" is defined as the cost necessary to purchase the equity of Cogent in the market. "Enterprise value" is defined as the equity value, plus the value of debt, minus the cash on the company's balance sheet. Bennett Aff. Ex. 37, Houlihan Lokey 2009 Transaction Termination Fee Study (June 2010), at 3.

766 In support of this conclusion, the Court cited: *Dollar Thrifty*, Cons. C.A. No. 5458-VCS (Del. Ch. Sept. 8, 2010) (termination fee of 3.5% of deal value [3.9% if expenses taken into account] neither preclusive nor coercive); *In re Topps Co. S'holders Litig.*, 926 A.2d 58, 86 (Del. Ch. 2007) (finding 4.3% termination fee not "likely to have deterred a [higher] bidder."); *In Re Toys "R" Us, Inc., S'holder Litig.*, 877 A.2d 975, 1015-21 (Del. Ch. 2005) (approving a 3.75% of equity value fee); *In re MONY Gp. Inc.*, 852 A.2d 9, 24 (Del. Ch. 2004) (approving a 3.3% fee); *McMillan v. Intercargo Corp.*, 768 A.2d 492, 505-06 (Del. Ch. 2000) (approving a 3.5% fee).

during the go-shop period and a traditional termination fee if the target terminates for a competing bidder who is identified after the go-shop period ends.[767]

Private equity bidders particularly like go-shop provisions because they allow them to sign up a target without the costs and uncertainties associated with a pre-signing auction. Targets may agree to a go-shop in lieu of an auction because they believe the buyer would be unwilling to bid if the target commenced an auction or because of concerns that an auction might fail to produce a satisfactory transaction,[768] thereby leaving the target with the damaged goods image together possible employee or customer losses. While a go-shop gives the Board an opportunity, with a transaction with the first bidder under contract, to canvass the market for a possibly higher bid and thus to have a basis for claiming that it has satisfied its *Revlon* duties[769] to seek the highest price reasonably available when control of the company is being sold, the bidder can take some comfort that the risk that its bid will be jumped is relatively low.[770]

The Delaware courts have long recognized that a pre-signing auction is not the exclusive way for a Board to satisfy its *Revlon* duties and that a post-signing market check can be sufficient.[771] The Chancery Court in *In re Netsmart Technologies*[772] found a post-signing "window-shop" which allowed the target Board to consider only unsolicited third party proposals was not a sufficient market test in the context of a micro-cap company because the Court concluded that a targeted sales effort would be needed to get the attention of potential competing bidders, but found a "go-shop" a reasonable means for a Board to satisfy its *Revlon* duties in the context of a large-cap company in the *In re Lear Corporation Shareholder Litigation*.[773] The *In re Topps Company Shareholder Litigation* produced a colorful Chancery Court validation of a go-shop:

> Although a target might desire a longer Go Shop Period or a lower break fee, the deal protections the Topps board agreed to in the Merger Agreement seem to have left reasonable room for an effective post-signing market check. For 40 days, the Topps board could shop like Paris Hilton. Even after the Go Shop Period expired, the Topps board could entertain an unsolicited bid, and, subject to Eisner's match right, accept a Superior Proposal. The 40-day Go Shop Period and this later right work together, as they allowed interested bidders to talk to Topps and obtain information during the Go Shop Period with the knowledge that if they

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767 Mark A. Morton & Roxanne L. Houtman, *Go-Shops: Market Check Magic or Mirage?*, Vol. XII Deal Points, Issue 2 (Summer 2007) at 2. *See Berg v. Ellison*, C.A. No. 2949-VCS (Del. Ch. June 12, 2007) (commenting that a go-shop period of only 25 days at a lower breakup fee was not enough time for a new bidder to do due diligence, submit a bid and negotiate a merger agreement, particularly if the initial bidder has a right to match the new bidder's offer; Stephen I. Glover and Jonathan P. Goodman, *Go Shops: Are They Here to Stay*, 11 No. 6 M&A LAW. 1 (June 2007); *see also* Guhan Subramanian, *Go-Shops vs. No-Shops in Private Equity Deals: Evidence and Implications*, 63 BUS. LAW. 729 (May 2008).

768 *See infra* notes 940-947 and related text.

769 *See supra* notes 649-671 and related text.

770 *See* Mark A. Morton & Roxanne L. Houtman, *Go-Shops: Market Check Magic or Mirage?*, Vol. XII Deal Points, Issue 2 (Summer 2007) at 2, 7.

771 *See supra* notes 654-676 and related text.

772 *See infra* notes 930-939 and related text.

773 *See infra* notes 948-957 and related text.

needed more time to decide whether to make a bid, they could lob in an unsolicited Superior Proposal after the Period expired and resume the process.[774]

G. Dealing with a Competing Acquiror.

Even in the friendly acquisition, a board's obligations do not cease with the execution of the merger agreement.[775] If a competing acquiror emerges with a serious proposal offering greater value to shareholders (usually a higher price), the board should give it due consideration.[776] Generally the same principles that guided consideration of an initial proposal (being adequately informed and undertaking an active and orderly deliberation) will also guide consideration of the competing proposal.[777]

1. Fiduciary Outs.

A board should seek to maximize its flexibility in responding to a competing bidder in the no-shop provision of the merger agreement. It will generally be advisable for the agreement to contain provisions permitting the corporation not only to provide information to a bidder with a superior proposal, but also to negotiate with the bidder, enter into a definitive agreement with the bidder and terminate the existing merger agreement upon the payment of a break-up fee. Without the ability to terminate the agreement, the board may find, at least under the language of the agreement, that its response will be more limited.[778] In such circumstances, there may be some doubt as to its ability to negotiate with the bidder or otherwise pursue the bid. This may in turn force the competing bidder to take its bid directly to the shareholders through a tender offer, with a concomitant loss of board control over the process.

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774 *See infra* notes 940-947 and related text.

775 *See e.g., Emerson Radio Corp. v. Int'l Jensen Inc.*, Nos. 15130, 14992, 1996 WL 483086 (Del. Ch. 1996) (discussing case where bidding and negotiations continued more than six months after merger agreement signed).

776 *See Phelps Dodge Corp. v. Cyprus Amax Minerals Co.*, C.A. Nos. 17383, 17398, 17427, 1999 WL 1054255 (Del. Ch. Sept. 27, 1999); *ACE Ltd. v. Capital Re Corp.*, 747 A.2d 95, 107-08 (Del. Ch. 1999).

777 *See Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, 559 A.2d 1261, 1282 n.29 (Del. 1988).

778 *See Smith v. Van Gorkom*, 488 A.2d 858, 888 (Del. 1985) ("Clearly the . . . Board was not 'free' to withdraw from its agreement . . . by simply relying on its self-induced failure to have [negotiated a suitable] original agreement."); *Global Asset Capital, LLC vs. Rubicon US REIT, Inc.*, C.A. No. 5071-VCL (Del. Ch. Nov. 16, 2009) (In the context of explaining why he granted a temporary restraining order enjoining the target and its affiliates from disclosing any of the contents of a letter of intent or soliciting or entertaining any third-party offers for the duration of the letter of intent, Vice Chancellor Laster wrote: "[I]f parties want to enter into nonbinding letters of intent, that's fine. They can readily do that by expressly saying that the letter of intent is nonbinding, that by providing that, it will be subject in all respects to future documentation, issues that, at least at this stage, I don't believe are here. I think this letter of intent is binding . . . [A] no-shop provision, exclusivity provision, in a letter of intent is something that is important. . . . [A]n exclusivity provision or a no-shop provision is a unique right that needs to be protected and is not something that is readily remedied after the fact by money damages. . . . [C]ontracts, in my view, do not have inherent fiduciary outs. People bargain for fiduciary outs because, as our Supreme Court taught in Van Gorkom, if you do not get a fiduciary out, you put yourself in a position where you are potentially exposed to contract damages and contract remedies at the same time you may potentially be exposed to other claims. Therefore, it is prudent to put in a fiduciary out, because otherwise, you put yourself in an untenable position. That doesn't mean that contracts are options where boards are concerned. Quite the contrary. And the fact that equity will enjoin certain contractual provisions that have been entered into in breach of fiduciary duty does not give someone carte blanche to walk as a fiduciary. . . . I don't regard fiduciary outs as inherent in every agreement."). *But see also Paramount Commc'ns Inc. v. QVC Network Inc.*, 637 A.2d 34, 51 (Del. 1994) (noting that a board cannot "contract away" its fiduciary duties); *ACE*, 747 A.2d at 107-08.

Bidders may seek to reduce the board's flexibility by negotiating for an obligation in the merger agreement to submit the merger agreement to stockholders (also known as a "force the vote" provision) even if the board subsequently withdraws its recommendation to the stockholders. Such an obligation is now permitted by DGCL § 146. The decision to undertake such submission, however, implicates the board's fiduciary duties. Because of the possibility of future competing bidders, this may be a difficult decision.[779]

a. Omnicare, Inc. v. NCS Healthcare, Inc.

The Delaware Supreme Court's April 4, 2003 decision in *Omnicare, Inc. v. NCS Healthcare, Inc.*[780] deals with the interrelationship between a "force the vote" provision in the merger agreement, a voting agreement which essentially obligated a majority of the voting power of the target company's shares to vote in favor of a merger and the absence of a "fiduciary termination right" in the merger agreement that would have enabled the board of directors to back out of the deal before the merger vote if a better deal comes along.

The decision in *Omnicare* considered a challenge to a pending merger agreement between NCS Healthcare, Inc. and Genesis Health Ventures, Inc. Prior to entering into the Genesis merger agreement, the NCS directors were aware that Omnicare was interested in acquiring NCS. In fact, Omnicare had previously submitted proposals to acquire NCS in a pre-packaged bankruptcy transaction. NCS, however, entered into an exclusivity agreement with Genesis in early July 2002. When Omnicare learned from other sources that NCS was negotiating with Genesis and that the parties were close to a deal, it submitted an offer that would have paid NCS stockholders $3.00 cash per share, which was more than three times the value of the $0.90 per share, all stock, proposal NCS was then negotiating with Genesis. Omnicare's proposal was conditioned upon negotiation of a definitive merger agreement, obtaining required third party consents, and completing its due diligence. The exclusivity agreement with Genesis, however, prevented NCS from discussing the proposal with Omnicare.

When NCS disclosed the Omnicare offer to Genesis, Genesis responded by enhancing its offer. The enhanced terms included an increase in the exchange ratio so that each NCS share would be exchanged for Genesis stock then valued at $1.60 per share. But Genesis also insisted that NCS approve and sign the merger agreement as well as approve and secure the voting agreements by midnight the next day, before the exclusivity agreement with Genesis was scheduled to expire. On July 28, 2002, the NCS directors approved the Genesis merger agreement prior to the expiration of Genesis's deadline.

The merger agreement contained a "force-the-vote" provision authorized by the Delaware General Corporation Law, which required the agreement to be submitted to a vote of NCS's stockholders, even if its board of directors later withdrew its recommendation of the merger (which the NCS board later did). In addition, two NCS director-stockholders who collectively held a majority of the voting power, but approximately 20% of the equity of NCS, agreed unconditionally and at the insistence of Genesis to vote all of their shares in favor of the Genesis

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779 *See* John F. Johnston, *Recent Amendments to the Merger Sections of the DGCL Will Eliminate Some - But Not All - Fiduciary Out Negotiation and Drafting Issues*, 1 Mergers & Acquisitions L. Rep. (BNA) 777 (1998).

780 *Omnicare, Inc. v. NCS Healthcare, Inc.*, 818 A. 2d 914 (Del. 2003).

merger. The NCS board authorized NCS to become a party to the voting agreements and granted approval under § 203 of the Delaware General Corporation Law, in order to permit Genesis to become an interested stockholder for purposes of that statute. The "force-the-vote" provision and the voting agreements, which together operated to ensure consummation of the Genesis merger, were not subject to fiduciary outs.

The Court of Chancery's Decision in Omnicare. The Court of Chancery declined to enjoin the NCS/Genesis merger. In its decision, the Court emphasized that NCS was a financially troubled company that had been operating on the edge of insolvency for some time. The Court also determined that the NCS board was disinterested and independent of Genesis and was fully informed. The Vice Chancellor further emphasized his view that the NCS board had determined in good faith that it would be better for NCS and its stockholders to accept the fully-negotiated deal with Genesis, notwithstanding the lock up provisions, rather than risk losing the Genesis offer and also risk that negotiations with Omnicare over the terms of a definitive merger agreement could fail.

The Supreme Court Majority Opinion in Omnicare. On appeal, the Supreme Court of Delaware accepted the Court of Chancery's finding that the NCS directors were disinterested and independent and assumed "arguendo" that they exercised due care in approving the Genesis merger. Nonetheless, the majority held that the "force-the-vote" provision in the merger agreement and the voting agreements operated in tandem to irrevocably "lock up" the merger and to preclude the NCS board from exercising its ongoing obligation to consider and accept higher bids. Because the merger agreement did not contain a fiduciary out, the Delaware Supreme Court held that the Genesis merger agreement was both preclusive and coercive and, therefore, invalid under *Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petroleum Co.*:[781]

> The record reflects that the defensive devices employed by the NCS board are preclusive and coercive in the sense that they accomplished a *fait accompli*. In this case, despite the fact that the NCS board has withdrawn its recommendation for the Genesis transaction and recommended its rejection by the stockholders, the deal protection devices approved by the NCS board operated in concert to have a preclusive and coercive effect. Those tripartite defensive measures – the Section 251(c) provision, the voting agreements, and the absence of an effective fiduciary out clause – made it "mathematically impossible" and "realistically unattainable" for the Omnicare transaction or any other proposal to succeed, no matter how superior the proposal.[782]

As an alternative basis for its conclusion, the majority held that under the circumstances the NCS board did not have authority under Delaware law to completely "lock up" the transaction because the defensive measures "completely prevented the board from discharging its fiduciary responsibilities to the minority stockholders when Omnicare presented its superior transaction."[783] In so holding, the Court relied upon its decision in *Paramount Communications Inc. v. QVC Networks Inc.*, in which the Court held that "[t]o the extent that a [merger] contract,

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781 *Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petrol. Co.*, 493 A.2d 946 (Del. 1985).

782 *Omnicare*, 818 A.2d at 936.

783 *Id.* at 936.

or a provision thereof, purports to require a board to act or not act in such a fashion as to limit the exercise of fiduciary duties, it is invalid and unenforceable."[784]

The Dissents in Omnicare. Chief Justice Veasey and Justice Steele wrote separate dissents. Both believed that the NCS board was disinterested and independent and acted with due care and in good faith – observations with which the majority did not necessarily disagree. The dissenters articulated their view that it was "unwise" to have a bright-line rule prohibiting absolute lock ups because in some circumstances an absolute lock up might be the only way to secure a transaction that is in the best interests of the stockholders. The dissenters would have affirmed on the basis that the NCS board's decision was protected by the business judgment rule. Both Chief Justice Veasey and Justice Steele expressed a hope that the majority's decision "will be interpreted narrowly and will be seen as sui generis."[785]

Impact of the Omnicare Decision. The *Omnicare* decision has several important ramifications with regard to the approval of deal protection measures in the merger context.

First, the decision can be read to suggest a bright-line rule that a "force-the-vote" provision cannot be utilized in connection with voting agreements locking up over 50% of the stockholder vote unless the board of directors of the target corporation retains for itself a fiduciary out that would enable it to terminate the merger agreement in favor of a superior proposal. It is worth noting that the decision does not preclude – but rather seems to confirm the validity of – combining a "force-the-vote" provision with a voting agreement locking up a majority of the stock so long as the board of directors retains an effective fiduciary out. More uncertain is the extent to which the rule announced in *Omnicare* might apply to circumstances in which a merger agreement includes a "force-the-vote" provision along with a fiduciary termination out and contemplates either an option for the buyer to purchase a majority block of stock or a contractual right of the buyer to receive some or all of the upside received by a majority block if a superior proposal is accepted. While neither structure would disable the board from continuing to exercise its fiduciary obligations to consider alternative bids, arguments could be made that such a structure is coercive or preclusive, depending upon the particular circumstances.

The *Omnicare* decision also does not expressly preclude coupling a "force-the-vote" provision with a voting agreement locking up less than a majority block of stock, even if the board does not retain a fiduciary termination out. Caution would be warranted, however, if a buyer were to request a "force-the-vote" provision without a fiduciary termination out and seek to couple such a provision with a voting agreement affecting a substantial block of stock, as that form of deal protection could potentially implicate the same concerns expressed by the majority in *Omnicare*. Moreover, existing case law and commentary make clear that a board must retain its ability to make full disclosure to stockholders if a merger agreement contains a "force-the-vote" provision and does not provide the board with a fiduciary termination right.

The extent to which the bright-line rule announced in *Omnicare* may be applicable to other factual circumstances remains to be seen. Powerful arguments can be made, for example,

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784 *Paramount Commc'ns Inc. v. QVC Network Inc.*, 637 A.2d 34, 51 (Del. 1994).

785 *Omnicare*, 818 A.2d at 946.

that a similar prohibition should not apply to circumstances in which the majority stockholder vote is obtained by written consents executed after the merger agreement is approved and signed. Likewise, it is doubtful that a similar prohibition should apply to a merger with a majority stockholder who has expressed an intention to veto any transaction in which it is not the buyer.

Second, the majority's decision confirms that *Unocal's* enhanced judicial scrutiny is applicable to a Delaware court's evaluation of deal protection measures designed to protect a merger agreement. Where board-implemented defensive measures require judicial review under *Unocal*, the initial burden is on the defendant directors to demonstrate that they had reasonable grounds for believing that a threat to corporate policy and effectiveness existed and that they took action in response to the threat that was neither coercive nor preclusive and that was within a range of reasonable responses to the threat perceived. Prior to *Omnicare*, there appeared to be a split of authority in the Delaware Court of Chancery as to whether deal protection measures in the merger context should be evaluated under *Unocal*. Although the dissenters questioned whether *Unocal* should be the appropriate standard of review, the majority decision confirms that *Unocal* applies to judicial review of deal protection measures.

Third, although the majority assumed "arguendo" that the *Revlon* doctrine was not applicable to the NCS board's decision to approve the Genesis merger, the majority seems to question the basis for the Delaware Court of Chancery's determination that *Revlon* was not applicable. When the doctrine announced in *Revlon, Inc. v. MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings, Inc.*[786] is applicable to a sale or merger of a corporation, the board of directors is charged with obtaining the best price reasonably available to the stockholders under the circumstances, and the board's decision making is subject to enhanced scrutiny judicial review and not automatically protected by the business judgment rule. Prior decisional law has established that *Revlon* is applicable where, among other circumstances, the board has initiated an active bidding process seeking to sell the company or has approved a business combination resulting in a break up or sale of the company or a change of control.

The Court of Chancery determined that *Revlon* was not applicable because the NCS board did not initiate an active bidding contest seeking to sell NCS, and even if it had, it effectively abandoned that process when it agreed to negotiate a stock-for-stock merger with Genesis in which control of the combined company would remain in a large, fluid and changing market and not in the hands of a controlling stockholder. The NCS board, however, had evaluated the fairness of the Genesis merger based on the market price of Genesis' stock and not as a strategic transaction. Accordingly, the Court of Chancery's suggestion that *Revlon* no longer applies if a board approves any form of stock-for-stock merger at the end of an active bidding process could signal that *Revlon* applies in fewer circumstances than many practitioners previously believed. On appeal, the Delaware Supreme Court majority explained that whether *Revlon* applied to the NCS board's decision to approve the Genesis merger was not outcome determinative. For purposes of its analysis, the majority assumed "arguendo" that the business judgment rule applied to the NCS board's decision to merge with Genesis. This could be read to signal that the majority disagreed with the trial court's *Revlon* analysis. Thus, whether or not *Revlon* could potentially be applicable to non-strategic stock-for-stock mergers entered into at the end of an auction process remains an open question.

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[786] 506 A.2d 173, 182 (Del. 1986).

b. Orman v. Cullman.

A year after *Omnicare*, the Chancery Court in *Orman v. Cullman (General Cigar)*,[787] upheld a merger agreement in which majority stockholders with high vote stock agreed to vote their shares pro rata in accordance with public stockholders and the majority stockholders also agreed not to vote in favor of another transaction for eighteen months following termination. The Chancery Court found that such a transaction was not coercive because there was no penalty to public stockholders for voting against the transaction.

In *Orman*, the Court focused on whether the combined effect of the provisions was coercive and upheld the deal protection devices as not being coercive. In this case, the acquiror obtained a voting agreement from stockholders owning a majority of the voting stock of the target entity. The target had two classes of stock (class A and class B), and the approval of the class A stockholders voting as a separate class was required. The voting agreement required the subject stockholders to vote in favor of the transaction, to not sell their shares and to vote their class B shares against any alternative acquisition for a period of up to eighteen months following the termination of the merger agreement. However, the voting agreement also contained a "mirrored voting" provision that required the stockholders subject to voting agreements to vote their shares of class A common stock in accordance with the vote of the other class A stockholders in connection with the vote to approve the transaction. Despite the "mirrored voting" concession with respect to a vote on the proposed transaction, there was an absolute obligation on the parties to the voting agreement to vote against a competing transaction. The terms of the merger agreement allowed the board of directors of the target to consider alternative proposals if the special committee of the board determined the proposal was bona fide and more favorable than the existing transaction. The board was also permitted to withdraw its recommendation of the transaction if the board concluded it was required to do so in order to fulfill its fiduciary duties. However, the merger agreement did contain a "force the vote" provision requiring the target to convene a special meeting of stockholders to consider the transaction even if the board withdrew its recommendation.

In upholding the deal protection provisions, the *Orman* Court, using reasoning similar to the dissent in *Omnicare*, concluded that the voting agreement and the eighteen month tail provision following the termination of the merger agreement did not undermine the effect that the class A stockholders had the right to vote on a deal on the merits. Thus, unlike in *Omnicare*, the deal protection measures did not result in "*a fait accompli*" where the result was predetermined regardless of the public shareholders' actions. The combination of the shareholders' ability to reject the transaction and the ability of the board to alter the recommendation resulted in the Chancellor concluding that "as a matter of law [that] the deal protection mechanisms present here were not impermissibly coercive."[788] The plaintiff did not argue that the arrangement was "preclusive."

Omnicare and *Orman* emphasize the risk of having deal protection measures that do not contain an effective "fiduciary out" or which would combine a "force the vote" provision with voting agreements that irrevocably lock up a substantial percentage of the stockholder vote.

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787 *Orman v. Cullman*, C.A. No. 18039, 2004 Del. Ch. LEXIS 150 (Del. Ch. Oct. 20, 2004).

788 *Id.* at *32.

Although under *Omnicare*, voting agreements locking up sufficient voting power to approve a merger are problematic, locking up less than 50% of the voting power could also be an issue in particular circumstances.[789]

c. Optima International of Miami, Inc. v. WCI Steel, Inc.

In *Optima International of Miami, Inc. v. WCI Steel, Inc.*, Vice Chancellor Lamb declined to enjoin a merger that had been approved by the Board of WCI Steel Inc. and adopted by its stockholders later that same day by written consent pursuant to a merger agreement permitting the acquirer to terminate the agreement if stockholder approval was not obtained within 24 hours.[790]

WCI was a closely held company (28 stockholders) that had emerged from bankruptcy only two years before. In connection with WCI's emergence from bankruptcy in March 2006, the Bankruptcy Court had approved a collective bargaining agreement between WCI and the union representing its employees. The union contract contained a "successorship" provision triggered upon a change-of-control transaction, which the union interpreted the successorship provision as granting it a veto right over any third-party acquisition of WCI, as well as a right-to-bid provision.

In the summer of 2007, WCI began searching for a potential acquirer, since it was suffering from severe liquidity problems and was under pressure to complete a deal or face the prospect of another bankruptcy. WCI's Board formed a special committee (for convenience rather than to address Board conflicts) and hired a financial advisor which solicited 22 potential buyers. By April 2008, only two bidders remained: Optima International of Miami, Inc. and OAO Severstal. Initially, each bidder was proposing an acquisition transaction on similar economic terms.

Severstal and Optima both sought the support of the union in connection with their bids, and the union ultimately decided to support Severstal over Optima. In late April, WCI requested that Optima and Severstal present their best and final bids. Severstal came forward offering $136 million, but demanding that stockholder approval be delivered within 24 hours of signing. Optima initially did not respond to this invitation. Rather than recommending a deal with Severstal at that time, the special committee again requested that Optima submit a bid, offering to assist Optima in its negotiations with the union. On May 1, 2008, Optima submitted a bid of $150 million.

Optima resumed its negotiations with the union, but it quickly became apparent that those negotiations would not be successful. WCI and Optima considered pursuing an alternative

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[789] *Compare ACE Ltd. v. Capital Re Corp.*, 747 A.2d 95 (Del. Ch. 1999) (noting that acquiror's ownership of 12.3% of target's stock and voting agreements with respect to another 33.5%, gave acquiror, as a "virtual certainty," the votes to consummate the merger even if a materially more valuable transaction became available) with *In re IXC Commc'ns, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. Nos. 17324, 17334, 1999 Del. Ch. LEXIS 210, at *24 (Del. Ch. Oct. 27, 1999) (stating, in reference to a transaction where an independent majority of the target's stockholders owning nearly 60% of the target's shares could freely vote for or against the merger, "'[a]lmost locked up' does not mean 'locked up,' and 'scant power' may mean less power, but it decidedly does not mean 'no power,'" and finding that the voting agreement did not "have the purpose or effect of disenfranchising [the] remaining majority of [stock]holders").

[790] C.A. No. 3833-VCL (Del. Ch. June 27, 2008).

transaction that would not trigger the successorship provision under the union contract, but they were unable to find an acceptable solution. Meanwhile, Severstal was pushing to close a deal promptly. On May 14, 2008, with Severstal offering $136 million, WCI approached Severstal with an option: either waive the 24-hour stockholder approval requirement or increase its bid. Severstal increased its bid to $140 million, but demanded that WCI's board act immediately and further demanded that WCI's stockholders adopt the merger agreement by consent promptly after signing. At this time, Optima's bid was $150 million, but it was conditioned on union approval, which Optima had been unable to obtain. After discussions with its legal advisors regarding the risks inherent in the options and receiving a fairness opinion from its financial advisor, WCI's Board approved a merger agreement with Severstal. Shortly thereafter, two stockholders who together owned a majority in voting power of WCI's stock delivered written consents adopting the merger agreement.

Plaintiffs argued that the board "abdicated its authority or delegated its authority to manage the business and affairs of the corporation to the union and that they did so by declining to strenuously challenge the union on its interpretation of the successorship provision."[791] The Court rejected that argument and distinguished the provision in the union contract from an invalid "no-hand poison pill,"[792] or the "force-the-vote provision" in *Omnicare*,[793] noting that the successorship provision was not self-imposed, but rather had been approved by the Bankruptcy Court as a condition of WCI's emergence from bankruptcy.

Plaintiffs also argued that the stockholder vote was a form of a lockup that either exceeded the board's power or resulted in a breach of its fiduciary duties. Plaintiffs argued that, in agreeing to the provision requiring the stockholder consent to be delivered within 24 hours, the Board improperly contracted away its "fiduciary out" in violation of *Omnicare*. Rejecting this argument, Vice Chancellor Lamb explained:

> But a stockholder vote is not like the lockup in Omnicare. First, it's really not my place to note this, but Omnicare is of questionable continued vitality. Secondly, the stockholder vote here was part of an executed contract that the board recommended after deciding it was better for stockholders to take Severstal's lower-but-more-certain bid than Optima's higher-but-more-risky bid. In this context, the board's discussion reflects an awareness that the company had severe liquidity problems. Moreover, it was completely unclear that Optima would be able to consummate any transaction. Therefore, the stockholder vote, although quickly taken, was simply the next step in the transaction as contemplated by the statute. Nothing in the DGCL requires any particular period of time between a board's authorization of a merger agreement and the necessary stockholder vote. And I don't see how the board's agreement to proceed as it did could result in a finding of a breach of duty.[794]

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791 *Id.*

792 *See Quickturn Design Sys. Inc. v. Shapiro*, 721 A.2d 1281 (Del. 1998).

793 *See supra* notes 780-786 and related text.

794 *Optima*, C.A. No. 3833-VCL.

d. Energy Partners, Ltd. v. Stone Energy Corp.

Whether a buyer may enter into a merger agreement which limits its own right to explore third party proposal for its acquisition if its being acquired could lead to a termination of the merger agreement (i.e., whether a buyer as well as a seller may need a fiduciary out) was presented in *Energy Partners, Ltd. v. Stone Energy Corp.*,[795] in which a declaratory judgment was sought as to the meaning and validity of Section 6.2(e) of the merger agreement between Energy Partners, Ltd. ("*Energy Partners*" or "*Parent*") (the acquiror) and Stone Energy Corporation ("*Stone*") (the target) that provided as follows:

> [N]either Parent nor any of its Subsidiaries . . . shall (e) knowingly take, or agree to commit to take, any action that would or would reasonably be expected to result in the failure of a condition [set forth in the merger agreement], . . . or that would reasonably be expected to materially impair the ability of Target, Parent, Merger Sub, or the holders of Target Common Shares to consummate the Merger in accordance with the terms hereof or materially delay such consummation.[796]

Although Stone's Board had originally approved a merger agreement pursuant to which Stone would merge into a wholly owned subsidiary of Plains Exploration and Production Company ("*Plains*"), after its later receipt of a proposal from Energy Partners, Stone's Board determined that the Energy Partners proposal satisfied the fiduciary out provision in the Plains merger agreement and initiated negotiations with Energy Partners. The Energy Partners merger agreement (the "*Energy Partners Merger Agreement*") was approved by Stone's Board and Energy Partners agreed to pay a termination fee to Plains pursuant to the Plains merger agreement.

The Energy Partners Merger Agreement negotiated between Energy Partners and Stone contained the provision noted above, as well as an express no-shop provision restricting Stone (the target) from soliciting or entertaining competing offers. The Energy Partners Merger Agreement did not, however, have a parallel no-shop provision restricting Energy Partners (the buyer). After the Energy Partners Merger Agreement was signed, ATS, Inc. ("*ATS*") made a hostile tender offer for Energy Partners conditioned on the Energy Partners stockholders voting down the Energy Partners Merger Agreement. In light of this development, Stone and Energy Partners expressed differing interpretations of Section 6.2(e), and ATS and Energy Partners sued, seeking a declaratory judgment on the matter. ATS argued that Section 6.2(e) was invalid to the extent that it prevented Energy Partners directors from fulfilling their fiduciary duties; Energy Partners argued that the section was neither intended to nor could be construed as a no-shop clause; and Stone argued that the section did not restrict Energy Partners so long as any negotiations, etc., did not materially delay or impair the Stone/Energy Partners merger.

After determining that the issue of whether Energy Partners could explore the ATS tender offer was justiciable, the Chancery Court then outlined the applicable contract interpretation precedents, and ultimately held that the plain language of the Energy Partners Merger Agreement

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795 *Energy Partners, Ltd. v. Stone Energy Corp.*, C.A. Nos. 2374-N, 2402-N, 2006 Del. Ch. LEXIS 182 (Del. Ch. Oct. 11, 2006); *see* Amy Y. Yeung & Charles B. Vincent, *Delaware's "No-Go" Treatment of No-Talk Provisions: Deal-Protection Devices After Omnicare*, 33 DEL. J. CORP. LAW 311 (2008).

796 *Id.* at *7-8.

permitted Energy Partners to pursue third party acquisition proposals. In so holding, the Chancery Court stated that when read as a whole, the Energy Partners Merger Agreement acknowledged that Energy Partners could be subject to third party proposals including proposals conditioned on the termination of the Energy Partners Merger Agreement, citing specifically the sections of the Energy Partners Merger Agreement that: (1) allowed Energy Partners or Stone to terminate the Energy Partners Merger Agreement if Stone accepted a superior proposal; (2) provided that Energy Partners could change its recommendation of the merger if necessary to comply with its fiduciary duties; and (3) explicitly recognized that Energy Partners might withdraw or modify its recommendation in reference to a proposal conditioned upon the termination of the merger agreement and abandonment of the merger. The Chancery Court concluded that although it could be argued that a change in recommendation would violate Section 6.2(e) by "materially impair[ing] the ability of [the parties] to consummate the merger," the other provisions of the Energy Partners Merger Agreement made clear that Stone's remedy for an Energy Partners change of recommendation would be to terminate the agreement and receive a termination fee.[797]

The Chancery Court further noted that even if there was ambiguity in the contract (which there was not), extrinsic evidence would resolve that ambiguity against Stone because the parties did not discuss Section 6.2(e) in their negotiations and also because Energy Partners repeatedly refused to agree to be bound by a no-shop provision. Finally, the Chancery Court found that Delaware law supported a construction of Section 6.2(e) that permitted Energy Partners to pursue third party acquisition proposals, stating that a complete ban on Energy Partners' ability to speak to ATS or shop the transaction would "likely be incompatible with the directors' fiduciary duties, and therefore, void."[798] The Chancery Court further stated that "[t]he structure of the no-shop provision applicable to Stone and the clauses in the nature of fiduciary outs in the Stone Merger Agreement demonstrate that Stone and Energy Partners recognized this reality."[799] Thus, the Chancery Court found that Energy Partners and ATS were entitled to a declaratory judgment that the Energy Partners Merger Agreement did not limit the ability of Energy Partners to explore third party acquisition proposals, including the ATS tender offer, in good faith.

e. Johnson & Johnson v. Guidant Corp.

A merger agreement fiduciary out that will enable a Board to evaluate and respond to an unsolicited superior proposal is typically part of a complicated "no shop" provision that generally restricts the ability of the Board to solicit other offers for the company. Litigation arising from the contest between Johnson & Johnson ("*J&J*") and Boston Scientific Corporation ("*BSC*") for the affections of Guidant Corporation illustrates the importance of technical compliance with merger agreement no-shop provisions. In *Johnson & Johnson v. Guidant Corporation*,[800] initial suitor J&J entered into a merger agreement with Guidant that contained a fiduciary out which enabled its Board to respond to an unsolicited proposal that offered the prospect of being a superior proposal. Thereafter, BSC made a topping bid that ultimately

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797 *Id.* at *56.

798 *Id.* at *63.

799 *Id.* at *64-65.

800 *Johnson & Johnson v. Guidant Corp.*, 525 F. Supp. 2d 336 (S.D.N.Y. 2007).

Guidant's Board concluded was a superior proposal and accepted, paying a termination fee to exit the merger agreement that Guidant had signed with J&J.

After the merger, J&J learned that Guidant had provided due diligence materials to Abbott Laboratories, which ultimately agreed to acquire part of Guidant's business to enable BSC to avoid antitrust issues with the merger. J&J sued in Federal District Court in New York for breach of contract damages of $5.5 billion, in addition to the contractually agreed $705 million break-up fee which had been paid, alleging that Guidant's providing of due diligence materials to Abbott (which at that point had not made a bid) amounted to solicitation in violation of the no solicitation provisions in the merger agreement.

The no-shop clause in the J&J/Guidant merger agreement provided that Guidant would not "solicit, initiate or knowingly encourage, or take any other action designed to, or which could reasonably be expected to, facilitate, any Takeover Proposal" or "furnish to any person any information."[801] An exception permitted Guidant, "in response to a bona fide written Takeover Proposal . . . not solicited" by Guidant, to "furnish information . . . to the person making such Takeover Proposal (and its Representatives)."[802] Following announcement of the J&J/Guidant merger agreement, BSC made a competing bid for Guidant at a higher price, and stated an intention to divest part of Guidant's operations to avoid potential antitrust issues. J&J's complaint alleged that Guidant provided due diligence information to Abbott in violation of the no-shop clause prior to any proposal having been made that named Abbott. BSC did subsequently submit a formal proposal to acquire Guidant, identifying Abbott as the party that would acquire the assets to be divested, and the Abbott portion of the deal was large enough to constitute a Takeover Proposal under the merger agreement.

The defendant argued that J&J's claim "amounts to a bid to grab more compensation than the parties expressly provided was available" based on a technical breach.[803] In denying defendant's motion to dismiss the breach of contract claim on the pleadings, the Court rejected the defendant's argument that the breach was immaterial as it could easily have been avoided had BSC named Abbott in its bid letter, and wrote that "an easily preventable breach may nonetheless be material."[804] The Court dismissed J&J's tortious interference with contract claims.

f. NACCO Industries, Inc. v. Applica Incorporated.

"No-shop" and other deal protection provisions will be enforced by Delaware courts if they are negotiated after a proper process and are not unduly restrictive under the standards discussed above. In *NACCO Industries, Inc. v. Applica Incorporated*,[805] NACCO (the acquirer under a merger agreement) brought claims against Applica (the target company) for breach of the merger agreement's "no-shop" and "prompt notice" provisions. NACCO also sued hedge funds managed by Herbert Management Corporation (collectively "*Harbinger*"), which made a

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801 *Id.* at 342.

802 *Id.* at 343.

803 *Id.* at 344.

804 *Id.* at 356.

805 C.A. No. 2541-VCL (Dec. 22, 2009).

topping bid after the merger agreement with NACCO was executed, for common law fraud and tortious interference with contract.

NACCO's complaint alleged that while NACCO and Applica were negotiating a merger agreement, Applica insiders provided confidential information to principals at the Harbinger hedge funds, which were then considering their own bid for Applica. During this period, Harbinger amassed a substantial stake in Applica (which ultimately reached 40%), but reported on its Schedule 13D filings that its purchases were for "investment," thereby disclaiming any intent to control the company. After NACCO signed the merger agreement, communications between Harbinger and Applica management about a topping bid continued. Eventually, Harbinger amended its Schedule 13D disclosures and made a topping bid for Applica, which then terminated the NACCO merger agreement. After a bidding contest with NACCO, Harbinger succeeded in acquiring the company.

In refusing to dismiss damages claims by NACCO arising out of its failed attempt to acquire Applica, Vice Chancellor Laster largely denied defendants' motion to dismiss. As to the contract claims, the Court reaffirmed the utility of "no-shop" and other deal protection provisions, holding that "[i]t is critical to [Delaware] law that those bargained-for rights be enforced," including by a post-closing damages remedy in an appropriate case. Good faith compliance with such provisions may require a party to "regularly pick up the phone" to communicate with a merger partner about a potential overbid, particularly because "in the context of a topping bid, days matter." Noting that the no-shop clause was not limited to merely soliciting a competing bid, and that the "prompt notice" clause required Applica to use "commercially reasonable efforts" to inform NACCO of any alternative bids and negotiations, the Vice Chancellor had "no difficulty inferring" that Applica's alleged "radio silen[ce]" about the Harbinger initiative may have failed to meet the contractual standard.

The Vice Chancellor also upheld NACCO's common law fraud claims against Harbinger based on the alleged inaccuracy of Harbinger's Schedule 13D disclosures about its plans regarding Applica. The Vice Chancellor dismissed Harbinger's contention that all claims related to Schedule 13D filings belong in federal court, holding instead that a "Delaware entity engaged in fraud"—even if in an SEC filing required by the 1934 Act—"should expect that it can be held to account in the Delaware courts." The Vice Chancellor noted that while the federal courts have exclusive jurisdiction over violations of the 1934 Act, the Delaware Supreme Court has held that statutory remedies under the 1934 Act are "intended to coexist with claims based on state law and not preempt them." The Vice Chancellor emphasized that NACCO was not seeking state law enforcement of federal disclosure requirements, but rather had alleged that Harbinger's statements in its Schedule 13D and 13G filings were fraudulent under state law without regard to whether those statements complied with federal law. The Court then ruled that NACCO had adequately pleaded that Harbinger's disclosure of a mere "investment" intent was false or misleading, squarely rejecting the argument that "one need not disclose any intent other than an investment intent until one actually makes a bid." In this respect, the *NACCO* decision highlights the importance of accurate Schedule 13D disclosures by greater-than-5% beneficial owners that are seeking or may seek to acquire a public company and raises the possibility of monetary liability to a competing bidder if faulty Schedule 13D disclosures are seen as providing an unfair advantage in the competition to acquire the company.

While *NACCO* was a fact-specific decision on motion to dismiss, the case shows the risks inherent in attempting to top an existing merger agreement with typical deal protection provisions. *NACCO* emphasizes that parties to merger agreements must respect no-shop and notification provisions in good faith or risk after-the-fact litigation, with uncertain damages exposure, from the acquiring party under an existing merger agreement.

2. Level Playing Field.

If a bidding contest ensues, a board cannot treat bidders differently unless such treatment enhances shareholder interests. As the Court in *Barkan* stated, "[w]hen multiple bidders are competing for control, this concern for fairness [to shareholders] forbids directors from using defensive mechanisms to thwart an auction or to favor one bidder over another."[806] In *Macmillan*, however, the Court stated that the purpose of enhancing shareholder interests "does not preclude differing treatment of bidders when necessary to advance those interests. Variables may occur which necessitate such treatment."[807] The *Macmillan* Court cited a "coercive 'two-tiered' bust-up tender offer" as one example of a situation that could justify disparate treatment of bidders.[808]

In all-cash transactions disparate treatment is unlikely to be permitted. In the context of keeping bidders on a level playing field, the Court in *Revlon* stated that:

> Favoritism for a white knight to the total exclusion of a hostile bidder might be justifiable when the latter's offer adversely affects shareholder interests, but when bidders make relatively similar offers, or dissolution of the company becomes inevitable, the directors cannot fulfill their enhanced Unocal duties by playing favorites with the contending factions.[809]

The Court in *QVC* restated this concept and applied the *Unocal* test in stating that in the event a corporation treats bidders differently, "the trial court must first examine whether the directors properly perceived that shareholder interests were enhanced. In any event the board's action must be reasonable in relation to the advantage sought to be achieved, or conversely, to the threat which a particular bid allegedly poses to stockholder interests."[810]

3. Match Rights.

A buyer which provides a fiduciary out to the target typically seeks to include in the merger agreement a provision giving it an opportunity to match any third party offer which the target's Board concludes is a superior proposal entitling the target Board to terminate the merger agreement. In *Berg v. Ellison*, Vice Chancellor Strine commented that a match right might deter other bidders, but not unacceptably:

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806 *Barkan v. Amsted Indus., Inc.*, 567 A.2d 1279, 1286-87 (Del. 1989); *see also Paramount Commc'ns Inc. v. QVC Network Inc.*, 637 A.2d 34, 45 (Del. 1994).

807 *Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, 559 A.2d 1261, 1286-87 (Del. 1988).

808 *Id*. at 1287 n.38.

809 *Revlon, Inc. v. MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings, Inc.*, 506 A.2d 173, 184 (Del. 1986).

810 *QVC*, 637 A.2d at 45 (quoting *Macmillan*, 559 A.2d at 1288).

> [A]ny kind of matching right is clearly going to chill anything, despite the fact that on multiple occasions, as reflected in Delaware case law and other things, people won out over a match right or topped a match right three times before the original bidder, in a foolish fit of indiscipline, raised their bid to an unsustainable level, and the other bidders went back and giggled and said "Well, you won it now but at 25 percent more than you should have paid."[811]

Match rights have been described in Delaware Chancery Court opinions, but have not been considered preclusive or otherwise inappropriate.[812]

4. Top-Up Options.

In a negotiated two-step acquisition, the buyer negotiates the terms of both the first step tender offer and the follow-up merger to acquire any target shares not acquired in the tender offer before commencing the tender offer.[813] If the buyer owns at least 90% of the target's shares after the tender offer, the buyer's Board can adopt a resolution merging the target into the buyer and file it with the applicable Secretary of State to effect the merger without holding a shareholder meeting, which obviates the cost and delay of holding a meeting and soliciting proxies therefor.[814] To address the risk that after the tender offer the buyer will not own 90% of the target's shares, "it has become commonplace in two-step tender offer deals" for the merger agreement to grant to buyer the option to purchase after closing the tender offer for the tender offer price enough shares to cross the 90% threshold.[815]

In negotiating a top-up option, the Board should understand the mechanics and implications of the option, and whether the target has sufficient shares authorized.[816] Most merger agreements require the buyer to have bought enough stock in the tender offer to own thereafter a majority or greater percentage of the outstanding stock before it can exercise the top-up option. Because of the dilution that could result from the exercise of a top-up option and to address challenges based on its effect on stockholder appraisal rights, merger agreements today

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811 C.A. No. 2949-VCS (Del. Ch. June 12, 2007).

812 *See*, *e.g.*, *In re Topps Co. S'holder Litig.*, 926 A.2d 58 (Del. Ch. 2007); *see also infra* notes 940-943 (discussing *Topps*); *In re Cogent, Inc. Shareholder Litigation*, Consolidated C.A. No. 5780-VCP (Del. Ch. Oct. 5, 2020).

813 Mark A. Morton & John F. Grossbauer, *Top-Up Options and Short Form Mergers*, VII DEAL POINTS – THE NEWSLETTER OF THE COMMITTEE ON NEGOTIATED ACQUISITIONS, 2 (Spring 2002), *available at* http://www.potteranderson.com/news-publications-0-54.html.

814 See TBOC § 10.006 and DGCL § 253.

815 *In re Cogent, Inc. Shareholder Litigation*, Consolidated C.A. No. 5780-VCP (Del. Ch. Oct. 5, 2020), citing "Am. Bar Ass'n Mergers & Acqs. Mkt. Subcomm., *2009 Strategic Buyer/Public Targets M&A Deal Points Study*, at 106 (Sept. 10, 2009) (reporting that 94% of two-step tender offer cash deals involved a top-up option in 2007 compared to 67% in 2005/2006)."

816 *See* Mark A. Morton & John F. Grossbauer, *Top-Up Options and Short Form Mergers*, VII DEAL POINTS – THE NEWSLETTER OF THE COMMITTEE ON NEGOTIATED ACQUISITIONS, 2 (Spring 2002), *available at* http://www.potteranderson.com/news-publications-0-54.html, in which the authors state "for every 1% that a bidder's tender offer falls short of 90%, a "top-up" option will require the target to issue that number of shares which is equal to 10% of its outstanding stock prior to the tender offer."

typically provide that the exercise of the top-up option will not be given effect in valuing the stock in any statutory appraisal action.[817]

5. Best Value.

In seeking to obtain the "best value" reasonably available, the Delaware Supreme Court has stated *that the "best value" does not necessarily mean the highest price.*

In Citron,[818] Fairchild was the subject of a bidding contest between two competing bidders, Schlumberger and Gould.[819] The Fairchild board had an all cash offer of $66 per share from Schlumberger, and a two-tier offer of $70 per share from Gould, with the terms of the valuation of the back-end of Gould's offer left undefined.[820] The board was also informed by its experts that a transaction with Schlumberger raised substantially less antitrust concern than a transaction with Gould. The board accepted Schlumberger's offer. In upholding the agreement between Fairchild and Schlumberger, the Court stated that Gould's failure to present a firm unconditional offer precluded an auction.[821] The Court also stated that Fairchild had a duty to consider "a host of factors," including "the nature and timing of the offer," and "its legality, feasibility and effect on the corporation and its stockholders," in deciding whether to accept or reject Gould's claim.[822] Nevertheless, the *Citron* Court specifically found that Fairchild "studiously endeavored to avoid 'playing favorites'" between the two bidders.[823]

A decision not to pursue a higher price, however, necessarily involves uncertainty, the resolution of which depends on a court's view of the facts and circumstances specific to the case. In *In re Lukens Incorporated Shareholders Litigation*,[824] the Court sustained a board decision to sell to one bidder, notwithstanding the known possibility that a "carve up" of the business between the two bidders could result in incremental stockholder value. The Court placed great weight on the approval of the transaction by the stockholders after disclosure of the carve-up possibility.[825]

In the final analysis, in many cases, the board may not know that it has obtained the best value reasonably available until after the merger agreement is signed and competing bids are no longer proposed. In several cases, the Delaware courts have found as evidence that the directors obtained the best value reasonably available the fact that no other bidders came forward with a competing offer once the transaction was public knowledge.[826]

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817 Edward B. Micheletti & Sarah T. Runnells, *The Rise and (Apparent) Fall of the Top-Up Option "Appraisal Dilution" Claim*, 15 No. 1 M&A LAW. 9 (Jan. 2011).

818 *Citron v. Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corp.*, 569 A.2d 53 (Del. 1989).

819 *Id*. at 54.

820 *Id*.

821 *Id*. at 68-69.

822 *Id*. at 68.

823 *Id*.

824 757 A.2d 720 (Del. Ch. 1999).

825 *Lukens*, 757 A.2d at 738.

826 *See, e.g., Barkan v. Amstad Indus., Inc.*, 567 A.2d 1279, 1287 (Del. 1989) (noting that "when it is widely known that some change of control is in the offing and no rival bids are forthcoming over an extended period of time, that fact is supportive of the board's decision to proceed"); *Goodwin v. Live Entm't, Inc.*, C.A. No. 15765, 1999 WL 64265, at *23

H. Postponement of Stockholder Meeting to Vote on Merger.

In *Mercier v. Inter-Tel (Delaware), Inc.*, the Delaware Court of Chancery held that a disinterested Special Committee may postpone for a short duration a stockholders' meeting called to approve the sale of the company because the Committee knew that if not postponed the merger would be voted down.[827] In *Inter-Tel*, the Court held that well-motivated, independent directors may reschedule an imminent special meeting at which the stockholders are to consider a merger when the directors:

> (1) believe that the merger is in the best interests of the stockholders; (2) know that if the meeting proceeds the stockholders will vote down the merger; (3) reasonably fear that in the wake of the merger's rejection, the acquiror will walk away from the deal and the corporation's stock price will plummet; (4) want more time to communicate with and provide information to the stockholders before the stockholders vote on the merger and risk the irrevocable loss of the pending offer; (5) reschedule the meeting within a reasonable time period; and (6) do not preclude or coerce the stockholders from freely deciding to reject the merger.[828]

In so holding, the Court distinguished *Blasius Industries, Inc. v. Atlas Corp.*[829] and other cases wherein directors manipulate the election process for the purposes of entrenching themselves and for which the Board's action will be upheld only where it can show "compelling justification." Since director elections and board entrenchment were not at issue, the Court applied a *Unocal* "reasonableness" standard of review that places the burden on the Board to identify the proper corporate objectives served by their actions and demonstrate that their actions were reasonable in relationship to their legitimate objectives and did not preclude stockholders from exercising their right to vote or coerce them into voting a particular way.[830]

Following the determination that Inter-Tel's Special Committee had satisfied the *Unocal*-style requirements and even though it concluded that the *Blasius* standard would not apply because he found that the Special Committee's non-preclusive, non-coercive action did not have the primary purpose of disenfranchisement (in part because none of the Committee members had been promised any position following the merger and all expected to lose their Board seats), the Court found that the independent directors had met the *Blasius* "compelling justification" standard by demonstrating that: (i) stockholders were about to reject a third-party merger proposal that the independent directors believed to be in their best interest; (ii) information useful to the stockholders' decision-making process had not been adequately considered or had not yet been publicly disclosed; and (iii) if the stockholders had voted no, the acquiror would have

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(Del. Ch. Jan. 25, 1999) ("Given that no draconian defenses were in place and that the merger was consummated three months after its public announcement, the fact that no bidders came forward is important evidence supporting the reasonableness of the Board's decision."); *Matador Capital Mgmt. Corp. v. BRC Holdings, Inc.*, 729 A.2d 280, 293 (Del. Ch. 1998) (failure of any other bidder to make a bid within one month after the transaction was announced "is evidence that the directors, in fact, obtained the highest and best transaction reasonably available").

827 929 A.2d 786 (Del. Ch. 2007).

828 *Id.*

829 564 A.2d 651 (Del. Ch. 1988); *cf.* J. Travis Laster & Michelle D. Morris, *How to Avoid a Collision Between the Delaware Annual Meeting Requirement and the Federal Proxy Rules*, 10 Del. L. Rev. 213 (2008).

830 *See supra* notes 464-467.

walked away without making a higher bid and the opportunity to receive that bid would have been lost.

The Court, however, criticized the press release issued by the Special Committee in which it announced the reasons for delaying the vote and changing the record date, saying the press release should have been more candid in informing the market that (a) the reason for the delayed vote was because it appeared the merger would not be approved and (b) the reason for the change in record date was to allow arbitrageurs and hedge funds an opportunity to buy additional shares at prices below the merger price and vote such shares.

VII. Responses to Hostile Takeover Attempts.

A. Certain Defenses.

Shareholder rights plans ("*Rights Plans*") and state anti-takeover laws, which developed in response to abusive takeover tactics and inadequate bids, have become a central feature of most major corporations' takeover preparedness.[831] For example, over 2,300 companies have adopted Rights Plans.

Rights Plans and state anti-takeover laws[832] do not interfere with negotiated transactions, nor do they preclude unsolicited takeovers. They are intended to cause bidders to deal with the target's board of directors and ultimately extract a higher acquisition premium than would otherwise have been the case. If a bidder takes action that triggers the Rights Plan or the anti-takeover laws, however, dramatic changes in the position of the bidder can result.

In a negotiated transaction the Board can let down the defensive screen afforded by a Rights Plan or state anti-takeover law to allow the transaction to proceed. Doing so, however, requires strict compliance with the terms of the Rights Plan and applicable statutes, as well as compliance with the directors' fiduciary duties.

B. Rights Plans.

The Basic Design. A typical Rights Plan provides for the issuance and distribution to shareholders of rights ("*Rights*") to purchase common stock or preferred stock of the corporation that, when triggered by a non-Board-approved outside acquirer becoming the beneficial owner[833] of more than a specified percentage (typically 10-20%) of the corporation's common stock, would give the holder of each share of common stock (other than those held by the acquirer) the right to purchase additional shares of common stock at a significant discount (typically 50%). The typical Rights Plan reserves to the Board the right to redeem the Rights for a nominal amount at any time before the Rights are triggered, and this power to redeem the Rights gives the

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831 State corporation statutes intended to restrain some of the abuses associated with hostile takeovers were validated by the United States Supreme Court in *CTS Corp. v. Dynamics Corp. of America*, 481 U.S. 69 (1987). *See Amanda Acquisition Corp. v. Universal Foods Corp.*, 877 F.2d 496, 505-09 (7th Cir. 1989), *cert. denied*, 493 U.S. 955 (1989) (upholding Wisconsin's 3-year moratorium statute); Byron F. Egan and Bradley L. Whitlock, *State Shareholder Protection Statutes*, Address at the University of Texas 11th Annual Conference on Securities Regulation and Business Law Problems (Mar. 10, 1989).

832 *See*, *e.g.*, TBOC §§ 21.601-21.610; DGCL § 203; and *infra* notes 881-891 and related text.

833 *See infra* notes 836-838 and related text.

Board tremendous power to negotiate with the would be acquirer. The goal of the Rights Plan is to deter acquisitions not approved by the Board by imposing unacceptable levels of dilution on potential acquirers, thus channeling the negotiation of any potential acquisition through the Board. Adoption of the Rights Plan by no means makes the corporation invulnerable to takeover. There is nothing in a Rights Plan to prevent an acquirer from launching an election contest to replace the current Board with new directors who would elect to redeem the Rights Plan, allowing the acquirer to consummate an acquisition without risk of dilution. The adoption of the Rights Plan, however, gives the acquirer a powerful incentive to negotiate with the Board and enhances the Board's ability to pursue value maximizing alternatives rather than succumbing to a hostile takeover bid that may not be in the best interests of the corporation or its shareholders. A Rights Plan can buy the Board time to evaluate potential offers and seek maximum value for the shareholders.

Adoption of the Rights Plan. As a first step, the Board will adopt resolutions approving and adopting the Rights Plan itself. It can be implemented without shareholder action or approval. Much like a stock option or other equity incentive plan, the Rights Plan defines the rights of a class of persons to receive a specified class of securities. Each Right would give its holder the option to purchase one share of the corporation's common stock (or preferred stock convertible into common stock) at a price per share determined by the Board.

Authorization of Issuance and Distribution of Rights. Once the Rights Plan has been approved by the Board, the Board must take steps to actually issue and distribute the Rights to the Company's shareholders. This is done by the Board adopting resolutions authorizing the issuance and distribution to shareholders of one Right for every share of common stock issued and outstanding. The Rights would be issued and distributed to all shareholders—even the potential acquirer—but would, again, only be exercisable once triggered, and then only by shareholders other than the acquirer.

The Triggering Event. The Rights would be designed so as to only be exercisable if "triggered" when a potential acquirer becomes the beneficial owner of a certain threshold percentage of the corporation's stock, and would be exercisable by all shareholders *except* the triggering acquirer.[834] Thus, definition of the triggering event is key, as it determines when and by whom the Rights will be exercisable and, more importantly, exactly who will be deterred from attempting to acquire control of the corporation without Board approval. Under a Rights Plan, the exercisability of the Rights will be triggered as soon as a person, together with its affiliates and associates, becomes an "*Acquiring Person*" by acquiring beneficial ownership (generally a defined term similar to, but more inclusive than, Rules 13d-3 and 13d-5 under the 1934 Act[835]) of a specified percentage of the common stock then outstanding.[836]

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834 TBOC § 21.169 specifically provides for selective treatments of different classes of shareholders in this manner.

835 Rules 13d-3 and 13d-5 under the 1934 Act provide as follows:

> **Rule 13d-3. Determination of beneficial owner.**
>
> (a) For the purposes of sections 13(d) and 13(g) of the Act a beneficial owner of a security includes any person who, directly or indirectly, through any contract, arrangement, understanding, relationship, or otherwise has or shares:
>
> (1) Voting power which includes the power to vote, or to direct the voting of, such security; and/or,

(2) Investment power which includes the power to dispose, or to direct the disposition of, such security.

(b) Any person who, directly or indirectly, creates or uses a trust, proxy, power of attorney, pooling arrangement or any other contract, arrangement, or device with the purpose of effect of divesting such person of beneficial ownership of a security or preventing the vesting of such beneficial ownership as part of a plan or scheme to evade the reporting requirements of section 13(d) or (g) of the Act shall be deemed for purposes of such sections to be the beneficial owner of such security.

(c) All securities of the same class beneficially owned by a person, regardless of the form which such beneficial ownership takes, shall be aggregated in calculating the number of shares beneficially owned by such person.

(d) Notwithstanding the provisions of paragraphs (a) and (c) of this rule:

(1)(i) A person shall be deemed to be the beneficial owner of a security, subject to the provisions of paragraph (b) of this rule, if that person has the right to acquire beneficial ownership of such security, as defined in Rule 13d-3(a) (§ 240.13d-3(a)) within sixty days, including but not limited to any right to acquire: (A) Through the exercise of any option, warrant or right; (B) through the conversion of a security; (C) pursuant to the power to revoke a trust, discretionary account, or similar arrangement; or (D) pursuant to the automatic termination of a trust, discretionary account or similar arrangement; provided, however, any person who acquires a security or power specified in paragraphs (d)(1)(i)(A), (B) or (C), of this section, with the purpose or effect of changing or influencing the control of the issuer, or in connection with or as a participant in any transaction having such purpose or effect, immediately upon such acquisition shall be deemed to be the beneficial owner of the securities which may be acquired through the exercise or conversion of such security or power. Any securities not outstanding which are subject to such options, warrants, rights or conversion privileges shall be deemed to be outstanding for the purpose of computing the percentage of outstanding securities of the class owned by such person but shall not be deemed to be outstanding for the purpose of computing the percentage of the class by any other person.

(ii) Paragraph (d)(1)(i) of this section remains applicable for the purpose of determining the obligation to file with respect to the underlying security even though the option, warrant, right or convertible security is of a class of equity security, as defined in Rule 13d-1(i), and may therefore give rise to a separate obligation to file.

(2) A member of a national securities exchange shall not be deemed to be a beneficial owner of securities held directly or indirectly by it on behalf of another person solely because such member is the record holder of such securities and, pursuant to the rules of such exchange, may direct the vote of such securities, without instruction, on other than contested matters or matters that may affect substantially the rights or privileges of the holders of the securities to be voted, but is otherwise precluded by the rules of such exchange from voting without instruction.

(3) A person who in the ordinary course of his business is a pledgee of securities under a written pledge agreement shall not be deemed to be the beneficial owner of such pledged securities until the pledgee AE1 has taken all formal steps necessary which are required to declare a default and determines that the power to vote or to direct the vote or to dispose or to direct the disposition of such pledged securities will be exercised, provided, that:

(i) The pledgee agreement is bona fide and was not entered into with the purpose nor with the effect of changing or influencing the control of the issuer, nor in connection with any transaction having such purpose or effect, including any transaction subject to Rule 13d-3(b);

(ii) The pledgee is a person specified in Rule 13d-1(b)(1)(ii), including persons meeting the conditions set forth in paragraph (G) thereof; and

(iii) The pledgee agreement, prior to default, does not grant to the pledgee;

(A) The power to vote or to direct the vote of the pledged securities; or

(B) The power to dispose or direct the disposition of the pledged securities, other than the grant of such power(s) pursuant to a pledge agreement under which credit is extended subject to regulation T and in which the pledgee is a broker or dealer registered under section 15 of the act.

(4) A person engaged in business as an underwriter of securities who acquires securities through his participation in good faith in a firm commitment underwriting registered under the Securities Act of 1933 shall not be deemed to be the beneficial owner of such securities until the expiration of forty days after the date of such acquisition.

Rule 13d-5 -- Acquisition of securities.

(a) A person who becomes a beneficial owner of securities shall be deemed to have acquired such securities for purposes of section 13(d)(1) of the Act, whether such acquisition was through purchase or otherwise. However, executors or administrators of a decedent's estate generally will be presumed not to have acquired beneficial ownership of the securities in the decedent's estate until such time as such executors or administrators are qualified under local law to perform their duties.

(b)(1) When two or more persons agree to act together for the purpose of acquiring, holding, voting or disposing of equity securities of an issuer, the group formed thereby shall be deemed to have acquired beneficial ownership, for purposes of Sections 13(d) and(g) of the Act, as of the date of such agreement, of all equity securities of that issuer beneficially owned by any such persons.

(2) Notwithstanding the previous paragraph, a group shall be deemed not to have acquired any equity securities beneficially owned by the other members of the group solely by virtue of their concerted actions relating to the purchase of equity securities directly from an issuer in a transaction not involving a public offering: Provided, That:

(i) All the members of the group are persons specified in Rule 13d-1(b)(1)(ii);

(ii) The purchase is in the ordinary course of each member's business and not with the purpose nor with the effect of changing or influencing control of the issuer, nor in connection with or as a participant in any transaction having such purpose or effect, including any transaction subject to Rule 13d-3(b);

(iii) There is no agreement among, or between any members of the group to act together with respect to the issuer or its securities except for the purpose of facilitating the specific purchase involved; and

(iv) The only actions among or between any members of the group with respect to the issuer or its securities subsequent to the closing date of the non-public offering are those which are necessary to conclude ministerial matters directly related to the completion of the offer or sale of the securities.

836 A traditional Rights Plan definition of beneficial owner that is an expanded version of the definition of beneficial owner in Rule 13d-3 under the 1934 Act provides as follows:

(e) A Person shall be deemed the "Beneficial Owner" of, and shall be deemed to "beneficially own," any securities:

(i) which such Person or any of such Person's Affiliates or Associates, directly or indirectly, has the right to acquire (whether such right is exercisable immediately or only after the passage of time) pursuant to any agreement, arrangement or understanding (whether or not in writing) or upon the exercise of conversion rights, exchange rights, rights, warrants or options, or otherwise; provided, however, that a Person shall not be deemed the "Beneficial Owner" of, or to "beneficially own," (A) securities tendered pursuant to a tender or exchange offer made by such Person or any of such Person's Affiliates or Associates until such tendered securities are accepted for purchase or exchange, (B) securities issuable upon exercise of Rights at any time prior to the occurrence of a Triggering Event, or (C) securities issuable upon exercise of Rights from and after the occurrence of a Triggering Event which Rights were acquired by such Person or any such Person's Affiliates or Associates prior to the Distribution Date or pursuant to Section 2(a) or Section 17 (the "Original Rights") or pursuant to Section 10(i) in connection with an adjustment made with respect to any Original Rights;

(ii) which such Person or any of such Person's Affiliates or Associates, directly or indirectly, has the right to vote or dispose of or has "beneficial ownership" of (as determined pursuant to Rule 13d-3 of the General Rules and Regulations under the Exchange Act), including pursuant to any agreement, arrangement or understanding, whether or not in writing; provided, however, that a Person shall not be deemed the "Beneficial Owner" of, or to "beneficially own," any security under this subparagraph (ii) as a result of an agreement, arrangement or understanding to vote such security if such agreement, arrangement or understanding arises solely from a revocable proxy given in response to a public proxy or consent solicitation made pursuant to, and in accordance with, applicable law; or

(iii) which are beneficially owned, directly or indirectly, by any other Person (or any Affiliate or Associate thereof) with which such Person (or any of such Person's Affiliates or Associates) has any agreement, arrangement or understanding (whether or not in writing), for the purpose of acquiring, holding, voting (except pursuant to a revocable proxy as described in the proviso to subparagraph (ii) of this paragraph (e)) or disposing of any voting securities of the Company.

Some Rights Plans attempt to deal with acquisitions of derivative or synthetic securities. *See infra* notes 874-876 and related text

This form of beneficial ownership trigger was recently upheld by the Delaware Chancery Court in *Yucaipa American Alliance Fund II, L.P. v. Riggio et al*.[837] In *Yucaipa*, the plaintiff alleged that the Board of Barnes & Noble, Inc. breached its fiduciary duties by adopting a Rights Plan that would be triggered if a stockholder became the beneficial owner of more than 20% of Barnes & Noble's voting stock. The Rights Plan—which included a definition of "beneficial owner" that effectively restricted two or more stockholders from joining together to control the company, but did not preclude a proxy contest—was adopted in response to the plaintiff's acquisition of an 18% stake in Barnes & Noble, which the Board felt threatened the possibility that shareholders' would have to "relinquish control through a creeping acquisition without the benefit of receiving a control premium."[838]

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837 C.A. No. 5465-VCS (Del. Ch. August 11, 2010). *See infra* note 866.

838 *Id.* at 3. In rejecting Yucaipa's "argument that the beneficial ownership provision in the Rights Plan is ambiguous, and that the lack of clarity has unnerved Yucaipa to the point that it was chary to even discuss, much less agree to, a potential proxy slate with other Barnes & Noble investors" and thus was unreasonable. Vice Chancellor Strine commented that "the Rights Plan's trigger is based on a well-recognized standard, which sophisticated investors like Yucaipa must address as a regular course of doing business due to provisions like § 13(d) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (the "Exchange Act") (§ 13D, for short), and which has been the subject of many judicial rulings including in *Moran* itself." He then summarized the negotiation of the definition as follows:

> For starters, let us consider the language of Paragraph (c) of the definition of beneficial ownership in the Rights Plan, which is what Yucaipa contends is ambiguous. As originally drafted, that language provided:
>
> > A Person shall be deemed the "Beneficial Owner" of, and shall be deemed to "beneficially own," and shall be deemed to have "Beneficial Ownership" of, any securities: . . .
> >
> > (c) which are beneficially owned, directly or indirectly, by any other Person (or an Affiliate or Associate thereof) with which such Person (or any of such Person's Affiliates or Associates) has (i) any agreement, arrangement or understanding (written or oral) for the purpose of acquiring, holding, voting (except pursuant to a revocable proxy as described in the proviso to clause (b)(ii) of this definition) or disposing of any voting securities of the Company or *(ii) any agreement, arrangement or understanding (written or oral) to cooperate in obtaining, changing or influencing the control of the Company*.
>
> In response to Yucaipa's request for clarification of Paragraph (c), Cravath sent a letter to Yucaipa explaining the definition of beneficial ownership on May 11, 2010. In that letter, Cravath stated:
>
> > Pursuant to the definition of "Beneficial Owner" in the Shareholder Rights Plan, [Yucaipa] would not trigger the Shareholder Rights Plan by, among other things: *(1) mounting a proxy contest by putting forth a slate of candidates for the upcoming Board election; (2) putting forth any proposals for shareholder consideration that [Yucaipa] wishes; (3) communicating his position regarding any or other proposals to other shareholder fully and freely; and (4) soliciting and receiving revocable proxies in response to any public proxy solicitation made generally to all of the Company's shareholders*. Your client and his Affiliates and Associates would, however, trigger the Shareholder Rights Plan if: (1) they enter into any agreement, arrangement or understanding (written or oral) with any other shareholder for the purposes of acquiring, holding, voting (except pursuant to a revocable proxy as described above) or disposing of any voting security of the Company, or if they enter into any agreement, arrangement or understanding (written or oral) with any other shareholder to cooperate in obtaining, changing or influencing the control of the Company; and (2) the aggregate number of Shares Beneficially Owned by your client and such other shareholder and their Affiliates and Associates is 20% or more of the outstanding stock. *Thus, your client and his Affiliates and Associates would trigger the provisions of the Shareholder Rights Plan if they, along with any such shareholder, jointly share expenses of a proxy contest or propose a joint slate of directors*.
>
> And, on June 23, 2010, the Board amended the Rights Plan to remove provision (c)(ii) from the definition of beneficial ownership entirely. As amended, Paragraph (c) is as follows:
>
> > A Person shall be deemed the "Beneficial Owner" of, and shall be deemed to "beneficially own," and shall be deemed to have "Beneficial Ownership" of, any securities: . . .

Flip-In and Flip Over. Once the Rights Plan is triggered, each holder of a Right (other than any Acquiring Person and certain related parties, whose Rights automatically become null

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> (c) which are beneficially owned, directly or indirectly, by any other Person (or an Affiliate or Associate thereof) with which such Person (or any of such Person's Affiliates or Associates) has *any agreement, arrangement or understanding (written or oral) for the purpose of acquiring, holding, voting (except pursuant to a revocable proxy as described in the proviso to clause (b)(ii) of this definition) or disposing of any voting securities of the Company*.

In an accompanying letter to Yucaipa explaining the amendment, Cravath wrote that "[t]here can be no question now that the terms of the Rights [Plan] do not foreclose" such things as "agreeing to talk or meet about a proxy contest, participating in forums or group calls discussing the candidates or grievances of the dissident, [and] having a regional or group meeting with other investors."

Despite the clarification provided by the letters from Cravath and by the later amendment, Yucaipa nevertheless argues that the italicized language in Paragraph (c) immediately above is still so ambiguous that it has "an *in terrorem* effect because no one can be certain what conduct might trigger the Rights Plan." * * *

To the extent that it is based on the premise that Yucaipa is prevented from soliciting revocable proxies, Yucaipa's argument is itself unreasonable. First, and most importantly, the Plan itself expressly carves out seeking revocable proxies in Paragraph (c). And, the letter Cravath sent to Yucaipa on May 11, 2010 lists a number of activities, including seeking revocable proxies, that Barnes & Noble views as acceptable under the Rights Plan, including:

> (1) [M]ounting a proxy contest by putting forth a slate of candidates for the upcoming Board election; (2) putting forth any proposals for shareholder consideration that [Yucaipa] wishes; (3) communicating his position regarding any or other proposals to other shareholder fully and freely; and (4) soliciting and receiving revocable proxies in response to any public proxy solicitation made generally to all of the Company's shareholders.

Thus, the Rights Plan is clear that soliciting revocable proxies is allowed, and Barnes & Noble has clarified that additional activities will not trigger the Plan. Indeed, Burkle had conversations with Eichler of Aletheia — another Schedule 13D filer — after the Rights Plan was put in place, belying any claim that he was so paralyzed by the Rights Plan that he did not dare talk to any other Barnes & Noble stockholder.

Second, as amended, the definition of beneficial ownership in Paragraph (c) is no different than the language that has been incorporated into countless rights plans since *Moran*. This court in *Moran* expressly noted the connection between the definition of beneficial ownership in the plan there and the definition under § 13D of the Exchange Act:

> [The rights plan] extends the 20% triggering event to the formation of an ownership group, acting in concert for the purposes of a proxy contest. The group concept and beneficial ownership have been admittedly borrowed from comparable provisions in federal regulations under Sections 13(d) and 14(d) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934.

Rule 13d-5, promulgated under § 13 of the Exchange Act, provides:

> When two or more persons agree to act together for the purpose of acquiring, holding, voting or disposing of equity securities of an issuer, the group formed thereby shall be deemed to have acquired beneficial ownership, for purposes of Section 13(d) and (g) of the Act, as of the date by any such persons.

Thus, like the pill in *Moran*, the Rights Plan's definition of beneficial ownership is essentially identical in scope to Rule 13d-5. Furthermore, the definition of beneficial ownership in *Stahl* [*Stahl v. Apple Bancorp Inc.*, 1990 WL 114222 (Del. Ch. Aug. 9, 1990)] was substantively identical to the definition here. The *Stahl* rights plan provided that a shareholder is deemed to own any shares "which are beneficially owned, directly or indirectly, by any other person with which such person or any such person's affiliates has any agreement, arrangement or understanding . . . for the purpose of acquiring, holding, voting or disposing of any securities of the [Company]," and the *Stahl* court presumed, as did the parties, that that language unambiguously circumscribed the Apple Bancorp shareholders' ability to reach agreements regarding the joint conduct of a proxy contest.

Both *Moran* and *Stahl* also upheld those rights plans on the basis that they allowed shareholders to seek revocable proxies. Thus, because the Rights Plan here uses substantively identical language to the pills in *Moran* and *Stahl* and explicitly allows the solicitation of revocable proxies, there is no question that Paragraph (c) of the Rights Plan permits Yucaipa to solicit revocable proxies.

and void) will have the right to receive, upon exercise, common stock having a value equal to two times the exercise price of the Right. This is known as the "*flip-in event*." The Rights typically may not be exercised for a ten-day period following a flip-in event, during which the Company still has the ability to cause the Rights to be redeemed.

Additionally, if at any time following the date on which a person becomes an Acquiring Person:

1. The corporation is acquired in a merger or other business combination transaction in which the corporation is not the surviving corporation;

2. The corporation is acquired in a merger or other business combination transaction in which it is the surviving entity and all or part of its common stock is converted into securities of another entity, cash or other property; or

3. 50% or more of the corporation's assets, cash flow or earning power is sold or transferred,

then each holder of a Right will have the right to receive, upon exercise, common stock of the acquiring company having a value equal to two times the exercise price of the Right. This is known as a "*flip-over*" event.

Exchange. Additionally, at any time after the Rights are triggered, Rights Plans often provide that the Board may exchange the Rights (other than Rights owned by the Acquiring Person, which will have become void), in whole or in part, at an exchange ratio of one share of common stock or an equivalent security, per Right (subject to adjustment). The exchange alternative results in less dilution than a traditional flip-in, but is a simple mechanism that can be implemented by the Board alone more quickly than a flip-in if the corporation has sufficient authorized but unissued shares. To satisfy Rights Plan requirements that the exchange shares not be issued to the Acquiring Person or its Affiliates, a trust can be formed to hold the exchange shares until ownership issues can be resolved.

Redemption. Most Rights Plans provide that the corporation may redeem Rights in whole, but not in part, at a price of $0.01 per Right at any time prior to their being triggered. Immediately upon the action of the Board authorizing the redemption, the Rights will terminate and the only right of the holders of Rights will be to receive the redemption price.

C. Fiduciary Duties Applicable to Rights Plans.

Delaware Precedent. It is a settled principle of Delaware law that a Rights Plan, if drafted correctly, is valid as a matter of Delaware law. *See Leonard Loventhal Account v. Hilton Hotels Corp.*,[839] in which the Chancery Court, citing *Moran v. Household International, Inc.*,[840] wrote:

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839 C.A. No. 17803, 2000 WL 1528909, at *1 (Del. Ch. Oct. 10, 2000).

840 *Moran v. Household Int'l, Inc.*, 500 A.2d 1346, 1346 (Del. 1985).

> The Delaware courts first examined and upheld the right of a board of directors to adopt a poison pill rights plan fifteen years ago in *Moran v. Household International, Inc*. Since that decision, others have followed which affirmed the validity of a board of directors' decision to adopt a poison pill rights plan. Today, rights plans have not only become commonplace in Delaware, but there is not a single state that does not permit their adoption.

Because the adoption of a Rights Plan is likely to deter certain acquisitions, and can have the effect of entrenching directors and management, such plans are often subject to judicial scrutiny. In Delaware, the standard articulated in *Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petroleum Co.*[841] is still applied in evaluating shareholder Rights Plans.[842] In *Unocal*, the Delaware Supreme Court held that when directors authorize takeover defensive measures, there arises "the omnipresent specter that a board may be acting primarily in its own interests, rather than those of the corporation and its shareholders."[843] The Court reviewed such actions with enhanced scrutiny even though a traditional conflict of interest was absent. In refusing to enjoin a selective exchange offer adopted by the Board to respond to a hostile takeover attempt, the *Unocal* Court held that the directors must prove that (i) they had reasonable grounds for believing there was a danger to corporate policy and effectiveness (satisfied by showing good faith and reasonable investigation)[844] and (ii) the responsive action taken was "reasonable in relation to the threat posed" (established by showing that the response to the threat was not "coercive" or "preclusive" and then by demonstrating that the response was within a "range of reasonable responses" to the threat perceived).[845]

Typically, establishing that a Rights Plan is valid at the time of its adoption is no longer a major hurdle. Only in extreme cases will a court invalidate the traditional flip-in/flip-over structure employed by a Rights Plan.[846] In fact, a Board may even have an affirmative duty to adopt a Rights Plan where failure to do so would subject the corporation to an unfair transaction.[847]

The litigation concerning Rights Plans now focuses on whether or not a Board should be required to redeem the Rights in response to a particular bid. In this respect, Courts applying Delaware law have upheld, or refused to enjoin, determinations by Boards not to redeem Rights

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841 493 A.2d 946 (Del. 1985). *See* notes 464-467, *supra*.

842 In *Yucaipa*, discussed *supra* in notes 837-838 and related text, the Court applied *Unocal* in upholding Barnes & Noble's shareholder rights plan. *Yucaipa*, C.A. No. 5465-VCS (Del. Ch. August 12, 2010).

843 493 A.2d at 954.

844 Id. at 954-55.

845 Id. at 955.

846 In *eBay Domestic Holdings, Inc. v. Newmark*, C.A. No. 3705-CC (Del. Ch. Sep. 9, 2010), the Court struck down a rights plan that was (a) designed solely to protect against a future threat to the company's corporate culture, (b) adopted in the context of several other protective (and potentially self-dealing transactions), and (c) essentially a retaliatory measure triggered by the targeted stockholder's choice to compete with the company in certain markets. By contrast, the typical Rights Plan is considered in response to an immediate threat to actual shareholder value, rather than a distant threat against an amorphous concept of "corporate culture."

847 *Louisiana Municipal Employees' Retirement System v. Fertitta*, C.A. No. 4339-VCL, at 20 n.34 (Del Ch. July 28, 2009) (holding that a "board's failure to employ a [rights plan], together with other suspect conduct, supports a reasonable inference at the motion to dismiss stage that the board breached its duty of loyalty in permitting the creeping takeover."). *See infra* notes 877-878 and related text.

in response to two-tier offers[848] or inadequate 100% cash offers[849] as well as to protect an auction or permit a target to explore alternatives.[850] On the other hand, some decisions have held that the Rights may not interfere with shareholder choice at the conclusion of an auction[851] or at the "end stage" of a target's attempt to develop alternatives.[852] *Grand Metropolitan Public, Ltd. v. Pillsbury Co.* involved circumstances in which the Board, rather than "just saying no," had pursued a restructuring that was comparable to the pending all-cash tender offer.[853]

Texas Precedent. In *Gearhart Industries v. Smith International* ("Gearhart"),[854] the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, applying Texas law, upheld certain defensive measures implemented by Gearhart Industries to ward off takeover attempts by Smith International. Though not a Rights Plan per se, the Gearhart Board's response to Smith's attempted takeover had the same basic intentions and effect: the Board authorized the issuance of subordinated debentures and warrants to purchase Gearhart common stock with so-called "springing" features, which would reduce the exercise price of the warrants by approximately 25% upon the occurrence of certain events, including certain attempts to effect a change in control of Gearhart.

In a suit by Gearhart to stop Smith's takeover attempt, Smith counterclaimed that the "springing" feature of the warrants constituted a violation of Gearhart management's fiduciary duty to its shareholders because the debentures and warrants were issued primarily to entrench Gearhart's management. The Fifth Circuit stated the general rule under Texas law (Texas's version of the business judgment rule) that courts will not impose liability upon a *noninterested* corporate director unless the challenged action is *ultra vires* or is tainted by fraud.

The Fifth Circuit concluded that the question of whether the directors should be considered "interested" need not be decided because the issuance of the debentures with warrants was fair to the corporation in light of the following factors:

(a) Gearhart's Board hired well respected financial experts and counsel to assist in the evaluation of the issuance of the debentures;

(b) the terms of the debentures were reasonable at the time of the transaction;

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848 *Desert Partners, L.P. v. USG Corp.*, 686 F. Supp. 1289 (N.D. Ill. 1988).

849 *BNS Inc. v. Koppers Co.*, 683 F. Supp. 458, 474-75 (D. Del. 1988); *Moore Corp. v. Wallace Computer Servs., Inc.*, 907 F. Supp. 1545 (D. Del. 1995); *MAI Basic Four, Inc. v. Prime Computer, Inc.*, [1988-89 Transfer Binder] Fed. Sec. L. Rep. (CCH) ¶ 94,179 (Del. Ch. 1988).

850 *CRTF Corp. v. Federated Dept. Stores, Inc.*, 683 F. Supp. 422, 438-42 (S.D.N.Y. 1988) (refusing to enjoin discriminatory application of poison pill during auction); *In re Holly Farms Corp. S'holders Litig.*, 564 A.2d 342 (Del. Ch. 1989).

851 *Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, C.A. No. 10168, 1988 WL 108332 [1988-89 Transfer Binder] Fed. Sec. L. Rep. (CCH) ¶ 94,071 (Del. Ch. 1988), *rev'd on other grounds*, 559 A.2d 1261 (Del. 1989).

852 *Grand Metropolitan Public, Ltd. v. Pillsbury Co.*, 558 A.2d 1049 (Del. Ch. 1988); *TW Services v. SWT Acquisition Corp.*, C.A. No. 10427, 1989 Del. Ch. LEXIS 19, at 24-25 (Mar. 2, 1989).

853 *Grand Metropolitan Public, Ltd. v. Pillsbury Co.*, 558 A.2d 1049 (Del. Ch. 1988). *See Paramount Commc'ns Inc. v. Time Inc.*, C.A. Nos. 10866, 10670, and 10935, 1989 WL 79880 at *28 (Del. Ch. July 14, 1989) [1989 Transfer Binder] Fed. Sec. L. Rep. (CCH) ¶ 94,514, at 93,283 (Del. Ch. 1988) (in *Pillsbury* and *Interco*, management sought to "'cram down' a transaction that was the functional equivalent of the very leveraged 'bust up' transaction that management was claiming presented a threat to the corporation"), *aff'd*, 571 A.2d 1140 (Del. 1989).

854 741 F.2d 707 (5th Cir. 1984). *See* notes 23-48, *supra*.

(c) the issuance and sale of the debentures were negotiated at arms length with unaffiliated third parties; and

(d) there were other good business reasons for issuing the debentures, such as the need to maintain corporate flexibility.

Thus, the Court in *Gearhart* did not determine whether Gearhart's directors approved the issuance of the debentures and warrants for the purpose of entrenching the existing management of Gearhart or whether such a purpose would cause the Gearhart directors to be considered "interested."

Later in *A. Copeland Enterprises, Inc. v. Guste* ("Copeland"),[855] the United States Federal District Court for the Western District of Texas considered the actions of the Board of Church's Fried Chicken, Inc. in adopting a shareholder Rights Plan in response to a hostile tender offer from A. Copeland Enterprises and Biscuit Investments, Inc.. The Church's Rights Plan contained "flip-in" and "flip-over" provisions which, if triggered, would immediately and severally dilute the investment of the potential acquirer.

Because the Church's Rights Plan constituted a substantial economic barrier, the tender offer was conditioned upon the invalidation or redemption of the Rights. Prior to the Court's decision, Church's announced that it would hold an "auction" to sell Church's. The Court's opinion was rendered in the context of Copeland's motion for a preliminary injunction enjoining Church's and its Board from enforcing the Rights Plan and compelling the redemption of the Rights.

The Church's Board action in adopting the Rights Plan then was tested on whether it was consistent with the directors' fiduciary duties, particularly the duty of loyalty. The Court in *Copeland* stated: "The duty of loyalty dictates that a director must act in good faith and must not allow his personal interests to prevail over the interests of the corporation. To prove a breach of this duty, it must be shown that the director was 'interested.'"[856] The Court found that while an entrenchment motive would support a finding that directors are "interested," it was unnecessary in that particular case to determine whether the adoption of the Rights Plan was done for the purpose of entrenchment since the plan at issue was fair to the corporation.[857]

While the Court in *Copeland* focused on the duty of loyalty "fairness" test, and in *Gearhart* the court applied both tests separately, the two courts' respective approaches to determining whether the transaction was "fair" seem to be in essence an application of the business judgment rule—a determination of whether any reasonable business purpose exists for the challenged actions.

While the adoption of the Church's Rights Plan was upheld in *Copeland*, and the Court did not require that the Rights be redeemed while an auction was in progress, the Court suggested that in that case the benefits of the Rights would be gone upon completion of the

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855 706 F. Supp. 1283 (W.D. Tex. 1989).

856 Id. at 1290.

857 706 F.Supp. at 1290–292.

auction. As discussed above, a failure to redeem Rights *after* an auction could potentially show entrenchment motives and amount to a breach of the duty of loyalty.[858]

Redemption of the Rights Plan. Today, litigation concerning Rights Plans generally focuses on whether or not a Board should be required to *redeem* the Rights Plan in response to a particular bid. In *Copeland*, for example, the Court suggested that it would enjoin the use of the Church's Rights Plan were it not removed at the close of an auction to facilitate a sale of the corporation to the highest bidder.[859] Courts applying Delaware law have upheld, or refused to enjoin, determinations by Boards not to redeem Rights in response to two-tier offers[860] or inadequate 100% cash offers[861] as well as to protect an auction or permit a target to explore alternatives.[862] On the other hand, some decisions have held that Rights Plans may not interfere with shareholder choice at the conclusion of an auction[863] or at the "end stage" of a target's attempt to develop alternatives.[864] In *Yucaipa American Alliance Fund II, L.P. v. Riggio et al.*,[865] the Court questioned whether a Rights Plan should remain in place when a competitor "(1) won a proxy contest for a third of the seats of a classified board; (2) is not able to proceed with its tender offer for another year because the incumbent board majority will not redeem the Rights as to the offer; and (3) is required to take all the various economic risks that would come with maintaining the bid for another year."[866]

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858 706 F. Supp at 1293.

859 706 F.Supp at 1293.

860 *Desert Partners, L.P. v. USG Corp.*, 686 F. Supp. 1289 (N.D. Ill. 1988).

861 *BNS Inc. v. Koppers Co.*, 683 F. Supp. 458, 474-75 (D. Del. 1988); *Moore Corp. v. Wallace Computer Servs., Inc.*, 907 F. Supp. 1545 (D. Del. 1995); *MAI Basic Four, Inc. v. Prime Computer, Inc.*, [1988-89 Transfer Binder] Fed. Sec. L. Rep. (CCH) ¶ 94,179 (Del. Ch. 1988).

862 *CRTF Corp. v. Federated Dept. Stores, Inc.*, 683 F. Supp. 422, 438-42 (S.D.N.Y. 1988) (refusing to enjoin discriminatory application of rights plan during auction); *In re Holly Farms Corp. S'holders Litig.*, 564 A.2d 342 (Del. Ch. 1989).

863 *Mills Acquisition Co. v. Macmillan, Inc.*, C.A. No. 10168, 1988 WL 108332 [1988-89 Transfer Binder] Fed. Sec. L. Rep. (CCH) ¶ 94,071 (Del. Ch. 1988), *rev'd on other grounds*, 559 A.2d 1261 (Del. 1989).

864 *Grand Metropolitan Public, Ltd. v. Pillsbury Co.*, 558 A.2d 1049 (Del. Ch. 1988); *TW Services v. SWT Acquisition Corp.*, C.A. No. 10427, 1989 Del. Ch. LEXIS 19, at 24-25 (Mar. 2, 1989).

865 C.A. No. 5465-VCS (Del. Ch. August 12, 2010). *See* notes 837-838, *supra*.

866 The Chancery Court's comments in *Yucaipa* were in the context of 2009, billionaire activist investor Ronald Burke's Yucaipa American Alliance (Parallel) Fund II, L.P. ("Yucaipa") rapid purchase of an 18% stake in Barnes & Noble ("B&N"), followed by a meeting with the chairman of B&N and largest shareholder to propose changes in its strategic direction. Yucaipa communicated in public filings that it might seek to implement changes in the company's governance, buy additional shares in the company and propose M&A transactions. Additionally, another investment advisory firm, which had followed Yucaipa's lead in prior investments, quickly bought another 17% of B&N. In response to the threat that B&N's shareholders "would relinquish control through a creeping acquisition without the benefit of receiving a control premium," the Board adopted a Rights Plan that would be triggered if a stockholder became the beneficial owner of more than 20% of B&N stock. The Rights Plan's typical definition of "beneficial owner" effectively restricted two or more stockholders from joining together to control the company, but did not preclude a proxy contest. The Rights Plan "grandfathered in" the founder of B&N with his current 30% B&N stake, but would trigger and apply to the founder if he acquired additional shares.

In upholding the Rights Plan under the *Unocal* standard, the Chancery Court recognized that directors must demonstrate that their actions were reasonable in relation to their legitimate objective, and whether "whether the pill unreasonably restricts the ability of stockholders to run an effective proxy contest." In this case, the Court found that "the board had a reasonable basis that Burke was potentially planning to acquire a controlling stake in B&N, or form a governing bloc with another large stakeholder." The Court also found that the Rights Plan did not prevent an effective proxy contest by finding that the Rights Plan did not "disenfranchise any stockholder in the sense of preventing them from freely voting [nor did it] prevent a stockholder from soliciting revocable proxies." The Court further rejected the

In the end, the test is one of fairness to the corporation and its shareholders. If the Rights Plan results in negotiations with an acquirer and the proposal of a tender offer or other transaction, then the onus will be on the Board to either redeem the Rights Plan, or support a position that the proposed transaction would not be in the best interests of all shareholders.

Term and Renewal. Rights Plans expire after a specified period provided therein, which is often ten years. Renewal of a Rights Plan involves essentially the same issues as the initial adoption of a Rights Plan.

"Dead Hand" Pills. In the face of a "Just Say No" defense, the takeover tactic of choice has become a combined tender offer and solicitation of proxies or consents to replace target's Board with directors committed to redeeming the Rights Plan to permit the tender offer to proceed. Under DGCL § 228, a raider can act by written consent of a majority of the shareholders without a meeting of stockholders, unless such action is prohibited in the certificate of incorporation (under the Texas Corporate Statues, unanimous consent is required for shareholder action by written consent unless the certificate of formation otherwise provides).[867] Under DGCL § 211(d) a raider can call a special meeting between annual meetings only if permitted under the target's bylaws, whereas under the Texas Corporate Statues any holder of at least 10% of the outstanding shares can call a special meeting unless the certificate of formation specifies a higher percentage (not to exceed 50%).[868] If the target has a staggered Board, a raider can generally only replace a majority of the target's board by waging a proxy fight at two consecutive annual meetings.

A target without a staggered Board cannot rely on an ordinary Rights Plan to give much protection in the face of a combined tender offer/proxy fight. The predicament faced by such targets has spawned variants of the so-called "continuing director" or "dead hand" pill.

"Pure" dead hand pills permit only directors who were in place prior to a proxy fight or consent solicitation (or new directors recommended or approved by them) to redeem the Rights Plan. Once these "continuing directors" are removed, no other director can redeem the pill.

Modified dead hand provisions come in a variety of forms. So called "nonredemption" or "no hand" provisions typically provide that no director can redeem the Rights Plan once the continuing directors no longer constitute a majority of the Board. This limitation on redemption may last for a limited period or for the remaining life of the Rights Plan. The Rights Plan at issue in the *Quickturn Design Sys., Inc. v. Shapiro* case discussed below included such a provision.

Another variant is the "limited duration," or "delayed redemption," dead hand pill. This feature can be attached to either the pure dead hand or no hand Rights Plan. As the name

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entire fairness standard as the Board did not adopt the Rights Plan in an effort to provide a special advantage in favor of the founder of B&N, but merely grandfathered in an existing stockholder.

Yucaipa undertook, and lost, a proxy contest to elect directors who would redeem the Rights. Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg & Gina Chon, *After Winning Proxy Battle, Barnes & Noble Weighs Sale*, Wall St. J., Sept. 29, 2010, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703882404575519730713498868.html.

867 TBOC §§ 6.201, 6.202; TBCA art. 9.10(A).

868 TBOC § 21.352(a)(2); TBCA art. 2.24(C).

indicates, these pills limit a dead hand or no hand restriction's effectiveness to a set period of time, typically starting after the continuing directors no longer constitute a majority of the board. These Rights Plans delay, but do not preclude, redemption by a newly elected board.

The validity of dead hand provisions depends in large part upon the state law that applies. Delaware recently has made clear that dead hand provisions – even of limited duration – are invalid. In *Quickturn Design Sys., Inc. v. Shapiro*, the Delaware Supreme Court held that the dead hand feature of the Rights Plan ran afoul of DGCL § 141(a), which empowers the Board to manage the corporation. Relying on the requirement in DGCL § 141(a) that any limitation on the Board's power must be stated in the certificate of incorporation, the Court found that a dead hand provision would prevent a newly elected Board "from completely discharging its fundamental management duties to the corporation and its stockholders for six months" by restricting the board's power to negotiate a sale of the corporation.[869] The reasoning behind the *Quickturn* holding leaves little room for dead hand provisions of any type in Delaware.[870]

Not all states have come down against dead hand Rights Plans.[871] The Rights Plan upheld in *Copeland*[872] involved dead hand features, although the opinion did not focus on the validity of the dead hand feature.

5% NOL Rights Plans. In *Selectica, Inc. v. Versata, Inc.*,[873] the Rights Plan was designed to protect the company's net operating losses for federal tax purposes ("NOLs") and was upheld as an appropriate mechanism for protecting a company's NOLs. The Delaware Supreme Court held that lowering a Rights Plan's triggering threshold to 4.99% in order to convert a traditional Rights Plan to a NOL Rights Plan in response to a competitor's accumulation of shares is permissible under *Unocal* and its progeny as directors have broad latitude to draw reasonable conclusions about the value of a company's NOLs, the severity of the threat posed by a particular shareholder, and the appropriate defensive response under the circumstances. Finally, the Delaware Supreme Court held that even after Rights have been triggered and the acquirer diluted, a Board is permitted to implement a new Rights Plan (*i.e.*, reload) to deter further acquisitions that could jeopardize the company's NOLs.

Selectica's Rights Plan was adopted in the context of Selectica having generated $165 million in NOLs and having rejected several acquisition offers by its competitor Trilogy, Inc. which had acquired more than 5% of Selectica's outstanding stock and continued to acquire shares. In response, the Selectica Board reviewed the effect of Trilogy's acquisitions on

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869 *Quickturn Design Sys., Inc. v. Shapiro*, 721 A.2d 1281 (Del. 1998), involved a "no hand" pill provision of limited duration that the target's board had adopted in the face of a combined proxy fight and tender offer by raider. 721 A.2d 1281 (Del. 1998). The pill provision barred a newly elected board from redeeming the rights plan for six months after taking office if the purpose or effect would be to facilitate a transaction with a party that supported the new board's election.

870 *See also Carmody v. Toll Bros., Inc.*, 723 A.2d 1180 (Del. Ch. 1998).

871 *See Invacare Corp. v. Healthdyne Tech., Inc.*, 968 F. Supp. 1578 (N.D. Ga. 1997) (rejecting the offeror's contention that a dead hand pill impermissibly restricts the power of future Boards – including a Board elected as part of a takeover bid – to redeem a rights plan, relying upon the "plain language" of a Georgia statute that expressly grants a corporation's board the "sole discretion" to determine the terms contained in a rights plan).

872 *A. Copeland Enter., Inc. v. Guste*, 706 F. Supp. 1283, 1283 (W.D. Tex. 1989). *See* notes 855-856 and related text, *supra*.

873 5 A.2d 386 (Del. Oct. 4, 2010), affirming C.A. No. 4241-VCN, 2010 WL 703062 (Feb. 26, 2010).

Selectica's NOLs and, after thorough discussion and with the advice of outside experts, determined to amend Selectica's existing Rights Plan to reduce the threshold from a typical 15% trigger to the 4.99% necessary to protect the value of Selectica's NOLs. Existing 5% shareholders were grandfathered in and permitted to acquire up to an additional 0.5% without triggering the distribution of Rights. The Board also established a committee of independent directors to review the Rights Plan periodically to ensure that it continued to be in the best interests of shareholders and to review the trigger threshold to ensure that it remained appropriate. Shortly after the adoption of this Rights Plan, Trilogy intentionally triggered Selectica's Rights Plan by increasing its stockholdings to 6.7% and refused repeated requests by Selectica to enter into a standstill agreement to give the Board time to evaluate the situation. The Selectica Board then determined to allow the exchange feature of the Rights Plan to trigger, which diluted Trilogy's holdings to 3.3%. The Board also amended the Rights Plan to reload it so that it could be triggered again if a shareholder exceeded the specified percentage of shares.

In upholding the adoption of Selectica's Rights Plan, the Supreme Court noted that rather than protecting a company from a change of control, the Selectica pill was designed to protect a corporate asset – its NOLs. The Court found that, although NOLs ultimately may be of no value to a company, the Board may, reasonably and in reliance on expert advice, conclude that the company's NOLs were worth protecting. This objective necessitated the low trigger threshold of 4.99%, determined by the directors with reference to tax laws and regulations. The Supreme Court observed that while a trigger under 5% may have a substantial preclusive effect, it did not constitute actual preclusion. Selectica's Rights Plan permitted the Board to redeem the Rights after an acquirer has triggered it, if the Board determines that the acquisition does not endanger the value of the NOLs. The Supreme Court, however, cautioned that the Board's actions would again be subject to judicial scrutiny if the Board were faced with a tender offer and a request to redeem the Rights and that, citing *Moran*, a "Board has no more discretion in refusing to redeem the Rights Plan than it does in enacting any other defensive mechanism."

Derivative Positions. *In re Atmel Corp. S'holders Litig.*[874] involved an application for an injunction (which the Court of Chancery denied) through which the plaintiff sought to invalidate an amendment to Atmel corporation's stockholder Rights Plan that included certain derivative positions in calculating a stockholder's total beneficial ownership for purposes of determining whether the stockholder had triggered the Rights Plan. During the course of rejecting an all-cash tender to acquire Atmel, the Atmel Board publicly rejected the offer as not in the stockholders' best interests and thereafter adopted an amendment to Atmel's Rights Plan (i) lowering the percentage of equity ownership necessary to trigger the Rights Plan from 20% to 10%, and (ii) expanding the definition of "beneficial ownership" to include derivative contracts that are designed to produce economic benefits and risks that correspond substantially to ownership of Atmel common shares.[875]

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874 C.A. No. 4161-CC (Del. Ch. May 19, 2009).

875 The Court in *Atmel* described the amendment to Atmel's Rights Plan as follows:

> On November 10, 2008, in response to these advances, the Atmel board adopted an amendment to Atmel's rights plan. The amendment has two principal features. First, it lowers the percentage of equity ownership necessary to trigger the rights under the plan from 20 percent to 10 percent for any person or group of persons that made a takeover proposal or made a "takeover proposal" on or after October 1, 2008.

The plaintiff in *Atmel* claimed that the amendment was so indefinite and uncertain in its terms that there was no objective means of determining how the Rights Plan operated or when it is triggered, and thus was invalid because its adoption constituted a *per se* breach of fiduciary duty or an *ultra vires* act. The plaintiff argued that (i) stockholders may be unable to determine the extent of their beneficial ownership under the expanded definition of "beneficial ownership" because a stockholder is imputed with ownership of not only the shares owned by its counterparty, but also those shares owned by its counterparty's counterparties; (ii) it would be impossible for Atmel to sort through the various layers of counterparties to determine beneficial ownership of a stockholder; and (iii) the definition of "derivatives contract," which provided that a contract "designed to produce economic benefits and risks to the receiving party that correspond substantially to the ownership by the receiving party of a number of common shares" (regardless of whether the contract was settled through cash or other property) was so vague as to include interests in mutual funds with a large percentage of their holdings represented by Atmel stock because such funds "may well substantially correspond to the economic risks and benefits" of owning Atmel stock. The Court denied the plaintiff's motion for injunctive relief because the plaintiff had failed to carry its burden to show a reasonable probability of success on the merits as had been presented only with abstract and theoretical legal arguments based on hypothetical scenarios.

The *Atmel* case was ultimately settled pursuant to a settlement agreement[876] which provided that if prior to September 14, 2012, Atmel adopts a new Rights Plan that includes a "Derivative Contract" within the definition of "Beneficial Ownership", Atmel will clarify that (i) the term "Derivatives Contract" excludes interests in broad-based index options, broad-based index futures, and broad-based publicly traded market baskets of stock approved for trading by the appropriate federal governmental authority; and (ii) to qualify as or constitute a "Derivatives Contract," a contractual arrangement must include or reference a number of "Notional Common

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> Second, it expands the definition of Beneficial Ownership to encompass derivatives contracts that are designed to produce economic benefits and risks that correspond substantially to the ownership of Atmel common shares. The amended definition of "beneficial ownership" provides, in part, that a person shall be deemed to beneficially own any securities "which are beneficially owned, directly or indirectly, by a Counterparty under any derivatives contract to which such person or any of such person's affiliates or associates is a receiving party."
>
> The definition also provides that "the number of common shares that a person is deemed to own beneficially in connection with a particular derivatives contract shall not exceed the number of notional common shares that are subject to such derivatives contract."
>
> The definition further provides that "the number of securities beneficially owned by each Counterparty, (Counterparty A) under a derivatives contract shall be deemed to include all securities that are beneficially owned, directly or indirectly, by a Counterparty, (Counterparty B) under any derivatives contract to which such Counterparty A is a receiving party, with this proviso being applied to successive Counterparties as appropriate.
>
> The amendment defines a "derivatives contract" as "a contract between two parties, (the receiving party and the Counterparty) that is designed to produce economic benefits and risks to the receiving party that correspond substantially to the ownership by the receiving party of a number of common shares regardless of whether obligations under such contract are settled through the delivery of cash, common shares or other property, without regard to any short position under the same or any other derivative contract."

[876] Stipulation and Agreement of Compromise, Settlement and Release dated November 6, 2009, *available at* http://google.brand.edgar-online.com/EFX_dll/EDGARpro.dll?FetchFilingHtmlSection1?SectionID=6899365-7014-122449&SessionID=zRoyHqfwJUKJbs7.

Shares." The Atmel Board also passed a resolution interpreting its definition of "Beneficial Ownership" in its existing Rights Plan consistent with the foregoing.

Duty to Adopt Rights Plan. In two recent cases the Delaware Court of Chancery has suggested that a special committee formed to negotiate with a controlling stockholder should be given by the Board the power to adopt a Rights Plan to prevent the controlling stockholder from dominating the process, and that the failure to do so may suggest that the Board has not handled the process in accordance with its fiduciary duties. *In re CNX Gas Corp. Shareholders Litigation*,[877] involved a special committee formed to negotiate a freeze two-step merger in which the controlling stockholder would make a tender offer followed by a short-form merger, and the Court noted that the special committee had been deprived of the negotiating leverage that comes from the ability to adopt a Rights Plan, commenting that "[t]he shadow of pill adoption alone may be sufficient to prompt a controller to give a special committee more time to negotiate or to evaluate how to proceed." In *Louisiana Municipal Employees' Retirement System v. Fertitta*,[878] the Chancery Court suggested that there may be a Board duty to adopt a Rights Plan where failure to do so would subject the corporation to an unfair transaction with a controlling stockholder.

D. Change in Control Provisions in Loan Documents.

Lenders are frequently concerned about the effect of a change in control of a company on the company's ability to pay its debts. As a result it is common for loan agreements, debt indentures and similar documents to contain provisions to the effect that a change in control of the company gives the lender a right to accelerate the maturity of the debt. Because they can make it more difficult and expensive for a third party to take over the company and hence may tend to protect positions of incumbent management, they can be subject to judicial scrutiny.

A change in control provision in a bond indenture of Amylin Pharmaceuticals, Inc. was scrutinized in *San Antonio Fire & Police Pension Fund v. Amylin Pharmaceuticals, Inc.*,[879] in which the Court of Chancery held that the continuing directors provision in Amylin's bond indenture, which the Court interpreted under New York law, did not prohibit incumbent directors from "approving" persons nominated by stockholders even as the incumbent Board publicly opposed those nominees in a proxy contest. The Court also found that the Amylin Board complied with its duty of care in approving the Indenture, although the Court cautioned counsel to be mindful of the Board's duties to protect stockholders in considering change in control provisions in loan documents.

Amylin's indenture provided holders of publicly traded convertible notes the right to demand redemption at face value upon the occurrence of certain events, including a "fundamental change," which was defined in part to have occurred if at any time the "continuing directors" do not constitute a majority of the Board. The indenture defined "continuing directors" in part as "any new directors whose election to the Board of Directors or whose

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877 C.A. No. 5377-VCL (Del. Ch. July 5, 2010). *See infra* note 910 and related text.

878 C.A. No. 4339-VCL (Del Ch. July 28, 2009); *see infra* note 958 and related text.

879 C.A. No. 4446-VCL (Del. Ch. May 12, 2009).

nomination for election by the stockholders of the company was *approved* by at least a majority of the directors then still in office" (emphasis added).

Litigation ensued after two insurgent stockholders each nominated separate five-person slates for election to Amylin's twelve-member Board. Election of seven of the insurgent nominees without the "approval" of the incumbent Board, which had nominated its own slate, would have constituted a "fundamental change" under the continuing directors provision, triggering the noteholders' put rights at a time when the notes were trading at a deep discount.

Another Amylin stockholder brought a putative class action suit alleging that the Amylin Board (i) breached its fiduciary duties of care and loyalty in approving the indenture; (ii) breached its fiduciary duties of care and loyalty in failing to approve the dissident nominees and thereby avoiding triggering the change-in-control provision; and (iii) breached various disclosure obligations. The plaintiff also sought a declaration that the continuing directors provision was unenforceable, as well as a mandatory injunction requiring the Amylin Board to approve the insurgent nominees.

Although Amylin believed that its Board had the ability to approve the dissident slate for purposes of the indenture, Amylin sought confirmation from the trustee. The trustee disagreed. The plaintiff subsequently added the trustee as a necessary defendant and sought a declaration that Amylin's Board has the sole right and power to approve the stockholder nominees for purposes of the continuing directors provision. Amylin filed a cross-claim against the trustee seeking a similar declaration.

Prior to trial, the parties reached a partial settlement pursuant to which the plaintiff dropped its loyalty and disclosure claims and agreed not to seek monetary damages from the Amylin directors. The plaintiff also agreed to dismiss its claim against the directors for failing to act to approve the stockholder nominees and drop its demand for injunctive relief. In exchange, the Amylin Board publicly stated that it would "approve" the dissident stockholder nominees for purposes of the continuing directors provision, contingent upon its receipt of a final adjudication that it possessed the contractual right to "approve" the nominees, but simultaneously recommend and endorse its own slate. As a result, the trial focused on whether the Board had the power and the right to approve the dissident stockholder nominees and whether the Board had breached its duty of care in approving the Indenture.

The indenture trustee argued that the Amylin Board would have to recommend a vote for the insurgent slate to "approve" the nominees for purposes of the indenture. Amylin maintained that it could "approve" nominees solely for purposes of the change-of-control provision but continue to recommend against their election. The Court held that Amylin's reading of the indenture was correct, noting that the trustee's reading "would prohibit any change in the majority of the board as a result of any number of contested elections, for the entire life of the notes." Such a provision would not be invalid *per se*, but if a Board approved such a provision, that Board would have to show that "in accepting such a provision, it was obtaining in return extraordinarily valuable economic benefits for the corporation that would not otherwise be available to it."

Having determined that the Amylin Board had the authority to approve the stockholder-nominated slate and still recommend and endorse its own slate, the Court turned to whether Amylin's Board properly exercised its right to do so in this case. The Court noted that the Board's action would be consistent with the implied duty of good faith and fair dealing, which inheres in all contracts, including the indenture, so long as the "board determines in good faith that the election of one or more of the nominees would not be materially adverse to the interests of the corporation or its stockholders." The Court ultimately declined to determine whether, in exercising its authority, Amylin's Board had complied with the implied duty of good faith and fair dealing because (i) the Court had been presented with no evidence regarding the Board's deliberation with respect to the decision to approve the stockholder-nominated slate and (ii) after the record had closed, the insurgents reduced their slates to three and two nominees, respectively, so that a majority of the Board would remain continuing directors even if all of the insurgent nominees were elected.

The Court also rejected plaintiff's claim that in approving the indenture, Amylin's directors violated their duty of care because the Board had not expressly known during its approval process that the indenture contained a continuing directors provision. The Court nevertheless rejected the due care claim, stressing that the committee "retained highly-qualified counsel, … sought advice from Amylin's management and investment bankers," and "asked its counsel if there was anything 'unusual or not customary'" before approving the indenture. The Court nevertheless cautioned:

> Outside counsel advising a board in such circumstances should be especially mindful of the board's continuing duties to the stockholders to protect their interests. Specifically, terms which may affect the stockholders' range of discretion in exercising the franchise should, even if considered customary, be highlighted to the board. In this way, the board will be able to exercise its fully informed business judgment.

The plaintiff's attorneys were awarded fees and expenses of $2.9 million for their role in disabling the "continuing director" provisions in the indenture that allegedly hindered shareholder voting for directors.[880]

E. Business Combination Statutes.

Both Delaware and Texas provide protections to shareholders of public companies against interested shareholder transactions that occur after a shareholder has acquired a 15% to 20% ownership interest. The Delaware limitations are found in § 203 of the DGCL and the Texas limitations are found in Part Thirteen of the TBCA and Chapter 21, Subchapter M of the TBOC (the "*Texas Business Combination Statutes*").

1. DGCL § 203.

DGCL § 203 imposes restrictions on transactions between public corporations and certain stockholders defined as "*interested stockholders*" unless specific conditions have been met. In

[880] *San Antonio Fire & Police Pension Fund v. Bradbury*, C.A. No. 4446-VCN (Del. Ch.. Oct.28, 2010).

general, § 203 provides that a publicly held Delaware corporation may not engage in a business combination with any interested stockholder for a period of three years following the date the stockholder first became an interested stockholder unless (i) prior to that date the board of directors of the corporation approved the business combination or the transaction that resulted in the stockholder becoming an interested stockholder, (ii) the interested stockholder became an interested stockholder as a result of acquiring at least 85% of the voting stock of the corporation, excluding shares held by directors and officers and employee benefit plans in which participants do not have the right to determine confidentially whether their shares will be tendered in a tender or exchange offer, or (iii) the transaction is approved by the board of directors and by the affirmative vote of at least two-thirds of the outstanding shares excluding the shares held by the interested stockholder. In the context of a corporation with more than one class of voting stock where one class has more votes per share than another class, "85% of the voting stock" refers to the percentage of the votes of such voting stock and not to the percentage of the number of shares.[881]

An interested stockholder is generally defined under DGCL § 203(c)(5) as any person that directly or indirectly owns or controls or has beneficial ownership or control of at least 15% of the outstanding shares of the corporation.[882] A business combination is defined under DGCL § 203(c)(3) to include (i) mergers, (ii) consolidations, (iii) direct or indirect sales, leases, exchanges, mortgages, transfers and other dispositions of assets to the interested stockholder having an aggregate market value greater than 10% of the total aggregate market value of the assets of the corporation, (iv) various issuances of stock and securities to the interested stockholder that are not issued to other stockholders on a similar basis and (v) various other transactions in which the interested stockholder receives a benefit, directly or indirectly, from the corporation that is not proportionally received by other stockholders.

The provisions of DGCL § 203 apply only to public corporations (i.e., corporations the stock of which is listed on a national securities exchange, authorized for quotation on interdealer quotation system of a registered national securities association or held of record by more than 2,000 stockholders).[883] The provisions of DGCL § 203 also will not apply to certain

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881 *See* DGCL § 203(c)(8).

882 DGCL § 203(c)(9) defines "owner" broadly as follows:

> (9) "Owner," including the terms "own" and "owned," when used with respect to any stock, means a person that individually or with or through any of its affiliates or associates:
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> (i) Beneficially owns such stock, directly or indirectly; or
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> (ii) Has (A) the right to acquire such stock (whether such right is exercisable immediately or only after the passage of time) pursuant to any agreement, arrangement or understanding, or upon the exercise of conversion rights, exchange rights, warrants or options, or otherwise; provided, however, that a person shall not be deemed the owner of stock tendered pursuant to a tender or exchange offer made by such person or any of such person's affiliates or associates until such tendered stock is accepted for purchase or exchange; or (B) the right to vote such stock pursuant to any agreement, arrangement or understanding; provided, however, that a person shall not be deemed the owner of any stock because of such person's right to vote such stock if the agreement, arrangement or understanding to vote such stock arises solely from a revocable proxy or consent given in response to a proxy or consent solicitation made to 10 or more persons; or
>
> (iii) Has any agreement, arrangement or understanding for the purpose of acquiring, holding, voting (except voting pursuant to a revocable proxy or consent as described in item (B) of subparagraph (ii) of this paragraph), or disposing of such stock with any other person that beneficially owns, or whose affiliates or associates beneficially own, directly or indirectly, such stock.

883 DGCL § 203(b).

stockholders who held their shares prior to the adoption of DGCL § 203. In addition, DGCL § 203 will not apply if the certificate of incorporation of the corporation or the bylaws approved by stockholders provides that the statute will not apply; provided that if the corporation is subject to DGCL § 203 at the time of adoption of an amendment eliminating the application of DGCL § 203, the amendment will not become effective for 12 months after adoption and the section will continue to apply to any person who was an interested stockholder prior to the adoption of the amendment.[884]

A vote to so waive the protection of DGCL § 203 is sometimes referred to as a "*§ 203 waiver*" and requires that the directors act consistently with their fiduciary duties of care and loyalty.[885] Significantly, in transactions involving a controlling stockholder, the board's decision to grant a DGCL § 203 waiver to a buyer may present conflict issues for a board dominated by representatives of the controlling stockholders.[886]

2. Texas Business Combination Statutes.

The Texas Business Combination Statutes, like DGCL § 203, impose a special voting requirement for the approval of certain business combinations and related party transactions between public corporations and affiliated shareholders unless the transaction or the acquisition of shares by the affiliated shareholder is approved by the board of directors prior to the affiliated shareholder becoming an affiliated shareholder.[887]

In general, the Texas Business Combination Statutes prohibit certain mergers, sales of assets, reclassifications and other transactions (defined as business combinations) between shareholders beneficially owning 20% or more of the outstanding stock of a Texas public corporation (such shareholders being defined as affiliated shareholders) for a period of three years following the shareholder acquiring shares representing 20% or more of the corporation's voting power unless two-thirds of the unaffiliated shareholders approve the transaction at a meeting held no earlier than six months after the shareholder acquires that ownership. The provisions requiring the special vote of shareholders will not apply to any transaction with an affiliated shareholder if the transaction or the purchase of shares by the affiliated shareholder is approved by the board of directors before the affiliated shareholder acquires beneficial ownership of 20% of the shares or if the affiliated shareholder was an affiliated shareholder prior to December 31, 1996, and continued as such through the date of the transaction.[888] The Texas Business Combination Statutes do not contain the Delaware 85% unaffiliated share tender offer exception, which was considered by the drafters to be a major loophole in the Delaware statute, and attempts to attempts to clarify various uncertainties and ambiguities contained in the Delaware statute.

The Texas Business Combination Statutes apply only to an "*issuing public corporation*," which is defined to be a corporation organized under the laws of Texas that has: (i) 100 or more

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884 *Id.*

885 *See In re Digex, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 789 A.2d 1176 (Del. Ch. 2000).

886 *Id.*

887 *See* TBOC § 21.606; TBCA arts. 13.01-13.08.

888 TBOC §§ 21.606, 21.607(3); TBCA arts. 13.03, 13.04.

shareholders, (ii) any class or series of its voting shares registered under the 1934 Act or (iii) any class or series of its voting shares qualified for trading in a national market system.[889] For the purposes of this definition, a shareholder is a shareholder of record as shown by the share transfer records of the corporation.[890] The Texas Business Combination Statutes also contains an opt-out provision that allows a corporation to elect out of the statute by adopting a by-law or charter amendment prior to December 31, 1997.[891]

VIII. Going Private Transactions

A. In re Pure Resources, Incorporated, Shareholders Litigation

In re Pure Resources, Incorporated, Shareholders Litigation[892] was another Delaware Chancery Court opinion involving an 800-pound gorilla with an urgent hunger for the rest of the bananas (i.e., a majority shareholder who desires to acquire the rest of the shares). In this case, the Court of Chancery enjoined Unocal Corp.'s proposed $409 million unsolicited tender offer for the 35% of Midland, Texas-based Pure Resources Inc. that it did not own (the "*Offer*"). The opinion, *inter alia*, (i) explains the kinds of authority that a Board may (should) delegate to a Special Committee in dealing with a buy-out proposal of a controlling shareholder (the full authority of the Board vs. the power to negotiate the price), and (ii) discusses how the standard of review may differ depending on whether the controlling shareholder proposes to acquire the minority via merger or tender offer (entire fairness vs. business judgment).

A Special Committee of Pure's Board voted not to recommend the Offer. The Special Committee requested, but was not "delegated the full authority of the board under Delaware law to respond to the Offer."[893] With such authority, the Special Committee could have searched for alternative transactions, speeded up consummation of a proposed royalty trust, evaluated the feasibility of a self-tender, and put in place a shareholder Rights Plan (*a.k.a.*, poison pill) to block the Offer. The Special Committee never pressed the issue of its authority to a board vote, the Pure directors never seriously debated the issue at the board table itself, and the Court noted that the "record does not illuminate exactly why the Special Committee did not make this their Alamo."[894] The Special Committee may have believed some of the broader options technically open to them under their preferred resolution (e.g., finding another buyer) were not practicable, but "[a]s to their failure to insist on the power to deploy a poison pill - the by-now *de rigeur* tool of a board responding to a third-party tender offer - the record is obscure."[895]

The Court commented that its "ability to have confidence in these justifications [for not pressing for more authority] has been compromised by the Special Committee's odd decision to invoke the attorney-client privilege as to its discussion of these issues" and in a footnote stated "in general it seems unwise for a special committee to hide behind the privilege, except when the

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889 TBOC § 21.601(1); TBCA art. 13.02(A)(6).

890 *Id.*

891 TBOC § 21.607(1)(B); TBCA art. 1304(A)(1)(b).

892 808 A.2d 421 (Del. Ch. 2002).

893 *Id.* at 430.

894 *Id.* at 431.

895 *Id.*

disclosure of attorney-client discussions would reveal litigation-specific advice or compromise the special committee's bargaining power."[896]

Much of the Court's opinion focuses on whether a tender offer by a controlling shareholder is "governed by the *entire fairness* standard of review," which puts the burden on the controlling shareholder to prove both "*substantive fairness*" (fair price and structure) and "*procedural fairness*" (fair process in approving the transaction).[897] Plaintiffs argued that "entire fairness" should be the applicable standard because "the *structural power* of Unocal over Pure and its board, as well as Unocal's involvement in determining the scope of the Special Committee's authority, make the Offer other than a *voluntary, non-coercive transaction*" and that "the Offer poses the same threat of . . . '*inherent coercion*' that motivated the Delaware Supreme Court in *Kahn v. Lynch*."[898]

In response, Unocal asserted that "[b]ecause Unocal has proceeded by way of an exchange offer and not a negotiated merger, the rule of Lynch is inapplicable," and under the *Solomon v. Pathe Communications Corp*.[899] line of cases Unocal "is free to make a tender offer at whatever price it chooses so long as it does not: i) '*structurally coerce*' the Pure minority by suggesting explicitly or implicitly that injurious events will occur to those stockholders who fail to tender; or ii) mislead the Pure minority into tendering by concealing or misstating the material facts."[900] Further, "[b]ecause Unocal has conditioned its Offer on a *majority of the minority* provision and intends to consummate a short-form merger at the same price, the Offer poses no threat of structural coercion and that the Pure minority can make a voluntary decision."[901] Thus, "[b]ecause the Pure minority has a negative recommendation from the Pure Special Committee and because there has been full disclosure (including of any material information Unocal received from Pure in formulating its bid), Unocal submits that the Pure minority will be able to make an informed decision whether to tender."[902]

The Court wrote that "[t]his case therefore involves an aspect of Delaware law fraught with doctrinal tension: what equitable standard of fiduciary conduct applies when a controlling shareholder seeks to acquire the rest of the company's shares? * * * The key inquiry is not what statutory procedures must be adhered to when a controlling stockholder attempts to acquire the rest of the company's shares, [for] [c]ontrolling stockholders counseled by experienced lawyers rarely trip over the legal hurdles imposed by legislation."[903]

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896 *Id.* at 431 n.8.

897 *Id.* at 433.

898 *Id.*

899 672 A.2d 35 (Del. 1996).

900 *Pure*, 808 A.2d at 433.

901 *Id.*

902 *Id.*

903 *Id.* The Court further commented that "the doctrine of *independent legal significance"* was not of relevance as that "doctrine stands only for the proposition that the mere fact that a transaction cannot be accomplished under one statutory provision does not invalidate it if a different statutory method of consummation exists. Nothing about that doctrine alters the fundamental rule that inequitable actions in technical conformity with statutory law can be restrained by equity." *Id.* at 434.

In analyzing cases involving negotiated mergers, Vice Chancellor Strine focused on *Kahn v. Lynch Communications Systems, Inc.*,[904] in which "the Delaware Supreme Court addressed the standard of review that applies when a controlling stockholder attempts to acquire the rest of the corporation's shares in a negotiated merger [and] held that the stringent *entire fairness* form of review governed regardless of whether: i) the target board was comprised of a majority of independent directors; ii) a special committee of the target's independent directors was empowered to negotiate and veto the merger; and iii) the merger was made subject to approval by a majority of the disinterested target stockholders."[905] This is the case because "even a gauntlet of protective barriers like those would be insufficient protection because of the 'inherent coercion' that exists when a controlling stockholder announced its desire to buy the minority's shares. In colloquial terms, the Delaware Supreme Court saw the controlling stockholder as the *800-pound gorilla whose urgent hunger for the rest of the bananas is likely to frighten less powerful primates* like putatively independent directors who might well have been hand-picked by the gorilla (and who at the very least owed their seats on the board to his support) [and] expressed concern that minority stockholders would fear retribution from the gorilla if they defeated the merger . . ." and could not make a genuinely free choice.[906] In two recent cases [*Aquila* and *Siliconix*],[907] the Chancery Court "followed *Solomon's* articulation of the standards applicable to a tender offer, and held that the 'Delaware law does not impose a duty of entire fairness on controlling stockholders making a non-coercive tender or exchange offer to acquire shares directly from the minority holders.'"[908]

The differences between the approach of the *Solomon v. Pathe* line of cases and that of *Lynch* were, to the Court, stark: "To begin with, the controlling stockholder is said to have no duty to pay a fair price, irrespective of its power over the subsidiary. Even more striking is the different manner in which the coercion concept is deployed. In the tender offer context addressed by *Solomon* and its progeny, coercion is defined in the more traditional sense as a wrongful threat that has the effect of forcing stockholders to tender at the wrong price to avoid an even worse fate later on, a type of coercion" which Vice Chancellor Strine called "*structural coercion*."[909] The "*inherent* coercion" that *Lynch* found to exist when controlling stockholders seek to acquire the minority's stake is not even a cognizable concern for the common law of corporations if the tender offer method is employed.[910]

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904 638 A.2d 1110 (Del. 1994).

905 *Pure*, 808 A.2d at 435.

906 *Id.* at 436.

907 *In re Aquila, Inc.*, 805 A.2d 184 (Del. Ch. 2002); *In re Siliconix, Inc., S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 18700, 2001 WL 716787 (Del. Ch. June 21, 2001).

908 *Pure*, 808 A.2d at 438.

909 *Id.*

910 The appropriate standard of review for a unilateral two-step freeze-out by a controlling shareholder was addressed in *In Re CNX Gas Corp. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 5377-VCL (Del. Ch. July 5, 2010), in which controlling shareholders of CNX Gas Corporation sought to certify for interlocutory appeal a decision of the Chancery Court that a unilateral two-step freeze-out merger by a controlling shareholder would be reviewed for entire fairness. The Chancery Court found that interlocutory appeal review was warranted because attempts to apply Supreme Court precedent produced different conclusions regarding the appropriate standard for review, confusion regarding the inherent coercion in a two-step freeze-out merger, and conflict as to the degree to which a target Board has a role in responding to a controller's tender offer. On July 8, 2010, the interlocutory appeal was denied by the Supreme Court of Delaware.

The Court agonized "that nothing about the tender offer method of corporate acquisition makes the 800-pound gorilla's retributive capabilities less daunting to minority stockholders . . . . many commentators would argue that the tender offer form is more coercive than a merger vote [for in] a merger vote, stockholders can vote no and still receive the transactional consideration if the merger prevails. In a tender offer, however, a non-tendering shareholder individually faces an uncertain fate. That stockholder could be one of the few who holds out, leaving herself in an even more thinly traded stock with little hope of liquidity and subject to a DGCL § 253 merger at a lower price or at the same price but at a later (and, given the time value of money, a less valuable) time. The 14D-9 warned Pure's minority stockholders of just this possibility. For these reasons, some view tender offers as creating a prisoner's dilemma – distorting choice and creating incentives for stockholders to tender into offers that they believe are inadequate in order to avoid a worse fate."[911]

The Court wrote that to avoid "the *prisoner's dilemma* problem, our law should consider an acquisition tender offer by a controlling stockholder non-coercive only when: 1) it is subject to a non-waivable majority of the minority tender condition; 2) the controlling stockholder promises to consummate a prompt § 253 merger at the same price if it obtains more than 90% of the shares; and 3) the controlling stockholder has made no retributive threats."[912]

"The informational and timing advantages possessed by controlling stockholders also require some countervailing protection if the minority is to truly be afforded the opportunity to make an informed, voluntary tender decision. In this regard, the majority stockholder owes a duty to permit the independent directors on the target board both free rein and adequate time to react to the tender offer, by (at the very least) hiring their own advisors, providing the minority with a recommendation as to the advisability of the offer, and disclosing adequate information for the minority to make an informed judgment. For their part, the independent directors have a duty to undertake these tasks in good faith and diligently, and to pursue the best interests of the minority."[913]

"When a tender offer is non-coercive in the sense . . . identified and the independent directors of the target are permitted to make an informed recommendation and provide fair disclosure, the law should be chary about super-imposing the full fiduciary requirement of entire fairness on top of the statutory tender offer process."[914] In response to plaintiffs' argument that the Pure board breached its fiduciary duties by not giving the Special Committee the power to block the Offer by, among other means, deploying a poison pill, the Court wrote, "[w]hen a controlling stockholder makes a tender offer that is not coercive in the sense I have articulated, therefore, the better rule is that there is no duty on its part to permit the target board to block the bid through use of the pill. Nor is there any duty on the part of the independent directors to seek blocking power."[915]

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911 *Id.* at 441-42.

912 *Id.* at 445.

913 *Id.*

914 *Id.* at 445-46.

915 *Id.* at 446.

The application of these principles to Unocal's Offer yields the following result: "The Offer . . . is coercive because it includes within the definition of the 'minority' those stockholders who are affiliated with Unocal as directors and officers [and] includes the management of Pure, whose incentives are skewed by their employment, their severance agreements, and their Put Agreements."[916] The Court categorized this as "a problem that can be cured if Unocal amends the Offer to condition it on approval of a majority of Pure's unaffiliated stockholders."[917]

The Court accepted the plaintiffs' argument that the Pure stockholders are entitled to disclosure of all material facts pertinent to the decision they are being asked to make, and that the 14D-9 is deficient because it does not disclose any substantive portions of the work of the investment banker on behalf of the Special Committee, even though the bankers' negative views of the Offer are cited as a basis for the board's own recommendation not to tender. The Court, however, concluded that Unocal did not have to disclose its "*reserve price*" in case its offer was not initially successful.

B. In re Emerging Communications, Inc. Shareholders Litigation

In *In re Emerging Communications, Inc. Shareholders Litigation*,[918] the Delaware Court of Chancery entered a judgment after trial imposing personal liability on outside directors for voting to approve a going-private transaction at an unfair price, where the directors had no personal financial interest in the transaction itself. The transaction had been approved by a special committee of directors advised by independent legal counsel and an independent financial advisor that opined to the fairness of the merger's terms to the public minority, and had been conditioned on a majority-of-the-minority tendering into the first-step tender offer. The process, however was tainted: (i) the controlling stockholder had failed to provide an updated set of projections that forecast substantially higher growth for the controlled subsidiary than the projections on which the special committee and its advisers relied; (ii) the special committee chair communicated with his fellow special committee members by faxing confidential materials (including the financial analysis of the special committee's financial advisor) to the secretary of the controlling stockholder with a request that they be faxed on to the special committee members; (iii) the actual fair value of the shares was found to be over three times the transaction price ($38.05 vs. $10.25); (iv) investment banking firms that had previously been engaged by the directors were "co-opted" by the controlling stockholder to serve as his advisors; (v) the controlling stockholder had "misled" the special committee chair by "falsely representing" that the price of the deal strained the limits of his available financing; and (vi) a majority of the special committee lacked true independence based on lucrative consultancy and directorship fees paid by the controlling stockholder or their expectation of continuing to serve as directors of his controlled entities.

The *Emerging Communications* opinion focused on the culpability and abilities of each director, rather than focusing on the collective decision making process of the board, and found

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916 *Id.*

917 *Id.*

918 C.A. No. 16415, 2004 WL 1305745 (Del. Ch. May 3, 2004) (involving V.C. Jacobs, now on the Delaware Supreme Court, sitting by designation on old case from his Chancery Court days).

some (but not all) of the directors liable. One of the directors held individually liable was a professional investment advisor, with significant experience in the business sector involved who had previously been a financial analyst for a major investment banking firm and a fund focused in the same industry. The Chancery Court reasoned that this director's "specialized financial expertise" put him in a position where he "knew, or at the very least had strong reasons to believe" that the price was unfair, and he was "in a unique position to know that." The Chancery Court reasoned that, while the other directors could argue that they relied on the fairness opinion of the independent financial advisor to the special committee, the director whose expertise in the industry was "equivalent, if not superior" to that of the committee's financial advisor could not credibly do so. Notwithstanding his lack of financial interest in the transaction, this director's vote to approve the transaction was "explainable in terms of only one of two possible mindsets" – either as a deliberate effort to further his personal interests (he was a consultant to a firm controlled by the controlling stockholder, receiving an annual $200,000 retainer for providing banking/financial advisory services, and could receive a potential $2 million fee for other financial advisory work) or the director had "for whatever reason, consciously and intentionally disregarded his responsibility to safeguard the minority stockholders from the risk, of which he had unique knowledge, that the transaction was unfair."[919] Either motivation, the Court held, would render the director personally liable, notwithstanding the DGCL § 102(b)(7) exculpation provision in the certificate of incorporation, for conduct that "amounted to a violation of the duty of loyalty and/or good faith."[920] The Chancery Court's finding a category of non-management director with specialized knowledge liable, while exonerating others without such expertise who approved the same transaction and engaged in essentially the same conduct, seems inconsistent with the thought-to-be Delaware concept that all directors are equally responsible to stockholders and all have the same fiduciary duties, but may be explainable because the facts suggest loyalty and independence concerns.

A second non-management director was held personally liable for a breach of the duty of loyalty because he was found "clearly conflicted" as an attorney whose law firm received virtually all of its fees from the controlling stockholder and he was found to have "actively assisted" the controlling stockholder in carrying out the privatization transaction. Other non-management directors who voted to approve the same transaction were not held individually liable.

C. In re PNB Holding Co. Shareholders Litigation

In re PNB Holding Co. Shareholders Litigation[921] involved the use of vote of a majority of disinterested stockholders condition (a "*majority-of-the-minority*") outside of the context in which a controlling stockholder is on both sides of a merger transaction.[922]

PNB was a bank holding company whose board decided to convert it to an S corporation under the Internal Revenue Code, but had too many stockholders to qualify as an S corporation

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919 *Emerging Commc'ns*, 2004 WL 1305745, at *40.

920 *Id.*

921 C.A. No. 28-N, 2006 WL 2403999 (Del. Ch. Aug. 18, 2006).

922 *See* Michael K. Reilly & Roxanne L. Houtman, *PNB Holding: "Majority of Minority Clarified,"* Vol. XI Deal Points, Issue 3 (Fall 2006) at 2.

under the Code. Thus, it proposed a merger transaction to cash out a sufficient number of stockholders to permit PNB to qualify as an S corporation. Any stockholder who owned at least 2,000 shares of stock and was one of the largest 68 stockholders would remain a stockholder, while all other stockholders would be cashed out. The directors controlled a sufficient number of shares such that they would remain stockholders of PNB following the merger.

Several stockholders dissented from the merger and perfected their appraisal rights, while several other stockholders accepted the merger consideration, but commenced an action in the Delaware Court of Chancery alleging that PNB's directors breached their fiduciary duties by approving a merger that was unfair to the minority stockholders.

Vice Chancellor Leo Strine, Jr. first considered the plaintiffs' contentions that the merger was subject to the entire fairness standard of review. The plaintiffs argued that PNB's board should be "considered as a monolith and that given the board's voting power and board control, the merger should be analyzed as if it were a squeeze-out merger proposed by a controlling stockholder." In *Kahn v. Lynch Communications Systems, Inc.*,[923] the Delaware Supreme Court held that the entire fairness standard of review applied *ab initio* in certain special circumstances, *e.g.*, a negotiated going private transaction with a controlling stockholder or a merger of two companies under the common control of one controlling stockholder. In those circumstances in which a controlling stockholder is on both sides of a negotiated transaction, the Delaware Supreme Court has found that the approval of the transaction by disinterested directors (*e.g.*, by a special committee) or by a majority of disinterested stockholders would only shift the burden of proving entire fairness, but would not render the business judgment rule applicable.

In considering the plaintiffs' argument that the merger should be subject to the rule of *Kahn v. Lynch*, the Chancery Court found that the officers and directors were not a "controlling stockholder group." The Court noted that, under Delaware law, a controlling stockholder exists either where the stockholder (i) owns more than 50% of the voting power of the corporation, or (ii) exercises control over the business and affairs of the corporation. Taken as a whole, the officers and directors owned only 33.5% of the voting power of the corporation. Furthermore, the evidence failed to show that the officers, directors, and their respective families operated as a unified controlling bloc. Rather, the Court observed that there were no voting agreements in place between any of the members of the purportedly controlling block (consisting of directors, officers, spouses, children and parents), and that each individual "had the right to, and every incentive to, act in his or her own self-interest as a stockholder."[924] Importantly, of the approximately 20 people that comprised the "supposed controlling stockholder group," the largest block held by any one holder was 10.6%. Thus, the Court reasoned as follows:

> Glomming share-owning directors together into one undifferentiated mass with a single hypothetical brain would result in an unprincipled Frankensteinian version of the already debatable 800-pound gorilla theory of the controlling stockholder that animates the *Lynch* line of reasoning.[925]

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923 638 A.2d 1110 (Del. 1994).

924 *In re PNB Holding Co.*, 2006 WL 2403999 at *10.

925 *Id.*

The Court, therefore, held that the *PNB* facts did not fit within the *Kahn v. Lynch* line of jurisprudence.

Although concluding that the defendant directors were not controlling stockholders, the Court nevertheless found that the defendant directors were subject to a conflict of interest that was sufficient to invoke the application of the entire fairness standard of review. Each of the defendant directors personally benefited to the extent that departing stockholders were underpaid. Furthermore, each of the defendant directors had a material interest in the merger, which had the effect of yielding an economic benefit that was not shared equally by all of the stockholders of the corporation. In addition, and unlike in the context of determining whether a controlling stockholder group existed, the Court found that the family ties between the directors and the non-director stockholders were relevant. Importantly, several of the directors apparently transferred shares of PNB's stock to family members in order to ensure that they remained stockholders of PNB after the merger. The Court found that fact to be "indicative of the importance they ascribed to continued ownership in" PNB.

Having found that the merger was subject to the entire fairness standard of review, the Vice Chancellor addressed the potential "cleansing" effect of approval by (i) independent and disinterested directors (e.g., a fully-functioning special committee), or (ii) a fully-informed, non-coerced vote of a "majority-of-the-minority." With respect to the former, Vice Chancellor Strine stated as follows:

> In my view, the rule of *Lynch* would not preclude business judgment rule protection for a merger of this kind so long as the transaction was approved by a board majority consisting of directors who would be cashed-out or a special committee of such directors negotiated and approved the transaction.[926]

Although the defendant directors created a committee to investigate the feasibility of the conversion of PNB to an S corporation, the committee was not comprised of disinterested directors. As a result, the Committee did not operate to invoke the substantive protections of the business judgment rule.

The Court also noted that the substantive protections of the business judgment rule could be invoked if the merger was approved by a "majority-of-the-minority." The Court found, however, that PNB failed, as a mathematical matter, to obtain the approval of a vote of a "majority-of-the-minority." In that regard, the Court rejected the defendant directors' contention that only those stockholders who returned a proxy should be included in calculating whether a transaction had been approved by an informed, non-coerced "majority-of-the-minority." Clarifying a previously unresolved aspect of Delaware law, the Court held that Delaware law requires a vote of a majority of *all* of the minority shares entitled to vote.

The Court indicated that, outside of the *Kahn v. Lynch* context, the approval of a majority of the disinterested stockholders may be sufficient to invoke the protections of the business judgment rule, even if the challenged transaction is not subject to a non-waivable "majority-of-the-minority" condition. The Vice Chancellor explained as follows:

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926 *Id.* at *14 n.69.

> Under Delaware law, however, the mere fact that an interested transaction was not made expressly subject to a non-waivable majority-of-the-minority vote condition has not made the attainment of so-called 'ratification effect' impossible. Rather, outside the *Lynch* context, proof that an informed, non-coerced majority of the disinterested stockholders approved an interested transaction has the effect of invoking business judgment rule protection for the transaction and, as a practical matter, insulating the transaction from revocation and its proponents from liability.[927]

The Court ultimately concluded that the defendant directors failed to prove the entire fairness of the merger. The Court awarded the appraisal claimants the fair value of their shares. Other claimants who did not vote in favor of the merger were awarded damages in an amount representing the difference between the merger consideration and the fair value. Claimants who voted in favor of the merger were barred from recovery under the doctrine of acquiescence. Claimants who accepted the merger consideration but did not approve the merger were not similarly barred.

D. In re SS&C Technologies, Inc. Shareholders Litigation

In re SS&C Technologies, Inc. Shareholders Litigation[928] was a case in which Vice Chancellor Lamb disapproved the settlement of litigation challenging a management led cash-out merger for two independent reasons: (i) the parties had been dilatory in presenting the settlement to the Court for approval (they did not seek court approval of the settlement for eleven months after signing the settlement agreement and nine months after the merger was consummated) and (ii) the fairness of the process for the management led buy-out was not shown. The Court was concerned that the buyer's proposal was solicited by the CEO as part of informal "test the waters" process to find a buyer who would pay a meaningful premium while allowing the CEO to make significant investment in the acquisition vehicle and continue managing the target. After being satisfied with the buyer's proposal but before all details had been negotiated, the CEO advised the Board about the deal. The Board then formed special committee that hired independent legal and financial advisers and embarked on a program to solicit other buyers, but perhaps too late to affect outcome. The Court was concerned whether the CEO had misused confidential information and resources of the corporation in talking to his selected buyer and engaging an investment banker before Board approval and whether the CEO's precommitment to a deal with the buyer and his conflicts (i.e., receiving cash plus an interest in the acquisition vehicle and continuing management role) prevented the Board from considering whether a sale should take place and, if so, from negotiating the best terms reasonably available.[929]

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927 *Id.* at *14.

928 911 A.2d 816 (Del. Ch. 2006).

929 *See In re infoUSA, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 953 A.2d 963 (Del. Ch. 2007) (involving fiduciary duty challenges to a number of transactions with the 41% shareholder after that shareholder had narrowly won a proxy contest, including allegations that the directors had breached their fiduciary duties by forming a Special Committee to consider a going private transaction by the 41% stockholder and then terminating the process after the Special Committee had turned down his bid). The Court noted:

> Plaintiffs assert that the formation, and subsequent dissolution, of the Special Committee constitutes nothing more than a sham, an effort by dominated directors to allow Vinod Gupta [the 41% shareholder] to acquire infoUSA at a lowball price. Defendants respond that this argument is factually incoherent given that the

E. In re Netsmart Technologies, Inc. Shareholders Litigation

The Delaware Court of Chancery in *In re Netsmart Technologies, Inc. Shareholders Litigation*, a case which the Court found "literally involves a microcosm of a current dynamic in the mergers and acquisitions market," enjoined the sale by a $115 million cash merger of a micro-cap public corporation (market capitalization approximately $82 million) to a private equity firm until the target's Board supplemented its proxy statement for the merger to (i) explain why the Board focused solely on private equity buyers to the exclusion of strategic buyers and (ii) to disclose the projections on which its investment bankers had relied in rendering their opinion that the merger was fair to the target's stockholders from a financial point of view.[930]

The context of the opinion was summarized by the Court as follows:

> Netsmart is a leading supplier of enterprise software to behavioral health and human services organizations and has a particularly strong presence among mental health and substance abuse service providers. It has been consistently profitable for several years and has effectively consolidated its niche within the healthcare information technology market. In October 2005, Netsmart completed a multi-year course of acquisitions by purchasing its largest direct competitor, CMHC Systems, Inc. ("CMHC"). After that acquisition was announced, private equity buyers made overtures to Netsmart management. These overtures were favorably received and management soon recommended, in May 2006, that the

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> Special Committee rejected the offer and, thus, acted independently from Gupta. If the Court were to find that the Committee was a sham, defendants argue, then the act of the whole board in disbanding the "sham" committee should not be a violation of fiduciary duties.
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> Defendants misstate the thrust of Count I. As alleged in the amended consolidated complaint, a board consisting of dominated directors formed the Special Committee. Given the extensive nature of the related-party transactions recited in the complaint, I may infer that the directors knew, or at least suspected, that any buy-out offer would be subject to protest from independent shareholders. A rational buyer, even one wholly unfaithful to his fiduciary duties, would appoint the most independent members of the board to such a Special Committee in the hopes of the acquisition surviving subsequent litigation. This does not mean that the buyer would expect rejection, but merely that the committee would be constituted such that success in the committee would not obviously lead to failure in court.
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> Properly understood, plaintiffs' allegation is that the infoUSA board of directors, and particularly the members dominated by Vinod Gupta, counted on the Committee to behave like a kitten, and were surprised when it bared its teeth. [The Special Committee members], according to plaintiffs, took their mandate seriously and began to search for potential acquirers for the company. Faced with this insurrection, Gupta and the conflicted members of the board . . . voted to disband the Special Committee. Plaintiffs' contention is that defendant directors should reimburse the company for the cost of instituting a process that from the beginning was intended to allow Vinod Gupta to acquire the company at a discount, and that the dominated directors eliminated as soon as there might be some risk of it attracting a valuable alternative offer for shareholders. The sudden *volte face* between public statements of corporate representatives as to the advisability of a going-private transaction before and after Vinod Gupta's offer was rejected lends some plausibility to this allegation.
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> * * * If defendants actually engaged in this form of wasteful legerdemain in order to help Vinod Gupta acquire the company at an inequitable price, it constitutes a violation of their fiduciary duty of loyalty, even if it did not succeed. Equity may require that the directors of a Delaware corporation reimburse the company for sums spent pursuing such faithless ends—if the evidence at trial bears out such a claim.

Id. at 995-96.

930 924 A.2d 171 (Del. Ch. 2007); *see* Blake Rohrbacher & John Mark Zeberkiewicz, *Fair Summary: Delaware's Framework for Disclosing Fairness Opinions*, 63 BUS. LAW. 881 (May 2008).

Netsmart board consider a sale to a private equity firm. Relying on the failure of sporadic, isolated contacts with strategic buyers stretched out over the course of more than a half-decade to yield interest from a strategic buyer, management, with help from its long-standing financial advisor, William Blair & Co., L.L.C., steered the board away from any active search for a strategic buyer. Instead, they encouraged the board to focus on a rapid auction process involving a discrete set of possible private equity buyers. Only after this basic strategy was already adopted was a "Special Committee" of independent directors formed in July 2006 to protect the interests of the company's non-management stockholders. After the Committee's formation, it continued to collaborate closely with Netsmart's management, allowing the company's Chief Executive Officer to participate in its meetings and retaining William Blair as its own financial advisor.

After a process during which the Special Committee and William Blair sought to stimulate interest on the part of seven private equity buyers, and generated competitive bids from only four, the Special Committee ultimately recommended, and the entire Netsmart board approved, the Merger Agreement with Insight. As in most private equity deals, Netsmart's current executive team will continue to manage the company and will share in an option pool designed to encourage them to increase the value placed on the company in the Merger.

The Merger Agreement prohibits the Netsmart board from shopping the company but does permit the board to consider a superior proposal. A topping bidder would only have to suffer the consequence of paying Insight a 3% termination fee. No topping bidder has emerged to date and a stockholder vote is scheduled to be held next month, on April 5, 2007.

A group of shareholder plaintiffs now seeks a preliminary injunction against the consummation of this Merger. As a matter of substance, the plaintiffs argue that the Merger Agreement flowed from a poorly-motivated and tactically-flawed sale process during which the Netsmart board made no attempt to generate interest from strategic buyers. The motive for this narrow search, the plaintiffs say, is that Netsmart's management only wanted to do a deal involving their continuation as corporate officers and their retention of an equity stake in the company going forward, not one in which a strategic buyer would acquire Netsmart and possibly oust the incumbent management team. * * * At the end of a narrowly-channeled search, the Netsmart directors, the plaintiffs say, landed a deal that was unimpressive, ranking at the low end of William Blair's valuation estimates.

The plaintiffs couple their substantive claims with allegations of misleading and incomplete disclosures. In particular, the plaintiffs argue that the Proxy Statement (the "Proxy"), which the defendants have distributed to shareholders in advance of their vote next month, omits important information regarding Netsmart's prospects if it were to remain independent. In the context of a cash-out transaction, the plaintiffs argue that the stockholders are entitled to the

best estimates of the company's future stand-alone performance and that the Proxy omits them.

The defendant directors respond by arguing that they acted well within the bounds of the discretion afforded them by Delaware case law to decide on the means by which to pursue the highest value for the company's stockholders. They claim to have reasonably sifted through the available options and pursued a course that balanced the benefits of a discrete market canvass involving only a select group of private equity buyers (e.g., greater confidentiality and the ability to move quickly in a frothy market) against the risks (e.g., missing out on bids from other buyers). In order to stimulate price competition, the Special Committee encouraged submissions of interest from the solicited bidders with the promise that only bidders who made attractive bids would get to move on in the process. At each turning point during the negotiations with potential suitors, the Special Committee pursued the bidder or bidders willing to pay the highest price for the Netsmart equity. In the end, the directors argue, the board secured a deal with Insight that yielded a full $1.50 more per share than the next highest bidder was willing to pay.

Moreover, in order to facilitate an implicit, post-signing market check, the defendants say that they negotiated for relatively lax deal protections. Those measures included a break-up fee of only 3%, a "window shop" provision that allowed the board to entertain unsolicited bids by other firms, and a "fiduciary out" clause that allowed the board to ultimately recommend against pursuing the Insight Merger if a materially better offer surfaced. The directors argue that the failure of a more lucrative bid to emerge since the Merger's announcement over three months ago confirms that they obtained the best value available.[931]

In this context the Court delayed the stockholder vote on the merger until additional disclosures were made, but left the ultimate decision on the merger to the stockholders. The Court summarized its holding as follows:

In this opinion, I conclude that the plaintiffs have established a reasonable probability of success on two issues. First, the plaintiffs have established that the Netsmart board likely did not have a reasonable basis for failing to undertake *any* exploration of interest by strategic buyers. * * * Likewise, the board's rote assumption (encouraged by its advisors) that an implicit, post-signing market check would stimulate a hostile bid by a strategic buyer for Netsmart — a micro-cap company — in the same manner it has worked to attract topping bids in large-cap strategic deals appears, for reasons I detail, to have little basis in an actual consideration of the M&A market dynamics relevant to the situation Netsmart faced. Relatedly, the Proxy's description of the board's deliberations regarding whether to seek out strategic buyers that emerges from this record is itself flawed.

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[931] *Id.* at 175-76.

Second, the plaintiffs have also established a probability that the Proxy is materially incomplete because it fails to disclose the projections William Blair used to perform the discounted cash flow valuation supporting its fairness opinion. This omission is important because Netsmart's stockholders are being asked to accept a one-time payment of cash and forsake any future interest in the firm. If the Merger is approved, dissenters will also face the related option of seeking appraisal. A reasonable stockholder deciding how to make these important choices would find it material to know what the best estimate was of the company's expected future cash flows.

The plaintiffs' merits showing, however, does not justify the entry of broad injunctive relief. Because there is no other higher bid pending, the entry of an injunction against the Insight Merger until the Netsmart board shops the company more fully would hazard Insight walking away or lowering its price. The modest termination fee in the Merger Agreement is not triggered simply on a naked no vote, and, in any event, has not been shown to be in any way coercive or preclusive. Thus, Netsmart's stockholders can decide for themselves whether to accept or reject the Insight Merger, and, as to dissenters, whether to take the next step of seeking appraisal. In so deciding, however, they should have more complete and accurate information about the board's decision to rule out exploring the market for strategic buyers and about the company's future expected cash flows. Thus, I will enjoin the procession of the Merger vote until Netsmart discloses information on those subjects.[932]

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[932] *Id.* at 177. In *In re CheckFree Corp.*, the Delaware Court of Chancery denied a request for preliminary injunction to block a merger because it failed to satisfy disclosure requirements in three ways: (1) the proxy statement did not disclose management's projections for the company, and the investment banker's fairness opinion relied on those projections; (2) the proxy statement gave insufficient detail on the background of the merger; and (3) the proxy statement did not disclose the nature or effect of the merger on a derivative action pending in Georgia. C.A. No. 3193-CC, 2007 WL 3262188 (Del. Ch. Nov. 1, 2007).

In denying the claim that the proxy statement did not disclose management's financial projections, the Court distinguished *Netsmart* because in *Netsmart* the proxy statement disclosed an early version of management's financial projections, which later required management to give "materially complete information," whereas in *CheckFree* the Board never disclosed the projections; thus no further disclosure was necessary. Furthermore, the Court explained that if shareholders receive a fair summary of the substantive work performed by the investment bankers then it does not matter whether the proxy statement disclosed all the information used by the investment bankers to render its fairness opinion. The Court used the standard set forth in *In re Pure Resources Shareholders Litigation* to determine whether the shareholders received a "fair summary of the substantive work performed by the investment bankers." 808 A.2d 421 (Del. Ch. 2002); *see supra* notes 892-917 and related text. The proxy statement disclosed the sources the investment bankers relied on, explained the assumptions, noted comparable transactions, and described management's estimated earning and EBITDA. The proxy statement further conveyed that management and the investment bankers discussed foreseen risks that might affect its estimates. The Court found that CheckFree's proxy statement adequately disclosed material information as required by *In re Pure Resources* by giving a "fair summary" of the work performed by the its investment bankers. The Court found that granting an injunction weighs against public interest because enjoining the "$4.4 billion merger would impose significant costs" on CheckFree's shareholders.

The Court also denied the claim that the proxy statement disclosed insufficient background information because it "span[ned] less than two full pages." The Court noted that it "does not evaluate the adequacy of disclosure by counting words."

Finally, Chancellor Chandler noted that "directors need not tell shareholders that a merger will extinguish pending derivative claims," concluding that "there is no obligation to supply investors with legal advice."

See also Globis Partners, L.P. v. Plumtree Software, Inc., wherein the Court dismissed at the pleading stage claims that a merger proxy omitted material facts with respect to the rendering of a fairness opinion by the target's investment

This holding reflected the intense scrutiny that Delaware courts give to directors' conduct under the *Revlon* standard[933] when a Board has decided to sell the company for cash and has a fiduciary duty to secure the highest price for the company reasonably achievable. This *Revlon* scrutiny was explained by the Court as follows:

> Having decided to sell the company for cash, the Netsmart board assumed the fiduciary duty to undertake reasonable efforts to secure the highest price realistically achievable given the market for the company. This duty — often called a *Revlon* duty for the case with which it is most commonly associated — does not, of course, require every board to follow a judicially prescribed checklist of sales activities. Rather, the duty requires the board to act reasonably, by undertaking a logically sound process to get the best deal that is realistically attainable. The mere fact that a board did not, for example, do a canvass of all possible acquirers before signing up an acquisition agreement does not mean that it necessarily acted unreasonably. Our case law recognizes that [there] are a variety of sales approaches that might be reasonable, given the circumstances facing particular corporations.
>
> What is important and different about the *Revlon* standard is the intensity of judicial review that is applied to the directors' conduct. Unlike the bare rationality standard applicable to garden-variety decisions subject to the business judgment rule, the *Revlon* standard contemplates a judicial examination of the reasonableness of the board's decision-making process. Although linguistically not obvious, this reasonableness review is more searching than rationality review, and there is less tolerance for slack by the directors. Although the directors have a choice of means, they do not comply with their *Revlon* duties unless they undertake reasonable steps to get the best deal.[934]

In so holding, the Court found that the Board and its Special Committee did not act reasonably in failing to contact strategic buyers. The Court rejected defendants' attempt to justify this refusal based on unauthorized sporadic contacts with strategic buyers over the half-decade

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bankers, emphasizing its that for an omission to be material, "there must be a substantial likelihood that the disclosure of the omitted fact would have been viewed by [a] reasonable investor as having significantly altered the 'total mix' of information" and concluding that:

- a disclosure of the investment banker fees that states simply that they are "customary" and contingent in nature was sufficient – the exact amount of the fees need not be further disclosed unless their magnitude makes them material;
- while reliable financial projections should generally be disclosed, and unreliable projections do not need to be disclosed, the omission of *any* projections was not grounds for a disclosure claim, because plaintiff did not allege that there existed any reliable projections that should have been disclosed; and
- the merger proxy did not need to disclose the identity of third parties that were approached by target as alternative merger partners.

Indeed, the Court determined that most of the alleged defects in the merger proxy's fairness opinion were with respect to the substance or quality of the opinion and its analyses and not the adequacy of the disclosure of the facts upon which the fairness opinion was based or the process by which it was reached. The Court noted that any such "quibble with the substance of a banker's opinion does not constitute a disclosure claim." C.A. No. 1577-VCP, 2007 WL 4292024 (Del. Ch. Nov. 30, 2007).

933 *See supra* notes 469-481 and related text.

934 *In re Netsmart*, 924 A.2d at 192.

preceding the proposed merger, and held that "[t]he record, as it currently stands, manifests no reasonable, factual basis for the board's conclusion that strategic buyers in 2006 would not have been interested in Netsmart as it existed at that time." In a later discussion, the Court distinguished such informal contacts from a targeted, private sales effort in which authorized representatives seek out a buyer. The Court viewed the record evidence regarding prior contacts as "more indicative of an after-the-fact justification for a decision already made, than of a genuine and reasonably-informed evaluation of whether a targeted search might bear fruit."

Further, the Court rejected a post-agreement market check involving a window-shop and 3% termination fee as a viable method for maximizing value for a micro-cap company:

> Of course, one must confront the defendants' argument that they used a technique accepted in prior cases. The Special Committee used a limited, active auction among a discrete set of private equity buyers to get an attractive "bird in hand." But they gave Netsmart stockholders the chance for fatter fowl by including a fiduciary out and a modest break-up fee in the Merger Agreement. By that means, the board enabled a post-signing, implicit market check. Having announced the Insight Merger in November 2006 without any bigger birds emerging thereafter, the board argues that the results buttress their initial conclusion, which is that strategic buyers simply are not interested in Netsmart.
>
> The problem with this argument is that it depends on the rote application of an approach typical of large-cap deals in a micro-cap environment. The "no single blueprint" mantra is not a one way principle. The mere fact that a technique was used in different market circumstances by another board and approved by the court does not mean that it is reasonable in other circumstances that involve very different market dynamics.
>
> Precisely because of the various problems Netsmart's management identified as making it difficult for it to attract market attention as a micro-cap public company, an inert, implicit post-signing market check does not, on this record, suffice as a reliable way to survey interest by strategic players. Rather, to test the market for strategic buyers in a reliable fashion, one would expect a material effort at salesmanship to occur. To conclude that sales efforts are always unnecessary or meaningless would be almost un-American, given the sales-oriented nature of our culture. In the case of a niche company like Netsmart, the potential utility of a sophisticated and targeted sales effort seems especially high.
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> * * *
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> In the absence of such an outreach, Netsmart stockholders are only left with the possibility that a strategic buyer will: (i) notice that Netsmart is being sold, and, assuming that happens, (ii) invest the resources to make a hostile (because Netsmart can't solicit) topping bid to acquire a company worth less than a quarter of a billion dollars. In going down that road, the strategic buyer could not avoid the high potential costs, both monetary (e.g., for expedited work by legal and financial advisors) and strategic (e.g., having its interest become a

public story and dealing with the consequences of not prevailing) of that route, simply because the sought-after-prey was more a side dish than a main course. It seems doubtful that a strategic buyer would put much energy behind trying a deal jump in circumstances where the cost-benefit calculus going in seems so unfavorable. Analogizing this situation to the active deal jumping market at the turn of the century, involving deal jumps by large strategic players of deals involving their direct competitors in consolidating industries is a long stretch.

Similarly, the current market trend in which private equity buyers seem to be outbidding strategic buyers is equally unsatisfying as an excuse for the lack of *any* attempt at canvassing the strategic market. Given Netsmart's size, the synergies available to strategic players might well have given them flexibility to outbid even cash-flush private equity investors. Simply because many deals in the large-cap arena seem to be going the private equity buyers' way these days does not mean that a board can lightly forsake any exploration of interest by strategic bidders.

In this regard, a final note is in order. Rightly or wrongly, strategic buyers might sense that CEOs are more interested in doing private equity deals that leave them as CEOs than strategic deals that may, and in this case, certainly, would not. That is especially so when the private equity deals give management . . . a "second bite at the apple" through option pools. With this impression, a strategic buyer seeking to top Insight might consider this factor in deciding whether to bother with an overture.[935]

The Court was critical of the lack of minutes for key Board and Special Committee meetings (some of which were labeled "informal" because no minutes were taken) relied upon by the Board to justify its process.[936] The Court also was displeased that most of the minutes were prepared in omnibus fashion after the litigation was filed.

The Court criticized the Special Committee for permitting management to conduct the due diligence process without supervision:

In easily imagined circumstances, this approach to due diligence could be highly problematic. If management had an incentive to favor a particular bidder (or type of bidder), it could use the due diligence process to its advantage, by using different body language and different verbal emphasis with different bidders. "She's fine" can mean different things depending on how it is said.[937]

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935 *Id.* at 197-98.

936 The Court focused on what the Board described as an "informal meeting" that resulted in a "tactical choice … to focus solely on a sale to a private equity buyer" rather than to also concurrently seek strategic buyers. The Court criticized the Board for failing to keep minutes of this important meeting, and subsequently discounted the description of the decision to go private and not focus on strategic buyers set forth in the proxy statement because of the lack of minutes from this meeting, finding "no credible evidence in the record" to support the description. *Id.* at 183.

937 *Id.* at 194.

The Court ultimately found no harm, no foul on this issue because management did not have a favored private equity backer and there was no evidence that they tilted the process in favor of any participant.

The Court found that the proxy's disclosures regarding the target's process and its reasons for not pursuing strategic buyers had no basis in fact. The Court also found that the projections relied on by the Special Committee and its financial advisor in its fairness opinion needed to be disclosed in the proxy materials:

> In the Proxy, William Blair's various valuation analyses are disclosed. One of those analyses was a DCF valuation founded on a set of projections running until 2011. Those projections were generated by William Blair based on input from Netsmart management, and evolved out of the earlier, less optimistic, Scalia projections. Versions of those figures were distributed to interested parties throughout the bidding process, and one such chart is reproduced in part in the Proxy. The final projections utilized by William Blair in connection with the fairness opinion, however, have not been disclosed to shareholders. Those final projections, which were presented to the Netsmart board on November 18, 2006 in support of William Blair's final fairness opinion, take into account Netsmart's acquisition of CMHC and management's best estimate of the company's future cash flows.
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> * * *
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> But, that was thin gruel to sustain the omission. Even if it is true that bidders never received 2010 and 2011 projections, that explanation does not undercut the materiality of those forecasts to Netsmart's stockholders. They, unlike the bidders, have been presented with William Blair's fairness opinion and are being asked to make an important voting decision to which Netsmart's future prospects are directly relevant.
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> * * *
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> [T]he Proxy now fails to give the stockholders the best estimate of the company's future cash flows as of the time the board approved the Merger. Because of this, it is crucial that the entire William Blair model from November 18, 2006 — not just a two year addendum — be disclosed in order for shareholders to be fully informed.
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> Faced with the question of whether to accept cash now in exchange for forsaking an interest in Netsmart's future cash flows, Netsmart stockholders would obviously find it important to know what management and the company's financial advisor's best estimate of those future cash flows would be. In other of our state's jurisprudence, we have given credence to the notion that managers had meaningful insight into their firms' futures that the market did not. Likewise, weight has been given to the fairness-enforcing utility of investment banker opinions. It would therefore seem to be a genuinely foolish (and arguably

> unprincipled and unfair) inconsistency to hold that the best estimate of the company's future returns, as generated by management and the Special Committee's investment bank, need not be disclosed when stockholders are being advised to cash out. That is especially the case when most of the key managers seek to remain as executives and will receive options in the company once it goes private. Indeed, projections of this sort are probably among the most highly-prized disclosures by investors. Investors can come up with their own estimates of discount rates or (as already discussed) market multiples. What they cannot hope to do is replicate management's inside view of the company's prospects.[938]

The Court did not require that either the fairness opinion or the proxy statement "engage in self-flagellation" over the fact that the merger price was at the low end of the investment banker's analytical ranges of fairness and explained:

> Here, there is no evidence in the record indicating that William Blair ever explained its decision to issue a fairness opinion when the Merger price was at a level that was in the lower part of its analytical ranges of fairness. * * * From this "range of fairness" justification, one can guess that William Blair believed that, given the limited auction it had conducted and the price competition it generated, a price in the lower range was "fair," especially given William Blair's apparent assumption that an implicit, post-signing market check would be meaningful. * * * The one reason in the record is simply that the price fell within, even if at the lower end, of William Blair's fairness ranges. William Blair's bare bones fairness opinion is typical of such opinions, in that it simply states a conclusion that the offered Merger consideration was "fair, from a financial point of view, to the shareholders" but plainly does not opine whether the proposed deal is either advisable or the best deal reasonably available. Also in keeping with the industry norm, William Blair's fairness opinion devotes most of its text to emphasizing the limitations on the bank's liability and the extent to which the bank was relying on representations of management. Logically, the cursory nature of such an "opinion" is a reason why the disclosure of the bank's actual analyses is important to stockholders; otherwise, they can make no sense of what the bank's opinion conveys, other than as a stamp of approval that the transaction meets the minimal test of falling within some broad range of fairness.[939]

F. In re Topps Company Shareholders Litigation

The Delaware Court of Chancery decision in *In re Topps Company Shareholder Litigation*[940] pitted a late responding competitor whose bid raised financing and antitrust issues against a private equity buyer that would keep management but offered a lower price. In *Topps*, Vice Chancellor Strine granted a preliminary injunction against a stockholder vote on a cash

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938 *Id.* at 201-03; *see* Blake Rohrbacher & John Mark Zeberkiewicz, *Fair Summary: Delaware's Framework for Disclosing Fairness Opinions*, 63 BUS. LAW. 881 (May 2008).

939 *Netsmart*, at 204-05.

940 926 A.2d 58 (Del. Ch. 2007).

merger at $9.75 per share with a private equity purchaser ("*Eisner*") until such time as: (1) the Topps Board discloses several material facts not contained in the corporation's proxy statement, including facts regarding Eisner's assurances that he would retain existing management after the merger and background information regarding approaches by a strategic competitor ("*Upper Deck*") which ultimately proposed a cash merger at $10.75 per share ($1.00 more than the Eisner merger price) although it presented antitrust and financing risks not present in the Eisner proposal; and (2) Upper Deck is released from a standstill that it had agreed to in return for non-public information for purposes of (a) publicly commenting on its negotiations with Topps in order to counter negative characterizations of Upper Deck's proposal in the Board's proxy statement, and (b) making a non-coercive tender offer on conditions as favorable or more favorable than those it has offered to the Topps Board. The Court concluded that Upper Deck and a group of stockholder plaintiffs had established a reasonable probability of success in being able to show at trial that the Topps Board breached its fiduciary duties by misusing a standstill to prevent Upper Deck from communicating with the Topps stockholders and presenting a bid that the Topps stockholders could find materially more favorable than the Eisner merger proposal, but found that the Board had not breached its *Revlon* duties.[941]

Topps had two lines of business, both of which had been declining: (i) baseball and other cards and (ii) bubblegum and other old style confections. It had a ten member classified Board, seven of whom had served Topps for many years (five of them were independent directors and one was outside counsel to Topps) (the "*Incumbent Directors*") and three of whom were representatives of a small hedge fund who were put on the Board to settle a proxy context (the "*Dissident Directors*"). The proxy contest led Topps' management to first (and unsuccessfully) endeavor to sell its confections division through a public auction. Sensing that these circumstances might make the Topps Board receptive to a going private transaction, even though it had announced that Topps was not for sale, Eisner and two other financial buyers (both of whom soon dropped out after submitting low value indication of interest) approached the Board. Although the Dissident Directors wanted an open auction of Topps, the Board decided to negotiate exclusively with Eisner (perhaps because of the failed auction of the confections division). Ultimately a merger agreement was signed by Eisner that provided a $9.75 per share, a 40-day "go-shop"[942] period with Eisner having the right to match any superior proposal and a fiduciary out with a 3% of transaction value termination fee for a superior bid accepted during the 40-day go-shop period and a 4.6% termination fee for superior proposals accepted after the go-shop period.[943]

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941 *See supra* notes 649-655.

942 Stephen I. Glover & Jonathan P. Goodman, *Go Shops: Are They Here to Stay?*, 11 M&A LAW. No. 6, 1 (June 2007).

943 The Court described the Eisner merger agreement more fully as follows:

> Eisner and Topps executed the Merger Agreement on March 5, 2006, under which Eisner will acquire Topps for $9.75 per share or a total purchase price of about $385 million. The Merger Agreement is not conditioned on Eisner's ability to finance the transaction, and contains a representation that Eisner has the ability to obtain such financing. But the only remedy against Eisner if he breaches his duties and fails to consummate the Merger is his responsibility to pay a $12 million reverse break-up fee.
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> The "Go Shop" provision in the Merger Agreement works like this. For a period of forty days after the execution of the Merger Agreement, Topps was authorized to solicit alternative bids and to freely discuss a potential transaction with any buyer that might come along. Upon the expiration of the "Go Shop Period," Topps was required to cease all talks with any potential bidders unless the bidder had already submitted a "Superior Proposal," or the Topps board determined that the bidder was an "Excluded Party," which was

Revlon Analysis. In finding that the Topps Board had not violated its *Revlon* duties in deciding not to undertake a pre-signing auction, Vice Chancellor Strine commented:

> The so-called *Revlon* standard is equally familiar. When directors propose to sell a company for cash or engage in a change of control transaction, they must take reasonable measures to ensure that the stockholders receive the highest value reasonably attainable. Of particular pertinence to this case, when directors have made the decision to sell the company, any favoritism they display toward particular bidders must be justified solely by reference to the objective of maximizing the price the stockholders receive for their shares. When directors bias the process against one bidder and toward another not in a reasoned effort to maximize advantage for the stockholders, but to tilt the process toward the bidder more likely to continue current management, they commit a breach of fiduciary duty.
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> * * *
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> The Stockholder Plaintiffs . . . argue that the Incumbent Directors unreasonably resisted the desire of the Dissident Directors to conduct a full auction before signing the Merger Agreement, that Greenberg [an Incumbent Director involved in the negotiations with Eisner] capped the price Eisner could be asked to pay by mentioning that a $10 per share price would likely command support from the Incumbent Directors, that the Incumbent Directors unfairly restricted the Dissident Director's ability to participate in the Merger negotiation and consideration process, and that the Incumbent Directors foreclosed a

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> defined as a potential bidder that the board considered reasonably likely to make a Superior Proposal. If the bidder had submitted a Superior Proposal or was an Excluded Party, Topps was permitted to continue talks with them after the expiration of the Go Shop Period.
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> The Merger Agreement defined a Superior Proposal as a proposal to acquire at least 60% of Topps that would provide more value to Topps stockholders than the Eisner Merger. The method in which the 60% measure was to be calculated, however, is not precisely defined in the Merger Agreement, but was sought by Eisner in order to require any topping bidder to make an offer for all of Topps, not just one of its Businesses.
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> Topps was also permitted to consider unsolicited bids after the expiration of the 40-day Go Shop period if the unsolicited bid constituted a Superior Proposal or was reasonably likely to lead to one. Topps could terminate the Merger Agreement in order to accept a Superior Proposal, subject only to Eisner's right to match any other offer to acquire Topps.
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> The Eisner Merger Agreement contains a two-tier termination fee provision. If Topps terminated the Eisner Merger Agreement in order to accept a Superior Proposal during the Go Shop Period, Eisner was entitled to an $8 million termination fee (plus a $3.5 million expense reimbursement), in total, or approximately 3.0% of the transaction value. If Topps terminates the Merger Agreement after the expiration of the Go Shop Period, Eisner is entitled to a $12 million termination fee (plus a $4.5 million expense reimbursement), or approximately 4.6% of the total deal value.
>
> The Eisner Merger Agreement is subject to a number of closing conditions, such as consent to the transaction by regulatory authorities and the parties to certain of Topps's material contracts, such as its licenses with Major League Baseball and other sports leagues.
>
> In connection with the Eisner Merger Agreement, Shorin and Eisner entered into a letter agreement pursuant to which Shorin agreed to retire within sixty days after the consummation of the Merger and to surrender $2.8 million to which he would otherwise be entitled under his existing employment agreement in the event of a change of control of Topps. Shorin would remain a consultant to Topps for several years with sizable benefits, consistent with his existing employment agreement.

In re Topps, 926 A.2d 58.

reasonable possibility of obtaining a better bid during the Go Shop Period by restricting that time period and granting Eisner excessive deal protections. For its part, Upper Deck echoes these arguments, and supplements them with a contention that Upper Deck had made its desire to make a bid known in 2005, before Eisner ever made a formal bid, and was turned away.

Although these arguments are not without color, they are not vibrant enough to convince me that they would sustain a finding of breach of fiduciary duty after trial. A close reading of the record reveals that a spirited debate occurred between the two members of the Ad Hoc Committee who were Incumbent Directors . . . and the two who were Dissident Directors . . . . After examining the record, I am not at all convinced that [the Incumbent Directors] were wrong to resist the Dissidents' demand for a full auction. Topps had run an auction for its Confectionary Business in 2005, without success.

The market knew that Topps, which had no poison pill in place, had compromised a proxy fight in 2006, with the insurgents clearly prevailing. Thus, although [CEO] Shorin had put out a letter before the settlement of the proxy fight indicating that a "quick fix" sale was not in the interests of stockholders, the pot was stirred and ravenous capitalists should have been able to smell the possibility of a deal. Certainly that was true of Upper Deck, which is Topps's primary competitor. Now, of course, Upper Deck says that its overtures were rebuffed by Lehman, Topps's banker, a year earlier. But one must assume that Upper Deck is run by adults. As Topps's leading competitor, it knew the stress the Dissident Directors would be exerting on [CEO] Shorin to increase shareholder value. If Upper Deck wanted to make a strong move at that time, it could have contacted [CEO] Shorin directly (e.g., the trite lunch at the Four Seasons), written a bear hug letter, or made some other serious expression of interest, as it had several years earlier. The fact that it did not, inclines me toward the view that the defendants are likely correct in arguing that Upper Deck was focused on acquiring and then digesting another company, Fleer, during 2005 and 2006, and therefore did not make an aggressive run at (a clearly reluctant) Topps in those years.

Given these circumstances, the belief of the Incumbent Directors on the Ad Hoc Committee, and the full board, that another failed auction could damage Topps, strikes me, on this record, as a reasonable one.[944]

The Court found that the 40 day "go-shop" period, with a 3% of transaction value termination fee during that period and a 4.6% termination fee thereafter, provided an effective post-signing market check:

Although a target might desire a longer Go Shop Period or a lower break fee, the deal protections the Topps board agreed to in the Merger Agreement seem to have left reasonable room for an effective post-signing market check. For 40 days, the Topps board could shop like Paris Hilton. Even after the Go Shop Period

[944] *Id.*

> expired, the Topps board could entertain an unsolicited bid, and, subject to Eisner's match right, accept a Superior Proposal. The 40-day Go Shop Period and this later right work together, as they allowed interested bidders to talk to Topps and obtain information during the Go Shop Period with the knowledge that if they needed more time to decide whether to make a bid, they could lob in an unsolicited Superior Proposal after the Period expired and resume the process.[945]

Duty of Candor. The Vice Chancellor summarized the Delaware duty of candor as follows:

> When directors of a Delaware corporation seek approval for a merger, they have a duty to provide the stockholders with the material facts relevant to making an informed decision. In that connection, the directors must also avoid making materially misleading disclosures, which tell a distorted rendition of events or obscure material facts. In determining whether the directors have complied with their disclosure obligations, the court applies well-settled standards of materiality, familiar to practitioners of our law and federal securities law.[946]

The proxy statement disclosed that the Topps Board had instructed management not to have any discussions with Eisner regarding post merger employment with Eisner. The Court found that while that disclosure may have been true, the proxy statement should have also made disclosures to the effect that Eisner had explicitly stated that his proposal was "designed to" retain substantially all of Topps' management and key employees. The Court also cited concerns that Topps' financial adviser had manipulated its financial analyses to make Eisner's offer look more attractive after Eisner refused to increase his bid and, thus, that the proxy statement should have included projections of Topps' future cash flows from a presentation which the financial adviser presented to the Topps Board at a meeting over a month before it made its fairness opinion presentation regarding the Eisner proposal that was approved by the Board.

Financing. Although the Upper Deck had not obtained a firm debt financing commitment, the Court found that the Proxy Statement should have disclosed that competing bidder Upper Deck (a private company) did not have a financing contingency.

Antitrust. Upper Deck and Topps were the only competitors in the baseball card business, but the Court felt that Board's proxy statement overstated the antitrust risk in an Upper Deck merger since the Board did not produce expert testimony that there was a significant antitrust risk and Upper Deck was willing to make such regulatory concessions (e.g. divestitures) necessary to get antitrust approval.

Standstill. In enjoining the enforcement of the standstill against Upper Deck, the Court found that standstills may be appropriate in some circumstances, but that the Topps Board had used the Upper Deck Standstill in a way that resulted in the Topps Board breaching its fiduciary duties:

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945 *Id.* at 86-87.

946 *Id.* at 64; *see* Blake Rohrbacher & John Mark Zeberkiewicz, *Fair Summary: Delaware's Framework for Disclosing Fairness Opinions*, 63 BUS. LAW. 881 (May 2008).

Standstills serve legitimate purposes. When a corporation is running a sale process, it is responsible, if not mandated, for the board to ensure that confidential information is not misused by bidders and advisors whose interests are not aligned with the corporation, to establish rules of the game that promote an orderly auction, and to give the corporation leverage to extract concessions from the parties who seek to make a bid.

But standstills are also subject to abuse. Parties like Eisner often, as was done here, insist on a standstill as a deal protection. Furthermore, a standstill can be used by a target improperly to favor one bidder over another, not for reasons consistent with stockholder interest, but because managers prefer one bidder for their own motives.

In this case, the Topps board reserved the right to waive the Standstill if its fiduciary duties required. That was an important thing to do, given that there was no shopping process before signing with Eisner.

The fiduciary out here also highlights a reality. Although the Standstill is a contract, the Topps board is bound to use its contractual power under that contract only for proper purposes. * * * I cannot read the record as indicating that the Topps board is using the Standstill to extract reasonable concessions from Upper Deck in order to unlock higher value. The Topps board's negotiating posture and factual misrepresentations are more redolent of pretext, than of a sincere desire to comply with their *Revlon* duties.

Frustrated with its attempt to negotiate with Topps, Upper Deck asked for a release from the Standstill to make a tender offer on the terms it offered to Topps and to communicate with Topps's stockholders. The Topps board refused. That refusal not only keeps the stockholders from having the chance to accept a potentially more attractive higher priced deal, it keeps them in the dark about Upper Deck's version of important events, and it keeps Upper Deck from obtaining antitrust clearance, because it cannot begin the process without either a signed merger agreement or a formal tender offer.

Because the Topps board is recommending that the stockholders cash out, its decision to foreclose its stockholders from receiving an offer from Upper Deck seems likely … to be found a breach of fiduciary duty. If Upper Deck makes a tender at $10.75 per share on the conditions it has outlined, the Topps stockholders will still be free to reject that offer if the Topps board convinces them it is too conditional. * * * Given that the Topps board has decided to sell the company, and is not using the Standstill Agreement for any apparent legitimate purpose, its refusal to release Upper Deck justifies an injunction. Otherwise, the Topps stockholders may be foreclosed from ever considering Upper Deck's offer, a result that, under our precedent, threatens irreparable injury.

Similarly, Topps went public with statements disparaging Upper Deck's bid and its seriousness but continues to use the Standstill to prevent Upper Deck

> from telling its own side of the story. The Topps board seeks to have the Topps stockholders accept Eisner's bid without hearing the full story. That is not a proper use of a standstill by a fiduciary given the circumstances presented here. Rather, it threatens the Topps stockholders with making an important decision on an uninformed basis, a threat that justifies injunctive relief.[947]

G. In re Lear Corporation Shareholder Litigation

Lear I. Again, in *In re Lear Corporation Shareholder Litigation*,[948] the Delaware Court of Chancery enjoined a merger vote until additional proxy statement disclosures were made regarding proposed changes in the compensation arrangements for the CEO who served as a lead negotiator for the company, but found that the sales process was reasonable enough to withstand a *Revlon*[949] challenge.

Lear was a major supplier to the troubled American automobile manufacturers and faced the possibility of bankruptcy as the maturity of substantial indebtedness was imminent. A restructuring plan was undertaken to divest unprofitable units and restructure debts. During this process in 2006, Carl Icahn took a large, public position in Lear stock, first through open market purchases and then in a negotiated purchase from Lear, ultimately raising his holdings to 24%.

Icahn's purchase led the stock market to believe that a sale of the company had become likely and bolstered Lear's flagging stock price. Lear's Board had eliminated the corporation's poison pill in 2004.

In early 2007, Icahn suggested to Lear's CEO that a going private transaction might be in Lear's best interest. After a week of discussions, Lear's CEO told the rest of the Board of Icahn's approach, which formed a Special Committee that authorized the CEO to negotiate merger terms with Icahn.

During those negotiations, Icahn only moved modestly from his initial offering price of $35 per share, going to $36 per share. He indicated that if the Board desired to conduct a pre-signing auction, he would pull his offer, but that he would allow Lear to freely shop his bid after signing, during a so-called "go-shop" period,[950] but only so long as he received a termination fee of approximately 3%.

The Board approved a merger agreement on those terms. After signing, the Board's financial advisors aggressively shopped Lear to both financial and strategic buyers, none of which made a topping bid.

The plaintiffs moved to enjoin the merger vote, arguing that the Lear Board breached its *Revlon* duties and failed to disclose material facts necessary for the stockholders to cast an informed vote.

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947 *Id.* at 91-92.

948 *In re Lear Corp. S'holder Litig.*, 926 A.2d 94 (Del. Ch. 2007) ("*Lear I*").

949 *See supra* notes 649-655.

950 Stephen I. Glover & Jonathan P. Goodman, *Go Shops: Are They Here to Stay?*, 11 M&A LAW. No. 6, 1 (June 2007).

Revlon Analysis. Plaintiffs argued that the Board breached its *Revlon* duties to obtain the best price reasonably available because (i) the Board allowed the CEO to lead the negotiations when he had a conflict of interest with respect to his compensation, (ii) the Board approved the merger agreement without a pre-signing auction and (iii) the merger agreement deal protections were unreasonable.

The Court found that although the Lear Special Committee made an "infelicitous decision" to permit the CEO to negotiate the merger terms without the presence of Special Committee or financial adviser representatives, the Board's efforts to secure the highest possible value appeared reasonable.[951] The Board retained for itself broad leeway to shop the company after signing, and negotiated deal protection measures that did not present an unreasonable barrier to any second-arriving bidder.[952] Moreover, the Board obtained Icahn's agreement to vote his equity position for any bid superior to his own that was embraced by the Board, thus signaling Icahn's own willingness to be a seller at the right price. Given the circumstances faced by Lear, the decision of the Board to lock in the potential for its stockholders to receive $36 per share with the right for the Board to hunt for a higher price appeared as reasonable. The Board's post-signing market check, which was actively conducted by investment bankers, who offered stapled financing and would be compensated for bringing in a superior proposal, provided adequate assurance that there was no bidder willing to materially top Icahn.[953]

Duty of Candor. Since the Special Committee employed the CEO to negotiate deal terms with Icahn, the proxy statement should disclose that shortly before Icahn expressed an interest in making a going private offer, the CEO had asked the Lear Board to change his employment arrangements to allow him to cash in his retirement benefits while continuing to run the company, which the Board was willing to do, but not put into effect due to concerns at negative reactions from institutional investors and from employees who were being asked to make wage concessions. Because the CEO might rationally have expected a going private transaction to provide him with a unique means to achieve his personal objectives of cashing in on his retirement benefits and options while remaining employed by Lear and being able to sell his

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951 The Court explained a Board's *Revlon* duties as follows:

> The other substantive claim made by the plaintiffs arises under the *Revlon* doctrine. *Revlon* and its progeny stand for the proposition that when a board has decided to sell the company for cash or engage in a change of control transaction, it must act reasonably in order to secure the highest price reasonably available. The duty to act reasonably is just that, a duty to take a reasonable course of action under the circumstances presented. Because there can be several reasoned ways to try to maximize value, the court cannot find fault so long as the directors chose a *reasoned* course of action.

Lear I, 926 A.2d at 115.

952 The merger agreement provided the Lear Board 45 days after signing (the "go-shop period") to actively solicit a superior proposal and a fiduciary out to accept an unsolicited superior third party bid after the go-shop period ended with a termination fee during the go-shop period of 2.79% of the equity, or 1.9% of the enterprise, value of Lear and thereafter of 3.52% of the equity, or 2.4% of the enterprise valuation. If the stockholders rejected the merger, a termination fee was payable only if a competing proposal was accepted substantially concurrently with the termination of the merger agreement. The merger agreement obligated Icahn to pay a 6.1% reverse breakup fee if he could not arrange financing or otherwise breached the merger agreement and to vote his stock for a superior proposal approved by the Board.

953 *In re Netsmart Technologies, Inc. Shareholder Litigation* (*see supra* note 930), in which a post-signing market check was found inadequate under *Revlon*, was distinguished on the basis that Lear was a large, well known NYSE company, whereas Netsmart was a microcap company unlikely to be noticed by potential bidders and the merger agreement permitted only a "window shop" (the right of the Board to consider unsolicited proposals) as contrasted with the active "go-shop" in *Lear*. *In re Netsmart Technologies, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 924 A.2d 171 (Del. Ch. 2007).

substantial holdings of Lear stock (which insider trading restrictions and market realities would inhibit him from doing), the Court concluded that "the Lear stockholders are entitled to know that the CEO harbored material economic motivations that differed from their own that could have influenced his negotiating posture with Icahn."[954] Thus, the Court issued an injunction preventing the merger vote until Lear shareholders were apprised of the CEO's overtures to the Board concerning his retirement benefits.

Lear II.[955] After the Court's decision in Lear I, the proxy voting advisory services recommended that stockholders vote against the merger and it appeared that the original merger agreement would not be approved. To salvage the deal, the Lear Special Committee (being sensitive to the Court's CEO involvement concerns expressed in Lear I, using its Chair and the CEO negotiating together) negotiated an increase in the merger consideration of $1.25 per share (3.5%) from $36 to $37.25, but in return the buyer got a termination fee of $25 million (0.9% of total deal value) if the stockholders rejected the merger agreement. After the stockholders rejected the amended merger agreement, plaintiff alleged that the Board acted in bath faith in approving the amended merger agreement that the stockholders rejected. In rejecting the plaintiff's theory that "directors who believe in good faith that a merger is good for the stockholders cannot adopt it if stockholder approval is unlikely" and granting the directors' motion to dismiss, Vice Chancellor Strine wrote:

> Directors are entitled to make good faith business decisions even if the stockholders might disagree with them. Where, as here, the complaint itself indicates that an independent board majority used an adequate process, employed reputable financial, legal, and proxy solicitation experts, and had a substantial basis to conclude a merger was financially fair, the directors cannot be faulted for being disloyal simply because the stockholders ultimately did not agree with their recommendation. In particular, where, as here, the directors are protected by an exculpatory [DGCL § 102(b)(7)] charter provision, it is critical that the complaint plead facts suggesting a fair inference that the directors breached their duty of loyalty by making a bad faith decision to approve the merger for reasons inimical to the interests of the corporation and its stockholders.[956]

In rejecting plaintiff's arguments that the directors exhibited bad faith in agreeing to give a $25 million no-vote termination fee in exchange for only a $1.25 per share increase in the merger agreement, the Vice Chancellor commented that "[t]hese prosciutto-thin margins are indicative of tough end-game posturing, not a huge value chasm," and explained:

> Thus, the plaintiffs are in reality down to the argument that the Lear board did not make a prudent judgment about the possibility of future success. That is, the plaintiffs are making precisely the kind of argument precluded by the business judgment rule. Precisely so as to ensure that directors are not unduly hampered in

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954 *Lear I*, 926 A.2d at 98.

955 *In re Lear Corporation Shareholder Litigation*, 967 A.2d 640 (Del. Ch. 2008) ("*Lear II*").

956 *Lear II*, 967 A.2d at 641. Because Lear's certificate of incorporation contained a DGCL § 102(b)(7) exculpatory provision, plaintiff could not survive a motion to dismiss by pleading facts showing only gross negligence; plaintiff had to plead facts showing the Lear directors' breach of their duty of loyalty by acting in bad faith for reasons inimical to Lear.

taking good faith risks, our law eschews the use of a simple negligence standard. Even where it is possible to hold directors responsible for a breach of the duty of care, Delaware law requires that directors have acted with gross negligence. Unless judges are mindful of the substantial difference between a simple negligence and gross negligence standard, the policy purpose served by Delaware's choice of a gross negligence standard risks being undermined. The definition of gross negligence used in our corporate law jurisprudence is extremely stringent.

Here, it is critically important that another substantial dividing line be respected. After *Van Gorkom* met an unenthusiastic reception, the General Assembly adopted § 102(b)(7), authorizing corporations to exculpate their directors from liability for violations of the duty of care. Lear's charter contains such an exculpatory charter provision.

To respect this authorized policy choice made by Lear and its stockholders, this court must be vigilant in reviewing the complaint here to make sure that it pleads particularized facts pleading a non-exculpated breach of fiduciary duty. That requires the plaintiffs to plead particularized facts supporting an inference that the directors committed a breach of the fiduciary duty of loyalty. More specifically here, because the plaintiffs concede that eight of the eleven Lear directors were independent, the plaintiffs must plead facts supporting an inference that the Lear board, despite having no financial motive to injure Lear or its stockholders, acted in bad faith to approve the Revised Merger Agreement. Such a claim cannot rest on facts that simply support the notion that the directors made an unreasonable or even grossly unreasonable judgment. Rather, it must rest on facts that support a fair inference that the directors consciously acted in a manner contrary to the interests of Lear and its stockholders.

The plaintiffs recognize this reality, and have attempted to sustain their complaint by charging the Lear board with having acted with "no care" and having approved in "bad faith" a Revised Merger Agreement that was almost certain not to be approved, while supposedly knowing that the $37.25 price was unfair. But they plead no particularized facts that support these inflammatory and conclusory charges of wrongdoing.

In fact, the very need of the plaintiffs to take legal doctrine that arose in the very different monitoring context and try to apply it to a discrete transaction that was subject to almost daily board attention suggests their desperation. The line of cases running from *Graham v. Allis-Chalmers* to *Caremark* to *Guttman* to *Stone v. Ritter* dealt in large measure with what is arguably the hardest question in corporation law: what is the standard of liability to apply to independent directors with no motive to injure the corporation when they are accused of indolence in monitoring the corporation's compliance with its legal responsibilities? The question is difficult for many reasons, including the reality that even the most diligent board cannot guarantee that an entire organization will always comply with the law. But it must be answered because one of the central justifications for

the use of independent directors is that they are well positioned to oversee management, particularly by monitoring the processes used by the corporation to accurately account for its financial affairs and comply with applicable laws. When a fiduciary takes on a paying role, her duty of loyalty requires that she make a good faith effort to carry out those duties. Although everyone has off days, fidelity to one's duty is inconsistent with persistent shirking and conscious inattention to duty. For this reason, *Caremark* and its progeny have held that directors can be held culpable in the monitoring context if they breach their duty of loyalty by "a sustained or systematic failure . . . to exercise oversight," or "were conscious of the fact that they were not doing their jobs [as monitors]." More generally, our Supreme Court has held that to hold a disinterested director liable for a breach of the fiduciary duty of loyalty for acting in bad faith, a strong showing of misconduct must be made. Thus, in its *Disney* decision, the Court enumerated examples that all depended on purposeful wrongdoing, such as intentionally acting "with a purpose other than that of advancing the best interests of the corporation," acting "with the intent to violate applicable positive law," or "intentionally fail[ing] to act in the face of a known duty to act."

The plaintiffs' invocation of this body of law in this case does not aid them. The complaint makes clear that the Lear board held regular meetings and received advice from several relevant experts. The plaintiffs have therefore not come close to pleading facts suggesting that the Lear directors "consciously and intentionally disregarded their responsibilities" and thereby breached their duty of loyalty.

To this point, the plaintiffs' use of this body of law also makes clear the policy danger raised by transporting a doctrine rooted in the monitoring context and importing it into a context where a discrete transaction was approved by the board. When a discrete transaction is under consideration, a board will always face the question of how much process should be devoted to that transaction given its overall importance in light of the myriad of other decisions the board must make. Seizing specific opportunities is an important business skill, and that involves some measure of risk. Boards may have to choose between acting rapidly to seize a valuable opportunity without the luxury of months, or even weeks, of deliberation — such as a large premium offer — or losing it altogether. Likewise, a managerial commitment to timely decision making is likely to have systemic benefits but occasionally result in certain decisions being made that, with more time, might have come out differently. Courts should therefore be extremely chary about labeling what they perceive as deficiencies in the deliberations of an independent board majority over a discrete transaction as not merely negligence or even gross negligence, but as involving bad faith. In the transactional context, a very extreme set of facts would seem to be required to sustain a disloyalty claim premised on the notion that disinterested directors were intentionally disregarding their duties. Where, as here, the board employed a

special committee that met frequently, hired reputable advisors, and met frequently itself, a *Caremark*-based liability theory is untenable.[957]

H. Landry's Restaurants, Inc.

In *Louisiana Municipal Employees' Retirement System v. Fertitta*,[958] Landry's Seafoods, Inc. entered into a cash-out merger agreement with an entity controlled by Tilman J. Fertitta, its Chairman, CEO and 39% stockholder. As events unfolded that made it less likely the merger would be completed, the Chairman began making open market purchases of shares at prices well below the proposed merger price over the objections of a Special Committee of independent directors established by Landry's Board to consider the proposed merger. After the Chairman's purchases made him the majority stockholder, Landry's Board voted to abandon the merger agreement, thus excusing the Chairman from paying a $15 million reverse-termination fee.

In concluding that the complaint adequately alleged claims for breach of the duty of loyalty against the defendant directors, the Chancery Court found that allegations lead to the reasonable inference that CEO Fertitta used his influence on the corporation as controlling stockholder and corporate officer to his own benefit and to the detriment of the interests of the minority stockholders. The Board and the Special Committee were found to have willingly acquiesced to his scheming because he was the controlling stockholder.

In rejecting the defendants' argument that the plaintiff failed to adequately allege that CEO Fertitta's 39% ownership made him a controlling stockholder, that all of his complained of actions involved his actions *qua* stockholder, and that he owed no fiduciary duties to the minority stockholders in any of those actions, the Vice Chancellor wrote:

> The Delaware Supreme Court stated the test for control by a non-majority stockholder in *Citron v. Fairchild Camera & Instrument Corp.*: "[f]or a

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957 *Id.* at 651-55. In what may have been a reference to *Ryan v. Lyondell*, the Court wrote in a footnote to the foregoing:

> Another risk warrants mention, which arises if courts fail to recognize that not all situations governed by *Revlon* have the strong sniff of disloyalty that was present in the original case. *Revlon* was a case rooted in entrenchment and bias concerns, with incumbent managers preferring one bidder strongly over another when a sale became inevitable. Many of the early *Revlon* and *Unocal*, 493 A.2d 946 (Del.1985), cases involved this flavor. When, as has become more common, a *Revlon* case simply involves the question of whether a board took enough time to market test a third-party, premium-generating deal, and there is no allegation of a self-interested bias against other bidders, a plaintiff seeking damages after the deal has closed cannot, in the presence of a § 102(b)(7) clause, rest on quibbles about due care. And, in that sort of scenario, the absence of an illicit directorial motive and the presence of a strong rationale for the decision taken (to secure the premium for stockholders) makes it difficult for a plaintiff to state a loyalty claim.
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> As this court has previously noted:
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> > The fact that a corporate board has decided to engage in a change of control transaction invoking so-called *Revlon* duties does not change the showing of culpability a plaintiff must make in order to hold the directors liable for monetary damages. For example, if a board unintentionally fails, as a result of gross negligence and not of bad faith or self-interest, to follow up on a materially higher bid and an exculpatory charter provision is in place, then the plaintiff will be barred from recovery, regardless of whether the board was in *Revlon*-land.

Lear II, 967 A.2d at 654 n.62 (citing *McMillan v. Intercargo Corp.*, 768 A.2d 492, 502 (Del. Ch. 2000)); *see also supra* notes 588-600 and related text (discussing *Ryan v. Lyondell*).

958 C.A. No. 4339-VCL (Del Ch. July 28, 2009).

dominating relationship to exist in the absence of controlling stock ownership, a plaintiff must allege domination by a minority shareholder through actual control of corporation conduct." First, there is no question (at least for the purposes of a motion to dismiss) that Fertitta exercised actual control of Landry's at all relevant times–he was not only the 39% stockholder, but the CEO and chairman of the company as well. Second, and more importantly, Fertitta's actions with respect to the negotiation of the refinancing commitment in the amended debt commitment letter [needed to finance the merger] do not fall so neatly into the "only acting as a minority stockholder" basket. It is unclear exactly in what capacity Fertitta was acting when negotiating with the Lending Banks on behalf of Landry's…. Ultimately, however, there are only two reasonable possibilities: 1) Fertitta was negotiating as CEO of the corporation, with at least tacit permission of the board; or 2) Fertitta was negotiating with the Lending Banks as controlling stockholder of Landry's. Under either circumstance, Fertitta was subject to a fiduciary duty to act in the best interests of the corporation and the stockholders as a whole, and to prefer those interests to any interest of his own. A breach of that duty is the essence of a failure of loyalty. Moreover, with respect to Landry's decision to act to terminate the merger agreement, by January 2009 it is indisputable that Fertitta was actually the majority owner of Landry's, raising a presumption of control on his part.

The court now turns to the claim against the board for breach of fiduciary duty. The defendants urge that at best the plaintiff has pleaded a breach of the duty of care, which is exculpated by the corporate charter of Landry's pursuant to section 102(b)(7) of the Delaware General Corporation Law, and point to the Delaware Supreme Court's recent decision in *Lyondell Chemical Co. v. Ryan* for good measure. Simply put, this is not a case to which *Lyondell* speaks. *Lyondell* is a case in which the plaintiffs attempted to apply the *Caremark* standard for lack of good faith to the context of a control transaction. To attempt to apply *Lyondell* to the instant case, however, misses entirely the gravamen of the plaintiff's claims. The plaintiff here does not claim that it was harmed by virtue of some sufficiently gross failure of process on the part of the Landry's directors. Rather, the plaintiff's claims are far simpler: the board knowingly preferred the interests of the majority stockholder to those of the corporation or the minority.

Turning first to the board's failure to employ a poison pill to prevent Fertitta from obtaining control without paying a control premium, it is reasonable in the context of a motion to dismiss to infer fiduciary misconduct more serious than a breach of the duty of care. The failure to act in the face of an obvious threat to the corporation and the minority stockholders instead supports a reasonable inference that the board breached its duty of loyalty in choosing not to cross Fertitta.

The court turns now to the board's decision to terminate the merger agreement and relieve Fertitta of the responsibility to pay the reverse-termination fee. The board's contention that it simply had no choice but to terminate the agreement, rather than forcing Fertitta to do so, is not persuasive. The board

contends that disclosure of the amended debt commitment letter would have risked the refinancing commitment, and therefore risked default on $400 million in notes. Thus, the argument goes, the only rational choice was to terminate the agreement, rather than risking bankruptcy. But the board must have recognized that the risk that Fertitta would have permitted that to happen, rather than terminating the agreement and paying the reverse break-up fee himself, was low. As of the time of the termination of the merger agreement, Fertitta owned 9,658,855 shares of Landry's common stock, worth between $78 million (based on the post-termination price) and $119 million (based on the pre-termination price). There is no doubt that the value of that stock would have been severely impaired, if not entirely destroyed, had Landry's defaulted on the $400 million note redemption and been forced into bankruptcy. Thus, it is unreasonable to think (at this stage at least) that Fertitta would have allowed the company to be forced into bankruptcy rather than paying the $15 million reverse-termination fee. It is difficult to imagine that the Landry's board would not have recognized this reality. It therefore raises a question whether the board's decision to terminate and entirely excuse Fertitta's performance constituted a rational exercise of business judgment. That question cannot be resolved at this stage of the proceedings, but must await the consideration of detailed facts beyond the scope of a motion to dismiss.

IX. M&A During the Credit Crunch.

A. General.

The credit crunch during the fall of 2008 led to acquisitions of four major financial institutions in quick succession: (i) The Bear Stearns Companies Inc. was acquired by JPMorgan Chase & Co. on May 30, 2008 pursuant to a merger agreement dated March 24, 2008, (ii) Merrill Lynch & Co. Inc. was acquired by Bank of America Corporation on January 1, 2009 pursuant to a merger agreement dated September 15, 2008, (iii) Wachovia Corporation was acquired by Wells Fargo & Company on December 31, 2008 pursuant to a merger agreement dated October 3, 2008, and (iv) National City Corporation was acquired by PNC Financial Services Group, Inc. on December 31, 2008 pursuant to a merger agreement dated October 24, 2008. Stockholders challenged each acquisition on the grounds that target directors breached their fiduciary duties of care by hastily agreeing to the transaction and entering into onerous deal protection provisions. The decisions in these cases from courts in different states (but largely based on Delaware law) showed that the courts were sensitive to the national impact of the credit crunch and the pressures on directors for quick action in extreme circumstances, but that they analyzed the directors' actions in approving merger agreements under established principles governing directors' duties.[959] These decisions do not show "the rule of law becoming a rule of awe" or purport to be based on "a 'national interest" doctrine, absolving companies of governance actions

[959] *In re Bear Stearns Litig.*, 870 N.Y.S.2d 709 (N.Y. Sup. 2008); *County of York Employees Ret. Plan v. Merrill Lynch & Co., Inc.*, C.A. No. 4066-VCN, 2008 WL 4824053 (Del. Ch. Oct. 28, 2008); *Ehrenhaus v. Baker*, No. Civ. A. 08 CVS 22632, 2008 NCBC 20, 2008 WL 5124899 (N.C. Super. Ct. Dec 05, 2008); *In re National City Corp. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. No. 4123-CC (Del. Ch. July 31, 2009).

that are potentially harmful, but are important to an economic or defense emergency" as has been suggested.[960]

B. Pre-Crunch Sensitivity to Target Financial Stress.

Delaware courts have previously confronted the challenges facing directors of troubled companies faced with difficult decisions, and have applied traditional principles when evaluating the directors' conduct.[961] A decision from earlier in 2008 rejecting a merger challenge suggested that the Delaware judiciary was sensitive to marketplace disruptions and reluctant to interfere with the completion of mergers where there were no other viable bidders.[962]

C. Bear Stearns.

On December 4, 2008, a New York state court issued a decision in *In re Bear Stearns Litigation*,[963] applying Delaware law as both Bear Stearns and JPMorgan Chase were Delaware corporations, and dismissing all claims against Bear Stearns directors and JPMorgan arising from the federally assisted merger of Bear Stearns with JPMorgan. The *Bear Stearns* decision was issued at the summary judgment stage after significant document and deposition discovery. After plaintiffs withdrew their motion to enjoin the shareholder vote, the merger was approved by Bear Stearns' shareholders, the merger was consummated, and the case proceeded on a claim for damages.

The Court discussed the extraordinary and rapidly deteriorating circumstances facing the Bear Stearns Board. Bear Stearns, through subsidiaries, was a leading investment banking, securities and derivatives trading, clearance and brokerage firm. Its demise quickly followed the downgrade on Monday, March 10, 2008, by Moody's Investors Services of the rating of mortgage-backed debt issued by an affiliate of Bear Stearns, which started questions regarding Bear Stearns' solvency to circulate in the market. Despite a press release denying the market rumors, by late Wednesday, March 12, an increased number of customers had expressed a desire to withdraw funds from Bear Stearns and counterparties had expressed concern over maintaining their ordinary course exposure to Bear Stearns.

On Thursday, March 13, 2008, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that, due to the market perception of Bear Stearns' liquidity problems, trading counterparties were becoming cautious about their dealings with, and exposure to, the company. Over the course of the day, an unusual number of customers withdrew funds from Bear Stearns. In addition, a significant number of

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960 Dennis K. Berman, *The Game: B of A's Merrill Deal Exposes Myth of Transparency—CEO Lewis Kept Mum After a Meeting With Chiefs of Treasury, Federal Reserve*, WALL ST. J., Jan. 20, 2009, at C3.

961 *See*, *e.g.*, *Omnicare, Inc. v. NCS Healthcare, Inc.*, 818 A. 2d 914 (Del. 2003); *supra* notes 780-786 (discussing *Omnicare*); *In re Loral Space and Commc'ns Inc. Consol. Litig.*, C.A. No. 2808-VCS, 2008 WL 4293781 (Del. Ch. Sept. 19, 2008); *supra* notes 581-585 (discussing *Loral*); *Optima Int'l of Miami, Inc. v. WCI Steel, Inc.*, C.A. No. 3833-VCL (Del. Ch. June 27, 2008); *supra* notes 790-793 (discussing *Optima*).

962 *See Wayne County Employees' Ret. Sys. v. Corti*, 954 A.2d 319 (Del. Ch. 2008) (denying plaintiff's motion for preliminary injunction because "where, as here, no other bidder has emerged despite relatively mild deal protection devices, the plaintiff's showing of a reasonable likelihood of success must be particularly strong. The risk that enjoining the shareholder vote will disrupt the deal and prevent the shareholders from exercising a potentially value-maximizing opportunity is not lost on this Court.").

963 870 N.Y.S.2d 709 (N.Y.Sup. 2008).

counterparties appeared unwilling to provide the short-term, fully secured funding customary in the investment banking business and necessary for the company's operations. Concerned that its liquidity had deteriorated sharply to the point that it would not have enough cash to meet its needs, Bear Stearns' senior management met with the New York Federal Reserve Bank ("*NY Fed*"), the SEC and representatives of the U.S. Treasury Department to inform them of Bear Stearns' condition. Bear Stearns' CEO contacted JPMorgan's CEO to seek funding assistance or some other solution to Bear Stearns' liquidity problem, including a possible business combination. At 10:30 p.m. that evening, Bear Stearns' Board held a special meeting at which its senior management and legal and financial advisors discussed the liquidity problem, and the possibility that the company would not be able to meet its operational needs the next day, absent the identification of sufficient funding sources. Following that meeting, representatives of JPMorgan and government officials held discussions and ultimately agreed to a temporary NY Fed-backed loan facility.

At a reconvened meeting at 8:00 a.m. the next morning, Friday, March 14, 2008, the Bear Stearns' Board approved the loan facility negotiated the previous evening. Despite Bear Stearns' announcement of the loan facility and discussions with JPMorgan, customers and counterparties continued to abandon the company, its common stock price declined precipitously and major rating agencies downgraded Bear Stearns' credit ratings. On the evening of March 14, the NY Fed informed Bear Stearns that the loan facility would no longer be available as of the upcoming Monday morning, March 17, 2008. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson also advised Bear Stearns' CEO that the company needed to complete a stabilizing transaction by the end of the weekend. The Federal Reserve intervention was premised on a concern that a sudden and disorderly failure of Bear Stearns would have "unpredictable but likely severe consequences for market functioning and the broader economy" and would also likely pose "the risk of systemic damage to the financial system."[964]

Accordingly, on Saturday, March 15, 2008, representatives of Bear Stearns and JPMorgan met to discuss a potential deal. Bear Stearns' financial adviser also contacted various potential buyers and parties capable of providing alternative funding, ultimately reporting to the Board that only JPMorgan and a private equity firm had expressed meaningful interest. A separate Bear Stearns team considered and prepared a bankruptcy filing.

Late Sunday morning, March 16, JPMorgan advised Bear Stearns' financial adviser that due to the risks of a merger it could not proceed without some level of financial and other support from the NY Fed. Late on the afternoon of Sunday, March 16, JPMorgan indicated that it was interested in a stock-for-stock merger with Bear Stearns at an implied value of $4 per share for Bear Stearns stock, a figure shortly thereafter reduced to $2 per share. Bear Stearns objected to the price and suggested a term requiring JPMorgan to pay additional consideration if certain Bear Stearns assets were sold for more than JPMorgan valued them. JPMorgan declined to increase the price as a consequence of the Treasury's insistence.

Bear Stearns' Board was informed that without a deal, the company would have to file for bankruptcy immediately, in which case its stockholders would likely receive nothing and the holders of Bear Stearns' unsecured $70 billion debt might suffer significant loss. Bear Stearns'

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964 *Id.* at 722.

financial adviser issued an opinion that the "Exchange Ratio is fair, from a financial point of view, to the holders of' the Company Common Stock."[965] Bear Stearns' Board approved an initial merger agreement on Sunday, March 16, 2008, which provided for a share-for-share merger at an implied price of $2 per share. JPMorgan provided an immediate guaranty of various Bear Stearns' obligations, with the NY Fed providing supplemental funding.

Under the initial merger agreement, JPMorgan received options to purchase 19.9% of Bear Stearns' stock at $2 per share, and to purchase Bear Stearns' headquarters building in New York for $1.1 billion. The agreement also contained a "no solicitation" clause which prohibited Bear Stearns from actively soliciting alternative proposals with a typical fiduciary out to respond to a "superior proposal."

Despite announcement of the merger, Bear Stearns' customers continued to withdraw funds and counterparties remained unwilling to provide secured financing on customary terms. JPMorgan advised Bear Stearns that it was skeptical of its ability to continue to extend credit or guarantee the loans in the face of market fears over Bear Stearns' viability and the perceived risk that the merger might not be completed. JPMorgan proposed that Bear Stearns issue a sufficient number of additional shares to give JPMorgan a two-thirds common stock interest, thereby increasing the certainty that the merger would close. Bear Stearns rejected this proposal and indicated that it would require a significant increase in the merger consideration for any revision of the initial merger agreement.

Negotiations over revisions to the merger agreement continued throughout the weekend, with the participation of the NY Fed. The parties reached an agreement on early Monday morning, March 24, on an amended merger agreement which increased the merger consideration to an implied value of approximately $10 per share, required JPMorgan to guarantee Bear Stearns' current and future borrowings from the NY Fed, and provided for JPMorgan to purchase a 39.5% interest in Bear Stearns' common stock for the merger price of $10 per share. As part of the renegotiation, JPMorgan and the NY Fed separately agreed to modify the special funding facility.

On May 29, 2008, a majority of Bear Stearns' stockholders voted to approve the merger transaction. With abstentions and unvoted shares counting against the merger, the transaction passed with 71% of the vote. If the 39.5% block of shares issued to JPMorgan had been excluded, the merger would still have passed with 52% of the vote. However, if all of JPMorgan's shares had been excluded, including the 10% of the outstanding shares purchased on the open market, the measure would have failed with a 42.7% vote. The merger closed on May 30, 2008.

Prior to the shareholder vote on the merger, plaintiffs filed a class action complaint asserting causes of action for breach of fiduciary duty against Bear Stearns and for aiding and abetting a breach of fiduciary duty against JPMorgan.[966] Plaintiffs' "due care" claims were

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965 *Id.*

966 In addition to the instant action filed in New York, litigation had been commenced in Delaware, but Delaware Vice Chancellor Parsons in *In re The Bear Stearns Cos. S'holder Litg.*, granted a stay in favor of the New York action, notwithstanding that the merger agreement provided that it was governed by Delaware law and that any action brought under it shall be brought in Delaware, because the Court was faced with a *sui generis* situation. C.A. No. 3643-VCP,

predicated principally on the haste with which the merger was negotiated, although the Bear Stearns merger was renegotiated and amended after an initial agreement was reached. Plaintiffs also challenged three deal protection devices: (i) an agreement pursuant to which JPMorgan Chase would purchase 39.5% of Bear Stearns' outstanding common stock (to increase the likelihood of shareholder approval), (ii) a "no solicitation" provision preventing Bear Stearns from soliciting additional bidders but permitting the acceptance of a superior proposal if the directors' fiduciary duties so required, and (iii) an option permitting JPMorgan Chase to buy the Bear Stearns headquarters building for $1.1 billion.

In rejecting these claims, the Court found no evidence that the Bear Stearns' Board (comprised of a majority of non-management, non-employee directors and assisted by teams of financial and legal advisers) acted out of self-interest or in bad faith, that the Board members had no financial or other interest distinct from that of the Bear Stearns stockholders at large or any affiliation with JPMorgan, and were not acting to preserve their power in response to overtures by an unwanted suitor or other uninvited bids (any claim regarding an entrenchment motive was negated by the provision in the merger agreement requiring the directors to resign). The Court explained its decision as follows:

> In response to a sudden and rapidly-escalating liquidity crisis, Bear Stearns' directors acted expeditiously to consider the company's limited options. They attempted to salvage some $1.5 billion in shareholder value and averted a bankruptcy that may have returned nothing to the Bear Stearns' shareholders, while wreaking havoc on the financial markets. The Court should not, and will not, second guess their decision.
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> However, even if enhanced scrutiny was applied to the board's decisions, plaintiffs' claim against the Director Defendants would still fail.
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> lf the transaction is viewed as "defensive," under *Unocal*, there is still no showing negating that the directors reasonably perceived and assessed a threat to the corporation. The liquidity crisis genuinely threatened Bear Stearns with extinction, and on three separate occasions within an eleven-day period the company was on the verge of filing for bankruptcy. The threat was so severe that the Federal Reserve intervened to avoid a broader destabilization of the markets. The Bear Stearns board promptly retained competent, independent financial and legal advisers to explore its options. Further, the directors' response was proportionate to the threat. Bear Stearns' very survival and the benefit to shareholders therefrom, depended on consummating a transaction with a financially sound partner. Bear Stearns' agreement to the Share Exchange Agreement, the no solicitation clause and other provisions was essential to ensure JPMorgan's willingness to undertake what it perceived as significant risks involved in guaranteeing Bear Stearns' obligations, and to assure customers and counterparties that the deal would go through. Having contacted over a dozen

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2008 WL 959992 (Del Ch. Apr. 9, 2008). The Court noted that this was an extraordinary situation unlikely to recur or have wide application and involving the Federal Reserve Bank and the Department of Treasury in which inconsistent rulings could "negatively impact not only the parties involved but also the U.S. financial markets and the national economy." *Id.* at *8.

other potential corporate parties without obtaining a viable alternative bid, its accommodation of JPMorgan's contractual demands to insure increased deal certainty, and to placate the demonstrably unsettled market concerns, was neither "draconian" nor outside the "range of reasonableness".

These same considerations satisfy any burden the Director Defendants might have had under *Blasius*, pursuant to which a compelling justification may be found where the "directors act for the purpose of preserving what the directors believe in good faith to be a value-maximizing offer". Despite the exigent circumstances, the directors were able to reject or moderate some of JPMorgan's proposed terms.

* * *

Additionally, even if the Director Defendants had duties under *Revlon* to pursue maximum shareholder value, such a duty has been met. A satisfactory showing under *Revlon* has been made where, as here, the directors: were sophisticated and knowledgeable about the industry and strategic alternatives available to the company; were involved in the negotiation process and bargained hard; relied on expert advice; and received a fairness opinion from a financial advisor. Moreover, *Revlon* duties may be fulfilled where, as here, the corporation is operating under extreme time pressure and can locate only one bona fide bidder despite its best efforts to find competing offers. The "*board's actions must be evaluated in light of relevant circumstances to determine if they were undertaken with due diligence and in good faith*". A "*court applying enhanced judicial scrutiny should be deciding whether the directors made a reasonable decision, not a perfect decision . . . [i]f a board selected one of several reasonable alternatives, a court should not second-guess that choice even though it might have decided otherwise or subsequent events may have cast doubt on the board's determination*".[967]

Plaintiffs contended that the Bear Stearns directors did not adequately explore alternatives to the merger with JPMorgan Chase, including a spin-off, a partial bankruptcy or a sale of assets, any of which could have achieved a better result. After considering reports from experts for plaintiffs and defendants, the Court concluded that "[t]he dispute between the experts is clearly one involving business judgment, which was within the board's discretion to resolve."[968]

The Court found that the directors faced a "very real emergency" and "real time pressure" because "[t]he company could simply not continue to carry on its major operations . . . unless it had put some major financing, or a major transaction which would carry with it major financing, into place. No options appeared to be available other than the merger transaction with JPMorgan."[969] The Court found that (i) there were no other actual or potential bidders even

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967 *Bear Stearns*, 870 NYS.2d at 731-32 (internal citations omitted) (emphasis in original).

968 *Id.* at 736.

969 *Id.* at 730-31.

though more than a dozen other parties had been contacted and Bear Stearns' financial distress was "extraordinarily well-publicized," (ii) the directors were able to reject or moderate some of JPMorgan Chase's demands and (iii) JPMorgan Chase increased the implied per share consideration from $2 in the initial merger agreement to $10 in the amended agreement.[970]

The Court also rejected the specific challenges to the deal protection devices, finding, among other things, that the building purchase option was at fair value and the "no solicitation" clause that prohibited Bear Stearns from actively soliciting alternative proposals had not prevented the board from entertaining additional offers, and found that the deal protections were "essential to ensure JPMorgan's willingness to undertake what it perceived as significant risks involved in guaranteeing Bear Stearns' obligations, and to assure customers and counterparties that the deal would go through."[971] In rejecting challenges to the deal protection provisions in the merger agreement, the Court wrote:

> The *Revlon* standard, concerned with the sale or transfer of control, is also not applicable here. Bear Stearns' issuance to JPMorgan of a 39.5% block of its shares was not a transfer of a controlling interest. Even after JPMorgan purchased an additional 10% on the open market, it did not become a majority shareholder. Rather, the public shareholders retained ultimate control. Plaintiffs' conclusory averments that the merger constituted a sale of transfer of control, or made the break-up of Bear Stearns inevitable, do not alter the essential nature of the merger transaction.
>
> Heightened scrutiny of the merger protection provisions is simply not warranted in the instant case.
>
> Inasmuch as, none of the enhanced standards apply, the deal protection measures are reviewable only under the business judgment rule. Plaintiffs have not made the requisite showing of self-dealing or disloyalty. Rather, the board was apparently concerned with preserving Bear Stearns' existence by ensuring a merger with the only bidder possessing the credibility and financial strength to help facilitate a government-assisted rescue.
>
> * * *
>
> Most importantly, under any standard, it is clear that the no solicitation clause did not prevent Bear Stearns from entertaining additional offers or sharing the necessary information with prospective partners. Bear Stearns' financial distress was extraordinarily well publicized and Lazard had already solicited the most likely merger candidates. *It simply cannot be said that the clause precluded any additional offers. In fact, it is quite apparent that there were no other potential or actual purchasers of Bear Stearns, in the circumstances which the company found itself. No other bidders were found despite Lazard's efforts.* Thus. the no solicitation clause did not limit competition for Bear Stearns shares.

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970 *Id.* at 735.

971 *Id.* at 731.

> The financial catastrophe confronting Bear Stearns, and the economy generally, justified the inclusion of the various merger protection provisions intended to increase the certainty of the consummation of the transaction with JPMorgan.[972]

The Court also observed that when a corporation is insolvent, its directors also owe duties to its creditors. Thus, the Court stated that the consideration being paid to stockholders was "primarily an incentive to secure approval of the merger" and that "[i]n seeking to maximize shareholder recovery, the directors were thus entitled to consider that the greatest amount that they could demand might reasonably coincide with the lowest price sufficient to induce approval of the merger."[973]

D. Merrill Lynch.

In *County of York Employees Retirement Plan v. Merrill Lynch & Co., Inc.*, stockholders alleged in Delaware Chancery Court that Merrill Lynch's directors "hastily negotiated and agreed to the Merger over a single weekend without 'adequately informing themselves' as to the true value of the Company or the feasibility of securing an alternative transaction."[974] According to plaintiff, the "directors failed to conduct the proper due diligence for the transaction as a result of the speed with which it was put together and did not conduct a pre-agreement market check."[975]

In an October 28, 2008 letter opinion, Vice Chancellor Noble granted plaintiff's motion to expedite discovery, finding through "an almost superficial factual assessment" that certain of plaintiff's due care and disclosure claims against the Merrill Lynch directors were colorable.[976] The Court evaluated the claims under the business judgment rule, commenting that a stock-for-stock merger is not subject to heightened scrutiny under Delaware law absent a showing that the Board acted without due care or loyalty. The Court acknowledged the directors' contentions that "severe time-constraints and an impending crisis absent an immediate transaction" justified their approval of the merger, but reasoned that "[t]he interests of justice are served when such essential and critical facts are properly developed in a manner recognized and accepted for establishing a factual basis for judicial action."[977] Although the Court took judicial notice of "well-known market conditions" generally, it would not do so with respect to Merrill Lynch's financial condition and other internal affairs.[978]

Plaintiff also challenged three deal protection provisions: (i) an equity termination fee capped at 4% of the transaction's total value, commenting that it was "an amount testing the high-end of the termination fees generally approved"; (ii) a "force the vote" provision requiring a shareholder vote even if the directors withdraw their support for the merger (e.g., in the event of

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[972] *Id.* at 733-35.

[973] *Id.* at 737.

[974] C.A. No. 4066-VCN, 2008 WL 4824053, at *5 (Del. Ch. Oct. 28, 2008).

[975] *Id.* at *5.

[976] *Id.* at *6.

[977] *Id.*

[978] *Id.*

a superior proposal); and (iii) a no shop provision that precluded the Board from soliciting other offers after the agreement was signed.[979]

After acknowledging that such provisions had been approved in other Delaware cases and commenting that "deal protection devices must be viewed in the overall context; checking them off in isolation is not the proper methodology," the Court ruled that "[i]n light of Merrill's choice to eschew a pre-agreement market check, and to conduct a truncated valuation of the Company, these provisions are suspect to an extent, and as such allow the Plaintiff to present colorable claims."[980]

The Court denied defendants motions to dismiss or stay the proceedings and ordered limited expedited discovery. On November 21, 2008, the defendants entered into a memorandum of understanding with the plaintiffs in this action regarding a settlement of the case which resulted in Merrill Lynch making additional disclosures in its proxy statement relating to its merger with Bank of America and plaintiffs being entitled to apply for an award of attorneys fees, all subject to court approval.[981] The merger was subsequently approved by the Merrill Lynch stockholders and was consummated on January 1, 2009.

E. Wachovia.

In *Ehrenhaus v. Baker*, a North Carolina state court declined to preliminarily enjoin a vote on the stock-for-stock merger transaction between Wachovia (a North Carolina corporation) and Wells Fargo (a Delaware corporation).[982] The challenge was that the Wachovia directors abdicated their fiduciary responsibilities to stockholders by entering into an inferior transaction rather than waiting for government assistance and by agreeing to deal protection devices that were preclusive and coercive.

The *Wachovia* decision turned on its facts. In September 2008, Wachovia was the fourth largest bank holding company in the U.S. and Wells Fargo was the fifth largest bank holding company in the United States. A financial crisis was engulfing Wachovia and the world when the Wachovia Board met in the evening of October 2, 2008 to consider a merger with Wells Fargo.

For several months prior to that meeting, the Wachovia Board was monitoring the troubled capital markets and considering strategic alternatives. On September 20, 2008, U.S. government officials had expressed concern to the company's management about Wachovia's liquidity posture and encouraged the company to consider acquisition proposals from an unidentified third-party suitor. Wachovia's management initiated that process the next day, but those talks broke off without an agreement.

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979 *Id.* at *7.

980 *Id.*

981 *See* Merrill Lynch & Co., Current Report (Form 8-K) (November 21, 2008) (describing three other purported class actions filed on behalf of Merrill Lynch stockholders in the Supreme Court of the State of New York, County of New York in respect of the merger that were also settled).

982 *Ehrenhaus v. Baker*, No. C.A. 08 CVS 22632, 2008 NCBC 20, 2008 WL 5124899 (N.C. Super. Ct. Dec 05, 2008).

On September 25, 2008, the combination of the seizure of Washington Mutual by federal regulators and Congress' rejection of the U.S. Treasury's bailout plan exacerbated Wachovia's liquidity crisis and caused a precipitous decline in the company's share price. At a telephone Board meeting, on September 26, management informed the Board that if a combination with another partner could not be arranged by Monday, September 29, the FDIC would place Wachovia's bank subsidiaries in receivership.

Over the weekend of September 27–28, 2008, Wachovia engaged in parallel negotiations with Citigroup, Inc. and Wells Fargo over terms of a potential merger. Neither suitor was willing to move forward without government assistance in the form of a loss-sharing arrangement. Citigroup, moreover, was only willing to consider the acquisition of the Company's bank subsidiaries.

On September 28, 2008, the FDIC notified the Company that, because the potential failure of Wachovia posed a "systemic risk" to the banking system, it intended to exercise its authority under federal law to force the sale of Wachovia to another financial institution in an "open bank assisted transaction."[983] Following another Board meeting, Wachovia's management proposed an alternative transaction to the FDIC in a bid to allow Wachovia to remain independent. The FDIC, however, rejected that proposal and declared instead "that Citigroup would acquire Wachovia's bank subsidiaries" with assistance from the FDIC.[984]

On September 29, 2008, Citigroup and Wachovia signed an agreement-in-principle by which Citigroup would acquire Wachovia's bank subsidiaries for $2.16 billion in cash and/or stock at Citigroup's election and assume approximately $53.2 billion of Wachovia's debt. The Citigroup merger would have left Wachovia as a stand-alone entity, but with its principal businesses limited to its retail brokerage and mutual fund operations. The Citigroup merger would have required the FDIC to provide Citigroup with loss protection on a $312 billion Wachovia loan portfolio.

On October 2, 2008, Wells Fargo tendered a merger proposal to acquire all of Wachovia's assets without government assistance in a stock-for-stock transaction that was worth more than $15 billion to Wachovia's shareholders. The Wells Fargo merger agreement also provided that Wells Fargo would purchase Wachovia Preferred Stock representing 39.9% of the Company's aggregate voting rights, including the right to vote on the approval of the Merger Agreement. The merger agreement prohibited Wachovia from soliciting alternative acquisition proposals. If the Wachovia Board received what it considered to be a proposal superior to the terms of the merger agreement, it could negotiate with the third-party bidder but would have to submit the Wells Fargo merger agreement to the Wachovia shareholders, although the Board could decline to recommend the Wells Fargo merger and communicate the basis for its lack of recommendation to the shareholders.

In response to the Board's inquiry whether further negotiations with Wells Fargo would be likely to yield more favorable terms, Wachovia's advisors counseled against such negotiations under the circumstances, and indicated that they expected to be able to render an opinion that the

983 *Id.* at *4.

984 *Id.* at *5.

exchange ratio contained in the merger agreement was fair, from a financial point of view, to Wachovia shareholders. In considering the merits of the merger agreement, the Board took into account the current and recent stresses on Wachovia's liquidity, and determined that the Wells Fargo merger would provide a strategic fit with a company with a strong balance sheet that had managed to avoid the negative impact of the crisis in the capital markets. The Board understood that the merger agreement was a "change in control" transaction that would result in (i) eleven of Wachovia's executive officers and the Board Chairman receiving vested stock option benefits totaling approximately $2.5 million, as a group, and (ii) ten executive officers being entitled to receive an aggregate amount of up to $98.1 million in severance payments should they be terminated from their employment following approval of the merger.

The Board also was aware that the FDIC had rebuffed an earlier attempt by Wachovia's management to obtain government assistance to allow Wachovia to remain a stand-alone entity and that the FDIC was again threatening to place Wachovia into receivership if a merger did not materialize with either Citigroup or Wells Fargo by the end of the day on October 3, 2008, which in turn would likely result in Wachovia shareholders receiving little or no value for their equity. After discussing the options available to them, the Board concluded that the Wells Fargo merger agreement provided an opportunity for enhanced financial performance and shareholder value and was otherwise fair to, and in the best interest of, Wachovia shareholders. Accordingly, the Board voted unanimously to approve it.

On October 12, 2008, the Federal Reserve Board approved the Wells Fargo merger noting that "the unusual and exigent circumstances affecting the financial markets [and] the weakened financial condition of Wachovia . . . justified expeditious action."[985]

Plaintiff contended that the Wells Fargo merger agreement provided for inadequate consideration to Wachovia's shareholders and substantially deprives the shareholders of their ability to "determine the appropriateness and fairness of the transaction."[986] According to plaintiff, the valuation of Wachovia's stock at the time of execution of the Wells Fargo merger agreement was substantially below the stock's market price a week earlier and was inconsistent with pronouncements made to the media by Wachovia's President and CEO two weeks earlier purportedly touting Wachovia's viability as an independent entity. Plaintiff's principal complaints, however, related to the defensive measures embedded in the merger agreement by which the Board "handed to Wells Fargo almost 40% of Wachovia's voting rights whether the merger was ultimately approved or not."[987]

In refusing to enjoin a shareholder vote on the proposed merger, the Court applied North Carolina law because Wachovia was a North Carolina corporation, but explained that North Carolina courts look to Delaware when interpreting North Carolina corporate law: "Although the corporate law of North Carolina and Delaware are not in complete lockstep, the North Carolina courts frequently look to Delaware for guidance on questions of corporate governance

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985 *Id.* at *7.

986 *Id.* at *8.

987 *Id.*

because of the special expertise and body of case law developed in the Delaware Chancery Court and the Delaware Supreme Court."[988]

In North Carolina, corporate directors' fiduciary duties are codified. North Carolina General Statutes § 55-8-30 requires directors to discharge their duties "(1) In good faith; (2) With the care an ordinarily prudent person in a like position would exercise under similar circumstances; and (3) In a manner [they] reasonably believe[] to be in the best interests of the corporation."[989]

North Carolina law recognizes a business judgment rule comparable to Delaware's. Regarding deal protection, the North Carolina Court quoted from then Delaware Chancery Court Vice-Chancellor (now Delaware Supreme Court Chief Justice) Myron T. Steele that the relevant question is whether the deal protection measures are actionably coercive on the shareholders and whether "the vote will be a valid and independent exercise of the shareholders' franchise, without any specific preordained result which precludes them from rationally determining the fate of the proposed merger."[990]

Plaintiff's principal argument focused on the duty of care and contended that the Wachovia Board was neither "attentive" nor "informed" as to the substantive deal protection devices embedded in the merger agreement. In determining whether the Board was attentive and informed when it approved the merger agreement, the Court examined the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the decisions made by the directors:

- The Board (all of whom save one are outside directors) faced a financial crisis of historic proportions;
- In the second quarter of 2008, Wachovia had reported a loss of $ 9.1 billion;
- The Board had previously fired the Company's CEO;
- Over the mere span of weeks, the Board had seen the demise of other venerable financial institutions via bankruptcy or liquidation;
- The U.S. House of Representatives had rejected the U.S. Treasury's original bailout bill aimed at providing relief to the capital markets;
- The Company's stock price had plummeted nearly 90% in ten days;
- Wachovia was facing an extreme liquidity crisis that had gotten the attention of federal regulators, who had effectively demanded that the Company merge with another financial institution to avoid a forced liquidation;

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988 *Id.* at *9 n.19 (quoting *First Union Corp. v. SunTrust Banks, Inc.*, 2001 NCBC 9A ¶ 32 (N.C. Super. Ct. Aug. 10, 2001), *available at* http://www.ncbusinesscourt.net/opinions/2001%20NCBC%2009A.pdf).

989 N.C. GEN. STAT. § 55-8-30.

990 *In re IXC Commc'ns, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, C.A. Nos. 17324, 17334, 1999 Del. Ch. LEXIS 210, at *3 (Del. Ch. Oct. 27, 1999).

- Although the Board had little time to digest the merger agreement, it was not acting in an information vacuum as to the precarious financial stability of the Company, having met nine times in the preceding two weeks; and been informed that other merger options had been explored as well as attempts to raise capital and sell assets and made an unsuccessful overture to federal regulators for assistance in allowing the Company to remain independent;

- The Board understood and appreciated the substantive terms of the merger agreement, including the deal protection devices embedded therein, and it had the benefit of counsel from legal and financial advisors;

- In deciding whether to accept the less palatable terms of the merger agreement, the Board weighed the certain value of the transaction against the risks of further negotiations with its two suitors and the very real probability that failure to consummate a merger (whether with Wells Fargo or Citigroup) would exacerbate Wachovia's liquidity crisis and result in a seizure of the Company's banking assets by federal regulators and the elimination of all shareholder equity;

- Following the Board's approval of the merger agreement, Wachovia posted a loss of more than $20 billion for the third quarter of 2008;

- No other entity had made a bid to purchase Wachovia; and

- There was no evidence that the U.S. government would assist Wachovia in remaining a stand-alone entity should the Wells Fargo merger not be consummated.[991]

After considering these circumstances, the Court concluded that:

> [T]he Board's decision-making process, although necessarily compressed given the extraordinary circumstances confronting it, was reasonable and fell within the standard of care demanded by law.
>
> What makes this case unique is the presence of the 800-pound gorilla in the Wachovia board room, in the form of the U.S. government's pervasive regulatory oversight over bank holding companies.
>
> Indeed, there is little doubt that the threat of government intervention (in the form of a forced liquidation of the Company's banking assets) weighed heavily on the Board as it considered the Merger Agreement.
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> In that regard, this case does not fit neatly into conventional business judgment rule jurisprudence, which assumes the presence of a free and competitive market to assess the value and merits of a transaction.[992]

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[991] *Ehrenhaus*, 2008 WL 5124899, at *13.

> But other than insisting that he would have stood firm in the eye of what can only be described as a cataclysmic financial storm, Plaintiff offers nothing to suggest that the Board's response to the Hobson's choice before it was unreasonable.
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> * * *
>
> Instead, what was clear to the Board as it met late in the evening on 2 October 2008 was that if it failed to consummate a merger with either Citigroup or Wells Fargo by the end of the day on 3 October 2008, it faced the very real prospect of a government-directed liquidation of the Company's banking assets and, with it, the loss of most, if not all, of the shareholder equity.[993]

The merger agreement contained the following deal protection provisions: (i) an agreement under which Wells Fargo was issued new preferred stock constituting 39.9% of Wachovia's aggregate voting power, which stock could, in certain circumstances, not be redeemed by Wachovia for 18 months even if Wachovia's stockholders disapproved the transaction, (ii) a "no solicitation" provision that precluded Wachovia from soliciting other bids, and (iii) a "force the vote" provision that required the merger to be put to stockholder vote even if the directors did not recommend approval (for example, if Wachovia were to receive a superior proposal from another bidder). Applying North Carolina's business judgment rule, the Court found that these deal protection devices – with one modification – did not constitute a breach of fiduciary duty. Although the 39.9% stock issuance to Wells Fargo created a "substantial hurdle" to defeating the transaction, it neither "precluded other bidders from coming forward" nor "forced management's preferred alternative upon the stockholders."[994] It did not preclude other bidders because an absolute majority of shares required for approval of the merger was not "locked up," given that 60% of the shares could vote against the transaction. Nor was it "coercive" because there was no other offer except a proposal from Citigroup that the Court characterized as "markedly inferior." The Court also held that the "force the vote" provision was not problematic because the Wachovia board retained the ability to explain its rationale for withdrawing its recommendation, even if a shareholder vote took place in the face of a "superior proposal." The Court did strike down the 18-month tail period for redemption of the preferred stock issued to Wells Fargo, reasoning that if the Wachovia stockholders voted down the merger, "the Board's duty to seek out other merger partners should not be impeded by a suitor with substantial voting power whose overtures have already been rejected."[995]

F. National City.

On July 31, 2009, the Delaware Court of Chancery approved a settlement in *In re National City Corp. Shareholders Litigation*.[996] Three days after the October 24, 2008 announcement of the proposed acquisition of National City Corporation ("NCC") by PNC

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992 *See First Union Corp. v. SunTrust Banks, Inc.*, 2001 NCBC 9A ¶ 32 (N.C. Super. Ct. Aug. 10, 2001), *available at* http://www.ncbusinesscourt.net/opinions/2001%20NCBC%2009A.pdf).

993 *Ehrenhaus*, 2008 WL 5124899, at *14.

994 *Id.* at *16.

995 *Id.* at *18.

996 C.A. No. 4123-CC (Del. Ch. July 31, 2009).

Financial Services group, Inc. ("*PNC*"), shareholders of NCC sued to enjoin the merger, alleging that the members of NCC's Board breached the fiduciary duties they owed to NCC's shareholders and that PNC aided and abetted those breaches. Plaintiffs and defendants eventually negotiated a settlement agreement which resulted in the defendants providing additional disclosures in connection with the merger, but no changes were made to the merger's financial terms. On December 23, 2008, NCC's shareholders voted to approve the merger and on December 31, 2008 it was consummated.

In approving a settlement of the National City litigation, Chancellor Chandler explained the background of the acquisition and his reasoning as follows:

> By September 2008, NCC, like many large financial institutions at that time, faced capital and liquidity challenges arising from disruptions in the credit and housing markets. The NCC board actively considered a variety of strategic options to deal with the growing crisis. After the events of September 2008, however, which included the failures of several large financial institutions, NCC was on the brink of failure. NCC faced concerns from depositors and counterparties, with many believing that NCC would be the next bank to fail.
>
> Against this backdrop, NCC considered its strategic alternatives. The board met with its legal and financial advisors eight times during the month of October, and had informal, nightly status calls on other days. As a result of that process, only U.S. Bancorp ("USB") emerged as a potential merger partner, but it proposed a transaction at only a fraction of NCC's then-current market capitalization of $6.3 billion. The Office of the Comptroller of the Currency ("OCC") nonetheless encouraged a merger between NCC and USB, and actively monitored negotiations.
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> * * *
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> Before the board could approve the USB transaction, PNC submitted a significantly higher competing offer of $5.45 billion. USB refused to counter-bid and withdrew entirely from the bidding process. Nevertheless, NCC negotiated a further price increase from PNC. With no superior alternatives available, NCC's board approved the PNC transaction.
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> * * *
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> In exchange for a release of their claims, plaintiffs were able to cause NCC to issue additional disclosures to its shareholders. Although minor, the disclosures obtained by plaintiffs did provide a benefit, albeit a meager benefit, to NCC's shareholders.
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> * * *
>
> It is clear that by September and October 2008 NCC faced extraordinary circumstances as it was roiled by the economic crisis that engulfed the entire financial industry. Plaintiffs' claims centered on the alleged breach of fiduciary

duties that NCC's board committed while it attempted to sell NCC during the financial crisis. In particular, plaintiffs alleged that NCC's board had failed to maximize the sale price and had allowed PNC to buy NCC "on the cheap." Later, plaintiffs' amended their complaint to add disclosure claims regarding NCC's preliminary proxy.

Plaintiffs faced an uphill battle in proving their fiduciary duty claims. The merger NCC negotiated with PNC was a strategic, stock-for-stock merger of two unaffiliated, widely held corporations. After the merger, control of the combined entity remained in a "large, fluid, changeable and changing market." Thus, absent evidence of interestedness or disloyalty to the corporation, decisions by NCC's board would be entitled to the protections of the business judgment rule, which would prevent this Court from second guessing director decisions if they were the product of a rational process and the directors availed themselves of all material and reasonably available information. The plaintiffs' complain offered nothing to rebut the presumption of the business judgment rule. Furthermore, NCC had adopted a provision in its certificate of incorporation pursuant to 8 Del. C. § 102(b)(7), which would cause plaintiffs to have to demonstrate that NCC's directors acted, among other things, in bad faith.

The objectors contend that NCC's management acted in its own self interest in approving the merger because fourteen offices of the Company received change-in-control payments at the completion of the merger. But NCC's board, not its management, approved the merger, and only one member of the board … was also an officer of NCC. There are no allegations that any of the other board members received change-of-control or unique payments as a result of the merger. The Delaware Supreme Court has "never held that one director's colorable interest in a challenged transaction is sufficient, without more, to deprive a *board* of the protection of the business judgment rule presumption of loyalty." Indeed, "self-interest, alone, is not a disqualifying factor even for a director. To disqualify a director, for rule rebuttal purposes, there must be evidence of disloyalty." The objectors fail to point to any evidence that NCC's board acted with disloyalty. If anything, the NCC directors' interests were consistent with NCC shareholders. The eleven outside directors held over 1,000,000 shares of NCC stock, aligning their interests with that of shareholders—to obtain the highest possible value for their shares.

Ultimately, the probability that plaintiffs would have been successful on the merits of their fiduciary duty claims is remote. Plaintiffs were able to cause NCC to make additional disclosures, which provided NCC's shareholders with further information concerning the potential conflicts of NCC's financial advisor, Goldman Sachs, as well as further insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the Company. These disclosures, in my opinion, amount to an exceedingly modest benefit to the shareholder class. Since plaintiffs' fiduciary duty claims lacked any probability of success on the merits, the additional disclosures plaintiffs' obtained constituted a reasonable, though meager, benefit to the class. Therefore, I

conclude that the settlement represents a fair and reasonable compromise and should be approved.

In ruling on the fee application of plaintiffs' counsel and approving a $400,000 fee instead of the $1.2 million fee which had been agreed in the settlement, the Chancellor wrote:

> Although the additional disclosures constitute a benefit of sufficient weight to justify approval of the settlement in light of the difficulty of the substantive claims plaintiffs raised, the disclosures do not justify a substantial fee. As a result of plaintiffs' counsel's prosecution and ultimate settlement of this litigation, the shareholder class received the benefit of a few additional disclosures filed on NCC's form 8-K. For this non-monetary, therapeutic and modest achievement in a case where counsel bitterly complained that NCC shareholders were being shortchanged, plaintiffs' counsel seeks the princely sum of $1.2 million as their fees and expenses. NCC or its successor agreed to pay any fee approved by the Court up to $1.2 million and, according to the parties, the fee was negotiated after the settlement negotiations had concluded, but was included in the memorandum of understanding entered into by the parties and submitted to the Court.
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> * * *
>
> I conclude that an award commensurate with the benefit obtained for the shareholder class and the amount of effort plaintiffs' counsel actually expended in connection with this litigation is $400,000. Plaintiffs' counsel only achieved meager additional disclosures that failed to be significant enough to warrant placement as an amendment to the proxy statement and were only reported on NCC's form 8-K. * * * Thus, I will not defer to the negotiated fee in this case. Instead, in the exercise of my discretion, I award $400,000 in attorney fees and expenses. . . .

G. Observations from Merrill Lynch, Bear Stearns, Wachovia and National City.

The decisions in *Merrill Lynch*, *Bear Stearns*, *Wachovia* and *National City* show that courts will scrutinize quickly made decisions under traditional principles before giving target directors the benefit of the business judgment rule. Extraordinary circumstances, however, may result in a different result than was reached by the Delaware Chancery Court in *Ryan v. Lyondell Chemical Company* in 2008[997] in stigmatizing Board action in a compressed period when there was no 800-pound gorilla at the door.

The unique circumstances facing the financial sector undoubtedly impacted the courts' views of the substantive deal protection devices. Issuing nearly 40% of the target's voting power to the acquiror – as in *Bear Stearns* and *Wachovia* – to ensure that the transactions secured stockholder approval was reflective of the unique economic environment and a lack of negotiating leverage by the target board. But, in each transaction, the court found that there were

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[997] *See supra* notes 588-600 and related text (discussing Lyondell).

no superior proposals, and there existed an urgent need to ensure deal certainty with an interested suitor in order to secure any value for the shareholders. The lack of alternative proposals was a function not of the deal protection devices, but of the absence of any credible third-party interest. The 800-pound gorilla at the door was a fact legitimately considered by the directors. Nevertheless, the *Merrill Lynch* Court refused to accede to the target's request that it simply take "judicial notice" of the financial condition of Merrill Lynch and approve the deal protection devices that were generally customary under Delaware law.

While courts will give substantial deference to target boards operating in financially stressful situations, such deference is not without limit. Although the *Wachovia* Court understood that Wells Fargo had demanded the issuance of the preferred stock as a *sine qua non* of any transaction, the Court effectively second-guessed the Board's decision to approve one aspect of the preferred stock (the 18-month tail provision). In this instance the *Wachovia* Court's modification had no practical consequence as Wachovia's stockholders approved the merger, but courts in other situations may strike down provisions that potentially restrict stockholder ability to consider superior offers and that give the impression of overreaching in negotiations where one side has little leverage.[998]

X. Governing Documents.

A. Charter.

1. Primacy of Charter.

In both Delaware and Texas a for-profit corporation is formed by filing with the applicable Secretary of State a charter document,[999] which is the highest governing document of a corporation. In Delaware this takes the form of a certificate of incorporation, while in Texas this document is called a certificate of formation (hereinafter for both states, the "*Charter*").[1000] In Delaware the Charter's primacy comes from DGCL § 109, which provides that "[t]he bylaws may contain any provision, not inconsistent with law *or with the certificate of incorporation*, relating to the business of the corporation, the conduct of its affairs, and its rights or powers or the rights or powers of its stockholders, directors, officers, or employees" (emphasis added).[1001] Texas has similar statutory authority from TBOC § 21.057 which states: "The bylaws may contain provisions for the regulation and management of the affairs of the corporation that are consistent with law and *the corporation's certificate of formation*" (emphasis added).[1002]

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998 *See, e.g., Omnicare, Inc. v. NCS Healthcare, Inc.*, 818 A.2d 914 (Del. 2003); *supra* notes 780-786 (discussing *Omnicare*). *See also* Marcel Kahan and Edward Rock, *When the Government is the Controlling Shareholder: Implications for Delaware*, 35 DEL. J. CORP. L. 409 (2010).

999 TBOC §§ 3.001-3.008; DGCL § 1.01.

1000 *Id.*

1001 DGCL § 109.

1002 TBOC § 21.057(b).

2. Adoption and Amendment of the Charter.

Under both Delaware and Texas law, a Charter must be filed with the Secretary of State to bring a corporation into existence.[1003] Under the DGCL, different rules apply for the adoption of an amendment to the Charter depending on the circumstances the corporation is in at the time. Before the corporation has received payment for any stock, if no directors were named in the Charter, then the incorporators can amend the charter by a majority vote.[1004] If directors were named, then they can amend the Charter by majority vote.[1005] If payment was received for stock, then the following procedure must be observed. First, the Board must adopt a resolution setting forth the amendment proposed, declaring its advisability, and either calling a special meeting of the stockholders entitled to vote on the amendment or directing that the amendment proposed be considered at the next annual meeting of the stockholders (with all of the regular notice rules applying).[1006] Then, if a majority of the outstanding stock entitled to vote on the amendment approve it, a certificate setting forth the amendment must be filed with the Delaware Secretary of State.[1007] Alternatively, the amendment could be approved by written consent of the number of shareholders that would be necessary under the Charter to approve the action.[1008]

Under the TBOC, the board must first adopt a resolution stating a proposed amendment to the Charter. As under the DGCL, different rules apply under the TBOC for the adoption of an amendment to the Charter depending on the circumstances the corporation is in at the time. If no shares of stock have been issued the Board may adopt a proposed amendment to the Charter by resolution without shareholder approval.[1009] If a corporation has outstanding and issued shares, however, the resolution passed by the directors must include a provision to submit the amendment to a shareholder vote and then the shareholders must approve the amendment.[1010] The corporation must then hold a meeting to consider the proposed amendment obeying all the usual rules for notice to shareholders and the number of shareholders required for an approval of a fundamental action under either the Charter or the default rules.[1011] Alternatively, the

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1003 TBOC §§ 3.001-3.008; DGCL § 1.01.

1004 DGCL § 241.

1005 *Id.*

1006 DGCL § 242.

1007 *Id.* DGCL § 242 further provides that: "The holders of the outstanding shares of a class shall be entitled to vote as a class upon a proposed amendment, whether or not entitled to vote thereon by the certificate of incorporation, if the amendment would increase or decrease the aggregate number of authorized shares of such class, increase or decrease the par value of the shares of such class, or alter or change the powers, preferences, or special rights of the shares of such class so as to affect them adversely. If any proposed amendment would alter or change the powers, preferences, or special rights of 1 or more series of any class so as to affect them adversely, but shall not so affect the entire class, then only the shares of the series so affected by the amendment shall be considered a separate class for the purposes of this paragraph. The number of authorized shares of any such class or classes of stock may be increased or decreased (but not below the number of shares thereof then outstanding) by the affirmative vote of the holders of a majority of the stock of the corporation entitled to vote irrespective of this subsection, if so provided in the original certificate of incorporation, in any amendment thereto which created such class or classes of stock or which was adopted prior to the issuance of any shares of such class or classes of stock, or in any amendment thereto which was authorized by a resolution or resolutions adopted by the affirmative vote of the holders of a majority of such class or classes of stock." *Id.*

1008 DGCL § 228.

1009 TBOC § 21.053.

1010 TBOC § 21.054.

1011 TBOC § 21.055.

amendment could be approved by unanimous written consent of the shareholders or, if the Charter allows it, by written consent of the number of shareholders that would be necessary under the Charter to approve the action.[1012] After the requisite approvals, the Charter is amended by filing a certificate of amendment with the Texas Secretary of State.[1013]

3. Contents.

Both Delaware and Texas require certain information to be included in the Charter. In Delaware the Charter must contain the name of the corporation, the address of the corporation's registered office in Delaware; the nature of the business or purposes to be conducted or promoted; if the corporation has only one class of stock, the total number of shares of stock which the corporation shall have authority to issue and the par value of each of such shares, or a statement that all such shares are to be without par value or if the corporation is to be authorized to issue more than one class of stock, the Charter shall set forth the total number of shares of all classes of stock which the corporation shall have authority to issue and the number of shares of each class and shall specify each class the shares of which are to be without par value and each class the shares of which are to have par value and the par value of the shares of each such class; and the name and mailing address of the incorporator or incorporators.[1014] Additionally, if the corporation desires to include such provisions it must include a statement of designation for all classes of shares and if the powers of the incorporator or incorporators are to terminate upon the filing of the Charter, the names and mailing addresses of the persons who are to serve as directors until the first annual meeting of stockholders or until their successors are elected and qualify.[1015] DGCL § 102(b) provides for permissive inclusion of certain provisions in the

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1012 TBOC §§ 6.201 and 6.202.

1013 TBOC §§ 3.052-3.054.

1014 DGCL § 102(a).

1015 *Id*. The full text of DGCL § 102(a) is as follows:

> (a) The certificate of incorporation shall set forth:
>
> (1) The name of the corporation, which (i) shall contain 1 of the words "association," "company," "corporation," "club," "foundation," "fund," "incorporated," "institute," "society," "union," "syndicate," or "limited," (or abbreviations thereof, with or without punctuation), or words (or abbreviations thereof, with or without punctuation) of like import of foreign countries or jurisdictions (provided they are written in roman characters or letters); provided, however, that the Division of Corporations in the Department of State may waive such requirement (unless it determines that such name is, or might otherwise appear to be, that of a natural person) if such corporation executes, acknowledges and files with the Secretary of State in accordance with § 103 of this title a certificate stating that its total assets, as defined in subsection (i) of § 503 of this title, are not less than $10,000,000, (ii) shall be such as to distinguish it upon the records in the office of the Division of Corporations in the Department of State from the names that are reserved on such records and from the names on such records of each other corporation, partnership, limited partnership, limited liability company or statutory trust organized or registered as a domestic or foreign corporation, partnership, limited partnership, limited liability company or statutory trust under the laws of this State, except with the written consent of the person who has reserved such name or such other foreign corporation or domestic or foreign partnership, limited partnership, limited liability company or statutory trust, executed, acknowledged and filed with the Secretary of State in accordance with § 103 of this title and (iii) shall not contain the word "bank," or any variation thereof, except for the name of a bank reporting to and under the supervision of the State Bank Commissioner of this State or a subsidiary of a bank or savings association (as those terms are defined in the Federal Deposit Insurance Act, as amended, at 12 U.S.C. § 1813), or a corporation regulated under the Bank Holding Company Act of 1956, as amended, 12 U.S.C. § 1841 et seq., or the Home Owners' Loan Act, as amended, 12 U.S.C. § 1461 et seq.; provided, however, that this section shall not be construed to prevent the use of the word "bank," or any variation thereof, in a context clearly not purporting to refer to a banking business or otherwise likely to mislead the public about the nature of the business of the corporation

Charter and includes any provision for the management of the business and for the conduct of the affairs of the corporation; any provision creating, defining, limiting and regulating the powers of the corporation, the directors, and the stockholders, or any class of the stockholders; any provision that is required or permitted to be stated in the bylaws; preemptive rights provisions; provisions increasing the voting requirements of stockholders or directors for certain issues; a provision limiting the corporation's existence to a specified date; provisions imposing personal liability on stockholders for the debts of the corporation; or provisions eliminating or limiting the personal liability of a director.[1016]

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or to lead to a pattern and practice of abuse that might cause harm to the interests of the public or the State as determined by the Division of Corporations in the Department of State;

(2) The address (which shall include the street, number, city and county) of the corporation's registered office in this State, and the name of its registered agent at such address;

(3) The nature of the business or purposes to be conducted or promoted. It shall be sufficient to state, either alone or with other businesses or purposes, that the purpose of the corporation is to engage in any lawful act or activity for which corporations may be organized under the General Corporation Law of Delaware, and by such statement all lawful acts and activities shall be within the purposes of the corporation, except for express limitations, if any;

(4) If the corporation is to be authorized to issue only 1 class of stock, the total number of shares of stock which the corporation shall have authority to issue and the par value of each of such shares, or a statement that all such shares are to be without par value. If the corporation is to be authorized to issue more than 1 class of stock, the certificate of incorporation shall set forth the total number of shares of all classes of stock which the corporation shall have authority to issue and the number of shares of each class and shall specify each class the shares of which are to be without par value and each class the shares of which are to have par value and the par value of the shares of each such class. The certificate of incorporation shall also set forth a statement of the designations and the powers, preferences and rights, and the qualifications, limitations or restrictions thereof, which are permitted by § 151 of this title in respect of any class or classes of stock or any series of any class of stock of the corporation and the fixing of which by the certificate of incorporation is desired, and an express grant of such authority as it may then be desired to grant to the board of directors to fix by resolution or resolutions any thereof that may be desired but which shall not be fixed by the certificate of incorporation. The foregoing provisions of this paragraph shall not apply to nonstock corporations. In the case of nonstock corporations, the fact that they are not authorized to issue capital stock shall be stated in the certificate of incorporation. The conditions of membership, or other criteria for identifying members, of nonstock corporations shall likewise be stated in the certificate of incorporation or the bylaws. Nonstock corporations shall have members, but failure to have members shall not affect otherwise valid corporate acts or work a forfeiture or dissolution of the corporation. Nonstock corporations may provide for classes or groups of members having relative rights, powers and duties, and may make provision for the future creation of additional classes or groups of members having such relative rights, powers and duties as may from time to time be established, including rights, powers and duties senior to existing classes and groups of members. Except as otherwise provided in this chapter, nonstock corporations may also provide that any member or class or group of members shall have full, limited, or no voting rights or powers, including that any member or class or group of members shall have the right to vote on a specified transaction even if that member or class or group of members does not have the right to vote for the election of the members of the governing body of the corporation. Voting by members of a nonstock corporation may be on a per capita, number, financial interest, class, group, or any other basis set forth. The provisions referred to in the 3 preceding sentences may be set forth in the certificate of incorporation or the bylaws. If neither the certificate of incorporation nor the bylaws of a nonstock corporation state the conditions of membership, or other criteria for identifying members, the members of the corporation shall be deemed to be those entitled to vote for the election of the members of the governing body pursuant to the certificate of incorporation or bylaws of such corporation or otherwise until thereafter otherwise provided by the certificate of incorporation or the bylaws;

(5) The name and mailing address of the incorporator or incorporators;

(6) If the powers of the incorporator or incorporators are to terminate upon the filing of the certificate of incorporation, the names and mailing addresses of the persons who are to serve as directors until the first annual meeting of stockholders or until their successors are elected and qualify.

[1016] DGCL § 102(b) provides as follows:

In Texas the information that must be included in a corporation's Charter comes first from the general provisions of the TBOC which require inclusion of the name of the filing entity being formed; the type of filing entity being formed; the purpose or purposes for which the filing

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(b) In addition to the matters required to be set forth in the certificate of incorporation by subsection (a) of this section, the certificate of incorporation may also contain any or all of the following matters:

(1) Any provision for the management of the business and for the conduct of the affairs of the corporation, and any provision creating, defining, limiting and regulating the powers of the corporation, the directors, and the stockholders, or any class of the stockholders, or the governing body, members, or any class or group of members of a nonstock corporation; if such provisions are not contrary to the laws of this State. Any provision which is required or permitted by any section of this chapter to be stated in the bylaws may instead be stated in the certificate of incorporation;

(2) The following provisions, in haec verba, (i), for a corporation other than a nonstock corporation, viz:

> "Whenever a compromise or arrangement is proposed between this corporation and its creditors or any class of them and/or between this corporation and its stockholders or any class of them, any court of equitable jurisdiction within the State of Delaware may, on the application in a summary way of this corporation or of any creditor or stockholder thereof or on the application of any receiver or receivers appointed for this corporation under § 291 of Title 8 of the Delaware Code or on the application of trustees in dissolution or of any receiver or receivers appointed for this corporation under § 279 of Title 8 of the Delaware Code order a meeting of the creditors or class of creditors, and/or of the stockholders or class of stockholders of this corporation, as the case may be, to be summoned in such manner as the said court directs. If a majority in number representing three fourths in value of the creditors or class of creditors, and/or of the stockholders or class of stockholders of this corporation, as the case may be, agree to any compromise or arrangement and to any reorganization of this corporation as consequence of such compromise or arrangement, the said compromise or arrangement and the said reorganization shall, if sanctioned by the court to which the said application has been made, be binding on all the creditors or class of creditors, and/or on all the stockholders or class of stockholders, of this corporation, as the case may be, and also on this corporation"; or

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(3) Such provisions as may be desired granting to the holders of the stock of the corporation, or the holders of any class or series of a class thereof, the preemptive right to subscribe to any or all additional issues of stock of the corporation of any or all classes or series thereof, or to any securities of the corporation convertible into such stock. No stockholder shall have any preemptive right to subscribe to an additional issue of stock or to any security convertible into such stock unless, and except to the extent that, such right is expressly granted to such stockholder in the certificate of incorporation. All such rights in existence on July 3, 1967, shall remain in existence unaffected by this paragraph unless and until changed or terminated by appropriate action which expressly provides for the change or termination;

(4) Provisions requiring for any corporate action, the vote of a larger portion of the stock or of any class or series thereof, or of any other securities having voting power, or a larger number of the directors, than is required by this chapter;

(5) A provision limiting the duration of the corporation's existence to a specified date; otherwise, the corporation shall have perpetual existence;

(6) A provision imposing personal liability for the debts of the corporation on its stockholders to a specified extent and upon specified conditions; otherwise, the stockholders of a corporation shall not be personally liable for the payment of the corporation's debts except as they may be liable by reason of their own conduct or acts;

(7) A provision eliminating or limiting the personal liability of a director to the corporation or its stockholders for monetary damages for breach of fiduciary duty as a director, provided that such provision shall not eliminate or limit the liability of a director: (i) For any breach of the director's duty of loyalty to the corporation or its stockholders; (ii) for acts or omissions not in good faith or which involve intentional misconduct or a knowing violation of law; (iii) under § 174 of this title; or (iv) for any transaction from which the director derived an improper personal benefit. No such provision shall eliminate or limit the liability of a director for any act or omission occurring prior to the date when such provision becomes effective. All references in this paragraph to a director shall also be deemed to refer to such other person or persons, if any, who, pursuant to a provision of the certificate of incorporation in accordance with § 141(a) of this title, exercise or perform any of the powers or duties otherwise conferred or imposed upon the board of directors by this title.

entity is formed; the period of duration; the street address of the initial registered office of the filing entity and the name of the initial registered agent; and the name and address of each organizer.[1017] Additionally, a Charter must include the aggregate number of shares the corporation is authorized to issue; the par value of each class of shares or a statement that each share is without par value; and the number of directors constituting the initial board of directors and the names and addresses of the persons constituting the initial board of directors.[1018] Finally, a Charter may include provisions: dividing the corporation's authorized shares into one or more classes and further dividing one or more classes into one or more series and if such a provision is included, the Charter must designate each class and series of authorized shares to distinguish that class and series from any other class or series;[1019] providing for certain special characteristics of shares;[1020] allowing the board of directors to establish series of unissued shares of any class by setting and determining the designations, preferences, limitations, and relative rights of the shares;[1021] providing for preemptive rights;[1022] share transfer restrictions;[1023] that adjust the quorum and voting requirements;[1024] allowing for cumulative voting;[1025] proscribing qualifications for board member eligibility;[1026] governing the number, quorum requirements, and voting requirements for directors;[1027] allowing for classified boards;[1028] and authorizing committees on the board of directors.[1029]

4. Reverse Splits.

By an amendment to its Charter, a corporation may effect a reverse split of its stock to reduce the number of outstanding shares. In a reverse split, each share becomes a fraction of a whole share, no fractional shares are issued, and any shareholder who would receive a fractional

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1017 TBOC § 3.005.

1018 TBOC § 3.007. If the shares a corporation is authorized to issue consist of more than one class of shares the certificate of formation must state:

> "the designation of the class; the aggregate number of shares in the class; the par value of each share or a statement that each share is without par value; the preferences, limitations, and relative rights of the shares; and if the shares in a class the corporation is authorized to issue consist of more than one series, the following with respect to each series: the designation of the series; the aggregate number of shares in the series; any preferences, limitations, and relative rights of the shares to the extent provided in the certificate of formation; and any authority vested in the board of directors to establish the series and set and determine the preferences, limitations, and relative rights of the series."

1019 TBOC § 21.152. One or more series of these class of shares must have unlimited voting rights and one or more classes or series of shares, which may be the same class or series of shares as those with voting rights, that together are entitled to receive the net assets of the corporation on winding up and termination. *Id.* TBOC § 21.153 further provides that "If more than one class or series of shares is authorized under Section 21.152(d), the certificate of formation must state the designations, preferences, limitations, and relative rights, including voting rights, of each class or series."

1020 TBOC § 21.154.

1021 TBOC § 21.155.

1022 TBOC § 21.203.

1023 TBOC § 21.210.

1024 TBOC §§ 21.358, 21.364, 21.365, 21.366, 21.457, 21.458.

1025 TBOC § 21.359

1026 TBOC § 21.402

1027 TBOC §§ 21.403, 21.406, 21.413, 21.415.

1028 TBOC § 21.408.

1029 TBOC § 21.416 The foregoing list of permissive provisions is illustrative and not comprehensive.

share is instead paid in cash the fair value of the fractional share.[1030] There are no shareholder appraisal rights for the determination of the fair value of a fractional share, which leaves it to the Board in the exercise of its powers and fiduciary duties to fix the fair value and to unhappy shareholders to go to court.

In *Reis v. Hazelett Strip-Casting Corporation*,[1031] the controlling 70% stockholder of the corporation cashed out the minority shares held by the estate of his deceased brother and its multiple beneficiaries via a reverse stock split in an effort to keep the family business closely held. Although Vice Chancellor Laster commented that "[f]inal stage transactions for stockholders provide another situation where enhanced scrutiny applies," he applied the entire fairness standard because of the lack of process, and commented:

> A reverse split in which stockholders receive cash in lieu of fractional interests is an end stage transaction for those stockholders being cashed out of the enterprise. A disinterested and independent board's decision to pay cash in lieu of fractional share therefore should be subject to enhanced scrutiny. ***
>
> When a controlling stockholder uses a reverse split to freeze out minority stockholders without any procedural protections, the transaction will be reviewed for entire fairness with the burden of proof on the defendant fiduciaries. *** A reverse split under those circumstances is the "functional equivalent" of a cash out merger. *** If the controlling stockholder permits the board to form a duly empowered and properly functioning special committee or if the transaction is conditioned on a correctly formulated majority-of-the-minority vote, then the burden could shift to the plaintiff to prove that the transaction was unfair. *** If the controlling stockholder permits the use of both protective devices, then the transaction could avoid entire fairness review.

In *Hazelett* the Board consisted of employees who maintained their independent and disinterested status, but the Vice Chancellor did not credit their testimony and found that "[t]he natural pulls of the directors' affiliations were too strong, and at no point did any of them actually act independently." The Vice Chancellor found that the defendants did not meet their burden of proving entire fairness and awarded damages based on his determination of the fair value of the fractional shares.

B. Bylaws.

1. Power to Adopt or Amend Bylaws.

The Texas Corporate Statutes and the DGCL each provide that the business and affairs of a corporation are to be managed under the direction of its Board.[1032] Each also provides that

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1030 TBOC §§ 3.051 and 21.163; DGCL §§ 155 and 242.

1031 C.A. No. 3552-VCL (Del. Ch. Jan. 21, 2011).

1032 TBOC § 21.401; TBCA art. 2.31; DGCL § 141(a). *See supra* notes 10 and 11 and related text.

both the Board and the shareholders have the power to adopt, amend or repeal the corporation's bylaws.[1033]

In *CA, Inc. v. AFSCME Employees Pension Plan*, the Delaware Supreme Court addressed the dual power of the Board and the stockholders to amend bylaws in answering two questions that had been certified to it by the SEC.[1034] The two questions arose from a proposal that AFSCME Employees Pension Plan had submitted for inclusion in the proxy materials of CA, Inc., a Delaware corporation, for its annual meeting of stockholders, and that CA proposed to exclude on the basis that the proposed bylaw was not a proper subject for stockholder action and that, if implemented, would violate the DGCL. The proposal sought stockholder approval of an amendment to CA's bylaws that would require the CA Board to reimburse the reasonable expenses (not to exceed the amount expended by CA in connection with such election) incurred by a stockholder or group of stockholders running a short slate of director nominees for election if at least one nominee on the short slate is elected to the Board.

The questions of law certified by the SEC to the Delaware Supreme Court were: (i) whether the proposed bylaw is a proper subject for action by stockholders as a matter of Delaware law and (ii) whether the proposed bylaw, if adopted, would cause CA to violate any Delaware law to which it is subject. The Court answered both questions in the affirmative – the proposed bylaw (1) was a proper subject for action by stockholders, but (2) would cause CA to violate Delaware law.

[1033] DGCL § 109 provides as follows:

> § 109. Bylaws. (a) The original or other bylaws of a corporation may be adopted, amended or repealed by the incorporators, by the initial directors if they were named in the certificate of incorporation, or, before a corporation has received any payment for any of its stock, by its board of directors. After a corporation has received any payment for any of its stock, the power to adopt, amend or repeal bylaws shall be in the stockholders entitled to vote, or, in the case of a nonstock corporation, in its members entitled to vote; provided, however, any corporation may, in its certificate of incorporation, confer the power to adopt, amend or repeal bylaws upon the directors or, in the case of a nonstock corporation, upon its governing body by whatever name designated. The fact that such power has been so conferred upon the directors or governing body, as the case may be, shall not divest the stockholders or members of the power, nor limit their power to adopt, amend or repeal bylaws.
>
> (b) The bylaws may contain any provision, not inconsistent with law or with the certificate of incorporation, relating to the business of the corporation, the conduct of its affairs, and its rights or powers or the rights or powers of its stockholders, directors, officers or employees. (8 Del. C. 1953, § 109; 56 Del. Laws, c. 50; 59 Del. Laws, c. 437, § 1).

TBOC §§ 21.057 and 21.058 provide as follows:

> Section 21.057. Bylaws. (a) The board of directors of a corporation shall adopt initial bylaws.
>
> (b) The bylaws may contain provisions for the regulation and management of the affairs of the corporation that are consistent with law and the corporation's certificate of formation.
>
> (c) A corporation's board of directors may amend or repeal bylaws or adopt new bylaws unless:
>
> (1) the corporation's certificate of formation or this code wholly or partly reserves the power exclusively to the corporation's shareholders; or
>
> (2) in amending, repealing, or adopting a bylaw, the shareholders expressly provide that the board of directors may not amend, repeal, or readopt that bylaw.
>
> Section 21.058. Dual Authority. Unless the certificate of formation or a bylaw adopted by the shareholders provides otherwise as to all or a part of a corporation's bylaws, a corporation's shareholders may amend, repeal, or adopt the corporation's bylaws regardless of whether the bylaws may also be amended, repealed, or adopted by the corporation's board of directors.

[1034] 953 A.2d 227 (Del. 2008).

Justice Jacobs explained that the DGCL empowers both directors (so long as the certificate of incorporation so provides, as CA's did) and stockholders of a Delaware corporation with the ability to adopt, amend or repeal the corporation's bylaws. Because the "stockholders of a corporation subject to DGCL may not directly manage the business and affairs of the corporation, at least without specific authorization in either the statute or the certificate of incorporation . . . the shareholders' statutory power to adopt, amend or repeal bylaws is not coextensive with the board's concurrent power and is limited by the board's management prerogatives under Section 141(a)."[1035] While it declined to "articulate with doctrinal exactitude a bright line" that would divide those bylaws that stockholders may permissibly adopt from those that would go too far in infringing upon the Board's right to manage the corporation, the Court commented:

> It is well-established Delaware law that a proper function of bylaws is not to mandate how the board should decide specific substantive business decisions, but rather, to define the process and procedures by which those decisions are made.
>
> * * *
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> Examples of the procedural, process-oriented nature of bylaws are found in both the DGCL and the case law. For example, 8 *Del. C.* § 141(b) authorizes bylaws that fix the number of directors on the board, the number of directors required for a quorum (with certain limitations), and the vote requirements for board action. 8 *Del. C.* § 141(f) authorizes bylaws that preclude board action without a meeting. And, almost three decades ago this Court upheld a shareholder-enacted bylaw requiring unanimous board attendance and board approval for any board action, and unanimous ratification of any committee action. Such purely procedural bylaws do not improperly encroach upon the board's managerial authority under Section 141(a).[1036]

The Court held that the proposed bylaw concerned the process for electing directors, which is a subject in which shareholders of Delaware corporations have a proper interest. Therefore, the proposed bylaw was a proper subject for stockholder action.[1037]

The Court, however, also found that the proposed bylaw could require the Board to reimburse dissident stockholders in circumstances where a proper application of fiduciary

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1035 *Id.* at 232.

1036 *Id.* at 234-35.

1037 In the words of the Court:

> The context of the Bylaw at issue here is the process for electing directors—a subject in which shareholders of Delaware corporations have a legitimate and protected interest. The purpose of the Bylaw is to promote the integrity of that electoral process by facilitating the nomination of director candidates by stockholders or groups of stockholders. Generally, and under the current framework for electing directors in contested elections, only board-sponsored nominees for election are reimbursed for their election expenses. Dissident candidates are not, unless they succeed in replacing at least a majority of the entire board. The Bylaw would encourage the nomination of non-management board candidates by promising reimbursement of the nominating stockholders' proxy expenses if one or more of its candidates are elected. In that the shareholders also have a legitimate interest, because the Bylaw would facilitate the exercise of their right to participate in selecting the contestants.

Id. at 237.

principles would preclude the Board from doing so (such as when a proxy contest was undertaken for "personal or petty concerns, or to promote interests that do not further, or are adverse to, those of the corporation").[1038] Accordingly, the Court held that the proposed bylaw, as written, would violate Delaware law if enacted by stockholders.

2. Effect of Bylaw Amendments on Director Terms and Removal of Directors.

In *Crown EMAK Partners, LLC v. Kurz*,[1039] the Delaware Supreme Court held bylaw amendments reducing the size of a Board to a number less than the number of sitting directors between annual meetings without first removing directors was not permitted by the DGCL and addressed what is, and what is not, impermissible vote-buying under Delaware law. The Supreme Court concluded that (i) stockholder adopted bylaw amendments may not shrink the size of the Board of a Delaware corporation below the number of sitting directors, (ii) the votes of a swing block of shares survived a "vote buying" challenge but were invalid because their transfer to an insurgent stockholder violated the transfer provisions of a restricted stock agreement pursuant to which they were issued and held, and (iii) the Court of Chancery's expansive interpretation of the definition of "stockholders of record" to include certain institutional nominees was "*obiter dictum*" and "without precedential effect."

The dispute in *Crown EMAK* arose out of two competing consent solicitations pursued by two opposing stockholder factions of EMAK Worldwide, Inc. ("*EMAK*"). The first faction (the "*TBE Parties*") launched a consent solicitation seeking (i) the removal of two of EMAK's five directors and (ii) the election of three insurgent nominees (two of whom would fill the seats of the removed incumbents and one of whom would fill one of two pre-existing vacancies) with the

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[1038] *Id.* at 240. The Court explained:

> Therefore, in response to the second question, we must necessarily consider any possible circumstance under which a board of directors might be required to act. Under at least one such hypothetical, the board of directors would breach their fiduciary duties if they complied with the Bylaw. Accordingly, we conclude that the Bylaw, as drafted, would violate the prohibition, which our decisions have derived from Section 141(a), against contractual arrangements that commit the board of directors to a course of action that would preclude them from fully discharging their fiduciary duties to the corporation and its shareholders.
>
> This Court has previously invalidated contracts that would require a board to act or not act in such a fashion that would limit the exercise of their fiduciary duties.
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> [T]he Bylaw mandates reimbursement of election expenses in circumstances that a proper application of fiduciary principles could preclude. That such circumstances could arise is not far fetched. Under Delaware law, a board may expend corporate funds to reimburse proxy expenses "[w]here the controversy is concerned with a question of policy as distinguished from personnel o[r] management." But in a situation where the proxy contest is motivated by personal or petty concerns, or to promote interests that do not further, or are adverse to, those of the corporation, the board's fiduciary duty could compel that reimbursement be denied altogether. It is in this respect that the proposed Bylaw, as written, would violate Delaware law if enacted by CA's shareholders. As presently drafted, the Bylaw would afford CA's directors full discretion to determine what amount of reimbursement is appropriate, because the directors would be obligated to grant only the "reasonable" expenses of a successful short slate. Unfortunately, that does not go far enough, because the Bylaw contains no language or provision that would reserve to CA's directors their full power to exercise their fiduciary duty to decide whether or not it would be appropriate, in a specific case, to award reimbursement at all.

Id. at 238-40.

[1039] 992 A.2d 377 (Del. 2010), affirming in part and reversing in part the Court of Chancery's holding in *Kurz v. Holbrook*, 989 A.2d 140 (Del. Ch. Feb. 9, 2010).

result that the insurgents would constitute a new Board majority. This action prompted a second stockholder faction, led by Crown EMAK Partners LLC ("*Crown*"), to launch its own consent solicitation. Crown held a significant stake in EMAK through its ownership of EMAK's Series AA Preferred Stock, which when voting with the common stock constituted 27.6% of EMAK's outstanding voting power. The Series AA Preferred Stock voted with the holders of the common stock on most matters and was separately entitled to elect two directors to the EMAK Board, but was not entitled to vote with the common stock in the election (or removal) of EMAK's other directors. Since Crown's Series AA Preferred Stock did not constitute an insurmountable obstacle to the TBE Parties' consent solicitation, Crown had to use other means to counter the TBE Parties' consent solicitation. Crown solicited, obtained and delivered written consents (executed by the holders of a majority of the combined voting power of EMAK's common stock and Series AA Preferred Stock) purporting to amend EMAK's bylaws to provide (1) that EMAK's "Board of Directors shall consist of three members" and (2) "[i]f at any time the number of members of the Board of Directors shall be greater than three ... the Chief Executive Officer shall promptly call a special meeting of the common stockholders ... for purposes of electing the one director ... who shall be the successor to all the directors previously elected by the common stockholders." Three days later, the TBE Parties delivered written consents (executed by the holders of a majority of EMAK's common stock) purportedly removing two incumbent directors and electing three insurgent candidates.

In the Chancery Court the TBE Parties sought to invalidate Crown's bylaw amendments and confirm the validity of their consent solicitation. Crown sought an order upholding the bylaw amendments and invalidating the TBE Parties consent solicitation, arguing that even if its bylaw amendments were invalid, TBE's consent solicitation was ineffective because it was not duly executed on behalf of record owners of the shares it purported to vote. Crown also argued that the votes of a critical block of stock (obtained by an TBE-affiliated director of EMAK immediately prior the delivery of the consents) should be invalidated because (i) the votes were obtained by illegal vote buying and (ii) the purchase transaction violated a restricted stock grant agreement. The Court of Chancery held that Crown's bylaw amendments were invalid and rejected Crown's multiple challenges to the validity of the TBE Parties' consent solicitation.

The Supreme Court affirmed the Court of Chancery's holding that Crown's bylaw amendments were invalid, holding that Crown's bylaw amendments conflicted with DGCL § 141(b), which "does not contemplate that a director's term can end through board shrinkage." The Supreme Court noted that Crown's bylaw amendments would create a conflict between the number of directors in office and the number of directors provided in the bylaws, and agreed with the Court of Chancery's conclusion that "[s]uch an occurrence is contrary to section 141(b)" and "not legally possible." The Supreme Court also agreed with the Chancery Court's observation that the bylaw amendments departed from the mandated annual electoral cycle for directors serving on non-classified Boards, explaining that, "[s]tockholders can act in between annual meetings to remove directors, to fill vacancies, or to fill newly created directorships. They cannot end an incumbent director's term prematurely by purporting to elect the director's successor before the incumbent's term expires."

The Supreme Court affirmed the Chancery Court's rejection of Crown's "vote buying" challenge to a block of votes cast by a TBE-affiliated director of EMAK who had entered into an agreement to purchase the shares at a significant premium to market just prior to the delivery of

the TBE Parties' written consents. To contract around the shares being subject to a restricted stock grant agreement which provided that the selling shareholder was "not entitled to transfer, sell, pledge, hypothecate or assign any shares" prior to March 3, 2011, the parties executed a purchase agreement conferring an irrevocable proxy and specifying that the purchaser acquired "(a) all shares of common stock of EMAK Worldwide … that seller is entitled or permitted to sell, transfer or assign as of the date hereof, and (b) all rights to receive all other shares of the Company that the Seller is or may hereafter be entitled or permitted to sell, transfer or assign…." The Chancery Court found that this purchase agreement transferred 100% of the economic risk associated with the shares and that the right to vote those shares properly followed. The Supreme Court concurred that "there was no improper vote buying, because the economic interests and the voting interests of the shares remained aligned since both sets of interests were transferred" from the seller to the buyer pursuant to the challenged purchase agreement. In other words, the insurgent "did not engage in illegal vote buying because … along with the votes … [the insurgent] simultaneously purchased and immediately received the full economic interests associated with the [seller's] shares."[1040]

The Supreme Court, however, reversed the Chancery Court's determination that the purchase agreement properly conferred voting power on the TBE-affiliated director. The TBE Parties' had successfully argued in the Chancery Court that the purchase agreement avoided the transfer restrictions in the restricted stock grant agreement because it stopped short of transferring legal title to the shares and because the grant agreement failed to prohibit an agreement to transfer the shares *after* the expiration of the grant agreement's restrictive provisions. The Supreme Court found that "the Purchase Agreement *immediately* conferred upon [the purchaser] the functional equivalent of 'full ownership,' in consideration for the $225,000 he paid to [the seller]," and reasoned that "[the seller's] immediate divestiture of all voting and economic rights in his shares frustrates the purpose of the Restricted Stock Grant Agreement, because bare legal title, alone and without more, does not give [the seller] a stake in the corporation's future." Thus, the "Purchase Agreement did not operate as a legally valid sale or transfer of [the seller's] shares and that [the buyer] was not entitled to vote those shares."

Because it invalidated the votes of this swing block of shares, the Supreme Court found that the TBE Parties' consent solicitation failed to obtain the votes necessary to take stockholder action. In so holding, the Supreme Court avoided the controversial question regarding who constitute "stockholders of record" under Delaware law and explained that the Court of Chancery's holding that certain institutional nominees were "stockholders of record" was "*obiter dictum* and without precedential effect."[1041]

1040 *See infra* notes 1115-1116 and related text.

1041 Inspectors charged with tabulating the results of corporate elections typically attempt to trace the authority of anyone purporting to cast votes in a corporate election back to a corresponding entry on the corporation's stock list (prepared from a stock ledger reflecting transfers between stockholders) to confirm that the votes were cast by or on behalf of a stockholder. This practice was summarized by the Supreme Court by quoting from John C. Wilcox, John J. Purcell III, & Hye-Won Choi, "Street Name" Registration & The Proxy Solicitation Process in Amy Goodman, et al., A Practical Guide to SEC Proxy and Compensation Rules 10-3 (4th ed. 2007 & 2008 Supp.) as follows:

> The vast majority of publicly traded shares in the United States are registered on the companies' books not in the name of beneficial owners—*i.e.*, those investors who paid for, and have the right to vote and dispose of, the shares—but rather in the name of "Cede & Co.," the name used by The Depository Trust Company ("DTC").

In *Airgas, Inc. v. Air Products and Chemicals, Inc.*,[1042] the Delaware Supreme Court invalidated a stockholder-proposed bylaw accelerating Airgas's annual meeting by approximately eight months, which was adopted in the context of Air Products' takeover battle with Airgas and would have given Air Products, whose nominees had been elected to the open directorships at Airgas's 2010 annual meeting, the opportunity to elect additional directors to Airgas's classified board just four months later (and, conceivably, to obtain control of a majority of Airgas's board without waiting for a full two-year meeting cycle to run). Reversing a Chancery Court decision upholding the bylaw as not inconsistent with the classified board provision in Airgas's charter,

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> Shares registered in this manner are commonly referred to as being held in "street name." . . . DTC holds the shares on behalf of banks and brokers, which in turn hold on behalf of their clients (who are the underlying beneficial owners or other intermediaries).

The roles of DTC and the Investor Communications Solutions Division of Broadridge Financial Services, Inc. ("*Broadridge*") were important in the *Crown EMAK* case and were summarized as follows by the Supreme Court by quoting from this treatise:

> For many years, banks and brokers maintained their own proxy departments to handle the back-office administrative processes of distributing proxy materials and tabulating voting instructions from their clients. Today, however, the overwhelming majority have eliminated their proxy departments and subcontracted these processes out to [Broadridge]. For many years, these proxy processing services were provided by Automatic Data Processing, Inc. ("ADP"), but on March 31, 2007, ADP spun off its Brokerage Services Group into a new independent company, Broadridge, which now provides these services to most banks and brokers.
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> To make these arrangements work, Broadridge's bank and broker clients formally transfer to Broadridge the proxy authority they receive from DTC (via the [DTC] Omnibus Proxy) via written powers of attorney. On behalf of the brokers and banks, Broadridge delivers directly to each beneficial owner a proxy statement and, importantly, a voting instruction form (referred to as a "VIF") rather than a proxy card. Beneficial owners do not receive proxy cards because they are not vested with the right to vote shares or to grant proxy authority—those rights belong only to the legal owners (or their designees). Beneficial owners merely have the right to instruct how their shares are to be voted by Broadridge (attorney-in-fact of the DTC participants), which they accomplish by returning a VIF.

The Supreme Court explained that DTC is generally regarded as the entity having the power under Delaware law to vote the shares that it holds on deposit for the banks and brokers who are members of DTC. Through the DTC omnibus proxy, DTC transfers its voting authority to those member banks and brokers. The banks and brokers then transfer the voting authority to Broadridge, which votes the shares held at DTC by each bank and broker in proportion to the aggregate voting instructions received from the ultimate beneficial owners.

In the *Crown EMAK* case, none of the parties involved in the dueling consent solicitations located or produced a DTC Omnibus Proxy. Crown seized upon this defect in the chain of voting authority and contended that the TBE Parties' consent solicitation was therefore ineffective. The Chancery Court accepted Crown's argument that only a "stockholder of record" could validly execute a written consent, but rejected Crown's contention that Broadridge needed to document its authority to vote shares held in the name of Cede & Company. Although the parties did not have a DTC Omnibus Proxy, they did have a so-called "Cede breakdown," which listed the banks and brokers which Cede represented on EMAK's stock list. Because Broadridge's consent also listed its bank and broker clients, the inspectors of election could match the shares listed in Cede's name to particular banks and brokers on the Broadridge consent. The Chancery Court held that Broadridge did not need "to provide specific evidence of proxy authority" when it delivered its consent because this matching process confirmed its voting authority as a practical matter.

The Court of Chancery also rejected Crown's argument that EMAK's "stockholders of record" were only those stockholders that appear on EMAK's stock list, holding that banks and brokers listed on the "Cede breakdown" should be deemed to be part of a corporation's stock ledger under DGCL § 219(c) and are therefore "stockholders of record" under Delaware law. The Chancery Court cited prior Delaware holdings that a "Cede breakdown" was already considered part of a corporation's stock ledger under DGCL § 220(b), commented that since a Delaware corporation "already generates its stocklist by calling a transfer agent to get the record holder information," ... "it hardly seems problematic for the same corporation to call DTC to get the Cede breakdown."

The Supreme Court declined to review this holding because it "would not alter the result" and because it would not be "prudent" to provide a "gratuitous statutory interpretation resolving this difficult issue," that a "legislative cure is preferable" as "any adjustment to the intricate scheme of [voting authority] should be accomplished by the General Assembly through a coordinated amendment process."

[1042] 8 A.3d 1182 (Del. Nov. 23, 2010).

which provided that directors' terms would expire at "the annual meeting of stockholders held in the third year following the year of their election," the Supreme Court (like the Chancery Court) found the language of Airgas's charter defining the duration of the directors' terms to be ambiguous. The Supreme Court looked to extrinsic evidence to construe that provision and consulded that the language "has been understood to mean that the Airgas directors serve three year terms." Accordingly, the Supreme Court held that the bylaw was invalid because it "prematurely terminate[d]" the three-year terms of Airgas's directors provided by statute and Airgas's charter. While the Supreme Court noted that neither DGCL § 141(d) nor Airgas's charter "requires that the three year terms be measured with mathematical precision," the Supreme Court concluded that the four-month period that would have resulted from the annual meeting bylaw did not "qualify under any construction of 'annual'" within the meaning of DGCL § 141(d) or Airgas's charter. The consequence of the bylaw, according to the Supreme Court, was to "so extremely truncate the directors' term" as to frustrate the purpose behind Airgas's classified board provision—i.e., to prevent the removal of directors without cause. Thus, the annual meeting bylaw was invalid "not only because it impermissibly shorten[ed] the directors' three year staggered terms, but also because it amounted to a *de facto* removal without cause" without the super-majority vote required by Airgas's charter.

C. Forum Selection Provisions.

Forum selection provisions in both corporate charters and bylaws are uncommon when compared to their ubiquity in business contracts. Bylaw forum selection provisions have been around since 1991, but before 2010 only 16 companies had adopted forum selection provisions in a charter or bylaw provision.[1043] One of these 16 companies is Oracle Corporation whose directors adopted a bylaw in 2006[1044] that provides that "[t]he sole and exclusive forum for any actual or purported derivative action brought on behalf of the Corporation shall be the Court of Chancery in the State of Delaware."[1045]

A passing comment by Vice Chancellor Laster in *In re Revlon, Inc. Shareholders Litigation*[1046] seems to have had an impact in the expansion in the number of companies

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1043 Steven M. Davidoff, *A Litigation Plan that Would Favor Delaware*, NEW YORK TIMES DEAL BOOK, http://dealbook.nytimes.com/2010/10/26/a-litigation-plan-that-would-favor-delaware/ (Oct. 26, 2010).

1044 Stanford professor Joseph Grundfest, a proponent of forum selection bylaws, was on Oracle's board when it adopted this bylaw provision. *See* Steven M. Davidoff, *A Litigation Plan that Would Favor Delaware*, NEW YORK TIMES DEAL BOOK, http://dealbook.nytimes.com/2010/10/26/a-litigation-plan-that-would-favor-delaware/ (Oct. 26, 2010).

1045 *Galaviz v. Berg*, 10-cv-3392, slip op. at 3 (N.D. Cal. Jan. 3, 2011). Although the Oracle forum selection bylaw only applied to derivative actions, another "sample forum selection provision states that the Court of Chancery at the State of Delaware shall be the sole and exclusive forum for (1) any derivative action or proceeding brought on behalf of the corporation; (2) any action asserting a claim for breach of fiduciary duty owed by any director, officer or other employee of the corporation to the corporation or the corporation's stockholders; (3) any action asserting a claim arising pursuant to any provision of the DGCL; or (4) any action asserting a claim governed by the internal affairs doctrine. Any person or entity purchasing or otherwise acquiring an interest in shares of capital stock of the corporation shall be deemed to have notice of and consented to the provisions of this article. That sample provision is a mandatory provision, meaning that it requires all litigation to be in Delaware. An alternative form of the by-law is permissive, in that it permits the corporation to consent in writing to the selection of an alternative forum. It give the board additional flexibility in case they like the jurisdiction in which the litigation has been brought." *Towards State of the Art: Scrubbing Your Bylaws, Governance Guidelines & Committee Charters* (The Corporate Counsel.net January 12, 2011).

1046 990 A.2d 940 (Del. Ch. 2010).

including forum selection provisions in their bylaws.[1047] The *Revlon* case arose in the context of two groups of plaintiffs' counsel jockeying for control of derivative litigation. The Vice Chancellor was unhappy with the original lead counsel's conduct of the litigation (or lack thereof) and what he viewed as somewhat of a sham settlement. In the course of his over twenty page opinion on why the conduct of the litigation by original counsel was inadequate, the Vice Chancellor discussed the volume litigation strategy pursued by traditional plaintiffs' firms in shareholder litigation and its questionable value to the class members and the companies.[1048] During this discussion he addressed the policy considerations behind limiting frequent filers and noted that this might lead to more suits being filed in other jurisdictions if Delaware became too harsh on frequent filers and replaced them as lead counsel too frequently.[1049] Addressing this concern the Vice Chancellor commented that "if boards of directors and stockholders believe that a particular forum would provide an efficient and value-promoting locus for dispute resolution, the corporations are free to respond with charter provisions selecting an exclusive forum for intra-entity disputes."[1050]

The first test for the validity of bylaw forum selection provisions involved the bylaw of Oracle quoted above. In *Galaviz v. Berg*,[1051] the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California denied motions to dismiss a derivative action for improper venue, finding the forum selection clause in the corporate bylaws of a Delaware corporation to be unenforceable. The plaintiffs in *Galaviz* brought a claim in the U.S. Court for the Northern District of California against the directors of Oracle alleging that each director was individually liable for breach of fiduciary duty and abuse of control in connection with certain actions allegedly taken by Oracle from 1998 to 2006.[1052]

In 2006, prior to the initiation of the *Galaviz* litigation, Oracle's Board amended Oracle's bylaws to include the forum selection provision referenced above which provided that "[t]he sole and exclusive forum for any actual or purported derivative action brought on behalf of the Corporation shall be the Court of Chancery in the State of Delaware."[1053] The defendants contended that Oracle's bylaws should be treated like any other contract and cited to cases in other contexts that described bylaws as representing a contract between a corporation and its shareholders.[1054] Accordingly, the defendants moved to dismiss the claims of the plaintiffs on the basis of improper venue, asserting that the forum selection clause in Oracle's bylaws is binding upon the plaintiffs and that the proper venue for the claims is the Delaware Chancery Court.

In analyzing whether to grant the motion to dismiss, the Court distinguished between corporate bylaws and contracts, rejecting Oracle's contention that the validity of a forum

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1047 Steven M. Davidoff, *A Litigation Plan that Would Favor Delaware*, NEW YORK TIMES DEAL BOOK, http://dealbook.nytimes.com/2010/10/26/a-litigation-plan-that-would-favor-delaware/ (Oct. 26, 2010).

1048 990 A.2d at 959.

1049 *Id.* at 960.

1050 *Id.*

1051 10-cv-3392, slip op. (N.D. Cal. Jan. 3, 2011).

1052 *Id.* at 2.

1053 *Id.* at 3.

1054 *Id.* at 5.

selection clause in corporate bylaws should be analyzed in the same manner as a forum selection clause in a contract.[1055] The Court noted that Oracle sought to rely on principles of corporate law with respect to how its bylaws could be amended.[1056] The Court believed this distinguished this case from federal contract law on forum selection clauses holding that "under contract law, a party's consent to a written agreement may serve as consent to all the terms therein, whether or not all of them were specifically negotiated or even read, but it does not follow that a contracting party may thereafter unilaterally add or modify contractual provisions."[1057] As a result the Court held that the contract analysis did not control.[1058] In so holding, the Court focused specifically on the fact that Oracle's directors could unilaterally amend the corporation's bylaws, the defendant's in the action were the ones who amended the bylaw after the majority of the purported wrongdoing had occurred, and that the amendment had occurred without the consent of the existing shareholders.[1059] Consequently, the District Court denied Oracle's motion to dismiss, finding that Oracle had otherwise failed to demonstrate the effectiveness of its forum selection bylaw under federal law such that it restricted the plaintiffs from pursuing their claims in the District Court.[1060]

As mentioned previously, the District Court noted that the *Galaviz* plaintiffs purchased shares in Oracle prior to the amendment to Oracle's bylaws adding the forum selection provision, that a majority of the alleged wrongdoing had occurred prior to the bylaw amendment, and that the same directors named as defendants had adopted the forum selection bylaw. If Oracle's bylaws had included a forum selection clause prior to any alleged wrongdoing or the purchase of shares in Oracle by the plaintiffs, the Court may have come to a different conclusion. Further, the Court suggested that if a majority of Oracle's stockholders had adopted the forum selection clause as a charter amendment, the case for treating the venue provision like those in commercial contracts would be much stronger even if the plaintiffs themselves had not voted for the amendment.[1061] In this sense the *Galaviz* decision may be confined to its facts.

The *Galaviz* holding should also be considered in light Vice Chancellor Laster's comment in *In re Revlon, Inc. Shareholders Litigation*[1062] discussed earlier. While this statement in *Revlon* was *dicta*, it may indicate that the Delaware courts would support the inclusion of a forum selection clause in corporate charters or bylaws.

D. Advance Notice and Director Qualification Provisions.

Corporations desire to have advance notice of proposals and nominations that shareholders intend to request be included in their proxy materials or presented at a meeting of

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1055 The district court acknowledged that if federal contract law principles were controlling, "there would be little basis to decline to enforce" the forum selection clause in Oracle's bylaws. *Id.* at 5. *See Argueta v. Banco Mexicano, S.A.*, 87 F.3d 320 (9th Cir. 1996).

1056 *Galaviz v. Berg*, 10-cv-3392 at 6.

1057 *Id.*

1058 *Id.*

1059 *Id.*

1060 *Id.* at 7.

1061 *Id.*

1062 990 A.2d 940, 960 (Del. Ch. 2010).

shareholders, and adopt provisions requiring advance notice thereof.[1063] These advance notice provisions are commonplace in Delaware.[1064] These types bylaws have been construed often by

[1063] Set forth below are sample advance notice bylaw provisions for a Texas corporation:

> 2.9 Shareholders may nominate one or more persons for election as directors at any annual meeting of shareholders or propose other business to be brought before the annual meeting of shareholders, or both, only if (a) such business is a proper matter for shareholder action, (b) the shareholder gives timely notice in proper written form of such shareholder's intention to make such nomination(s) or to propose such business, and (c) the shareholder is a shareholder of record of the corporation at the time of giving such notice and is entitled to vote at the annual meeting. The provisions of this Article II shall be the exclusive means for a shareholder to make nominations or submit other business (other than matters properly brought under Rule 14a-8 or Rule 14a-11 promulgated under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, as amended (the "Exchange Act"), and included in the corporation's proxy materials) at an annual meeting of shareholders.
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> 2.10 Without qualification, for director nominations or any other business to be properly brought before an annual meeting of shareholders, a shareholder notice shall be delivered to and received by the secretary at the principal executive offices of the corporation not later than the close of business on the 90th day, and not earlier than the close of business on the 120th day, prior to the first anniversary of the preceding year's annual meeting of shareholders; provided, however, that in the event that the date of the annual meeting has changed by more than thirty (30) days from the date of the previous year's annual meeting, notice by the shareholder to be timely must be so delivered and received not earlier than the close of business on the 120th day prior to such annual meeting and not later than the close of business on the later of (a) the 90th day prior to such annual meeting, and (b) the 10th day following the date on which public announcement of the date of such meeting is first made by the corporation. In no event shall the public announcement of an adjournment or postponement of an annual meeting commence a new time period for the giving of a shareholder notice as described above. For purposes of this Article II, "public announcement" shall mean disclosure in a press release reported by Dow Jones News Service, Associated Press or a comparable national news service, in a document publicly filed by the corporation with the Securities and Exchange Commission, or in a notice pursuant to the applicable rules of an exchange on which the corporation's securities are listed. To be in proper written form, the shareholder notice must comply with Section 2.12 below.
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> 2.11 Only such business shall be conducted at a special meeting of shareholders as shall have been brought before the meeting pursuant to the notice of meeting. Nominations of persons for election to the board of directors may be made at a special meeting of shareholders at which directors are to be elected pursuant to the notice of meeting (a) by or at the direction of the board of directors or (b) by any shareholder of the corporation pursuant to Rule 14a-11 promulgated under the Exchange Act who (1) is a shareholder of record at the time of giving such notice (2) is entitled to vote at the meeting, and (3) provides timely notice as to such nomination in the proper written form. In the event the corporation calls a special meeting of shareholders for the purpose of electing one or more directors to the board of directors, any shareholder meeting the requirements of the previous sentence may nominate a person or persons (as the case may be), for election to such position(s) as specified in the corporation's notice of meeting, if the shareholder notice with respect to any nomination (including the completed and signed questionnaire and representation and agreement required by Section 2.15 below) shall be delivered to the secretary at the principal executive offices of the corporation not earlier than the close of business on the 90th day prior to the date of such special meeting and not later than the close of business on the later of (a) the 70th day prior to the date of such special meeting, and (b) if the first public announcement of the date of such special meeting is less than 80 days prior to the date of such special meeting, the 10th day following the day on which public announcement is first made of the date of the special meeting and of any nominees proposed by the board of directors to be elected at such meeting. In no event shall the public announcement of an adjournment or postponement of a special meeting commence a new time period for the giving of a shareholder notice as described above.
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> 2.12 To be in proper written form, a shareholder notice (whether given pursuant to Section 2.3 above, Sections 2.9 and 2.10 above with respect to annual meetings or Section 2.11 above with respect to special meetings) to the secretary must be in writing and:
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> (a) set forth, as to the shareholder giving the notice and the beneficial owner, if any, on whose behalf the director nomination or proposal of other business is made (i) the name and address of such shareholder, as they appear on the corporation's books, and of such beneficial owner, (ii) (1) the class and number of shares of the corporation which are, directly or indirectly, owned beneficially and of record by such shareholder and such beneficial owner, (2) any option, warrant, convertible security, stock appreciation right, or similar right with an exercise or conversion privilege or a settlement

payment or mechanism at a price related to any class of shares of the corporation or with a value derived in whole or in part from the value of any class of shares of the corporation, whether or not such instrument or right shall be subject to settlement in the underlying class of capital stock of the corporation or otherwise (a "Derivative Instrument") directly or indirectly owned beneficially by such shareholder or beneficial owner and any other direct or indirect economic interest held or owned beneficially by such shareholder or beneficial owner to profit or share in any profit derived from any increase or decrease in the value of shares of the corporation, (3) any proxy, contract, arrangement, understanding, or relationship pursuant to which such shareholder or beneficial owner has a right to vote any shares of any security of the corporation, (4) any short interest in any security of the corporation (for purposes of this Section 2.12, a person shall be deemed to have a short interest in a security if such person, directly or indirectly, through any contract, arrangement, understanding, relationship or otherwise, has the opportunity to profit or share in any profit derived from any decrease in the value of the subject security), (5) any rights to dividends on the shares of the corporation owned beneficially by such shareholder or beneficial owner that are separated or separable from the underlying shares of the corporation, (6) any proportionate interest in shares of the corporation or Derivative Instruments held, directly or indirectly, by a general or limited partnership in which such shareholder or beneficial owner is a general partner or, directly or indirectly, beneficially owns an interest in a general partner, and (7) any performance-related fees (other than an asset-based fee) that such shareholder or beneficial owner is entitled to based on any increase or decrease in the value of shares of the corporation or Derivative Instruments, if any, as of the date of such notice including, without limitation, any such interests held by members of such shareholder's or beneficial owner's immediate family sharing the same household (which information shall be updated and supplemented by such shareholder and beneficial owner (A) as of the record date, (B) ten days before the meeting, and (C) immediately prior to the commencement of the meeting), and (iii) any other information relating to such shareholder and beneficial owner that would be required to be disclosed in a proxy statement or other filings required to be made in connection with solicitations of proxies for, as applicable, the proposal and/or for the election of directors in a contested election pursuant to Section 14 of the Exchange Act and the rules and regulations promulgated thereunder;

(b) if the notice relates to any business other than a nomination of a director or directors that the shareholder proposes to bring before the meeting, set forth (i) a brief description of the business desired to be brought before the meeting, the reasons for conducting such business at the meeting and any material interest of such shareholder and beneficial owner, if any, in such business and (ii) a description of all agreements, arrangements and understandings between such shareholder and beneficial owner, if any, and any other person or persons (including their names) in connection with the proposal of such business by such shareholder;

(c) if the notice relates to the nomination of a director or directors, (i) set forth with respect to each nominee, (1) all information relating to such nominee that would be required to be disclosed in a proxy statement or other filings required to be made in connection with solicitations of proxies for election of directors in a contested election pursuant to Section 14 of the Exchange Act and the rules and regulations promulgated thereunder (including such nominee's written consent to being named in a proxy statement as a nominee and to serving as a director of the corporation if elected) and (2) a description of all direct and indirect compensation and other material monetary agreements, arrangements and understandings during the past three years, and any other material relationships, between or among such shareholder and beneficial owner, if any, and their respective affiliates and associates, or others acting in concert therewith, on the one hand, and each proposed nominee, and his or her respective affiliates and associates, or others acting in concert therewith, on the other hand, including, without limitation, all information that would be required to be disclosed pursuant to Rule 404 promulgated under Regulation S-K (or any successor rule) if the shareholder making the nomination and any beneficial owner on whose behalf the nomination is made, or any affiliate or associate thereof or person acting in concert therewith, were the "registrant" for purposes of such rule and the nominee were a director or executive officer of such registrant, and (ii) with respect to each nominee, include a completed, dated and signed written questionnaire and written representation and agreement and any other information required by Section 2.15 below.

2.13 Notwithstanding anything in the first sentence of Section 2.10 to the contrary, in the event that the number of directors to be elected to the board of directors of the corporation is increased and there is no public announcement by the corporation naming all of the nominees for director or specifying the size of the increased board of directors at least 90 days prior to the first anniversary of the preceding year's annual meeting, a shareholder notice required by Section 2.10 shall also be considered timely, but only with respect to nominees for any new positions created by such increase, if it shall be delivered to

Delaware courts.[1065] Generally, advance notice provisions have been upheld under Delaware law so long as they do not unduly restrict the shareholder franchise and are not applied inequitably.[1066]

Following the mandate of Dodd-Frank, the SEC adopted new proxy access rules.[1067] Of specific application to advance notice bylaws is Rule 14a-11 under the 1934 Act, which governs the requirements for shareholders to be able to include director nominees on a company's proxy materials.[1068] However, in order for a shareholder to be able to use Rule 14a-11 to include a nominee on a company's proxy materials, the shareholder must have a state law right to nominate a director.[1069] SEC staff members have said that the SEC's position on the matter is that advance notice bylaws cannot be ignored.[1070] The reason for this position is that compliance with an advance notice bylaw is a prerequisite for having a state law right to nominate a director.[1071] Therefore, if an advance notice bylaw is not complied with by a shareholder in attempting to nominate a director, then the fact of non-compliance can be used to preclude the

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the secretary at the principal executive offices of the corporation not later than the close of business on the 10th day following the day on which such public announcement is first made by the corporation.

2.14 General.

(a) Only such persons who are nominated as directors in accordance with the procedures set forth in Sections 2.9, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13, 2.14 and 2.15 shall be eligible to be elected at an annual or special meeting of shareholders to serve as directors and only such other business shall be conducted at an annual or special meeting of shareholders as shall have been brought before the meeting in accordance with the procedures set forth in Sections 2.9, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13 and 2.14. Except as otherwise provided by law, the Articles of Incorporation or these Bylaws, the person presiding over the meeting shall have the power and duty to determine whether a director nomination or any other business proposed to be brought before the meeting was made or proposed, as the case may be, in accordance with the procedures set forth in Sections 2.9, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13, 2.14 and 2.15 and, if any proposed director nomination or other business is not in compliance with Sections 2.9, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13, 2.14 and 2.15, to declare that such defective nomination or other proposal shall be disregarded.

(b) Notwithstanding the foregoing provisions of Sections 2.9, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13 and 2.14, a shareholder shall also comply with all applicable requirements of the Exchange Act and the rules and regulations thereunder with respect to nominations of one or more persons for election as directors or proposals of other business to be brought before an annual or special meeting of shareholders. Nothing in Sections 2.9, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13, 2.14 and 2.15 shall be deemed to affect any rights of (i) shareholders to request inclusion of proposals in the corporation's proxy statement pursuant to Rule 14a-8 under the Exchange Act, (ii) shareholders to request inclusion of nominees in the corporation's proxy statement pursuant to Rule 14a-11 under the Exchange Act, or (iii) the holders of any series of Preferred Stock if and to the extent provided for under law, the Articles of Incorporation or these Bylaws.

1064 *Openwave Sys. v. Harbinger Capital Partners Master Fund I, Ltd.*, 924 A. 2d 228, 238-239 (Del. Ch. 2007); *Stroud v. Grace*, 606 A.2d 75, 95 (Del. 1992) (upholding advance bylaw provisions); *Accipiter Life Scis. Fund, L.P. v. Heifer*, 905 A.2d 115, 127 (Del. Ch. 2006) (upholding validity of 10 day advance notice provision); *see Unitrin, Inc. v. Am. Gen. Corp.*, 651 A.2d 1361, 1388 n. 38 (Del. 1995) (bylaws upheld in hostile takeover situation).

1065 *Id.*

1066 *Id.*

1067 SEC Release Nos. 33-9136; 34-62764; IC-29384; File No. S7-10-09 at 22 (Aug. 25, 2010).

1068 Rule 14a-11 is currently stayed pending the resolution of the Business Roundtable and Chamber of Commerce petition for review of the rule in the D.C. Circuit. Resolution of the case is expected sometime in the spring of 2011.

1069 *See* J.W. Verret, *Defending Against Shareholder Proxy Access: Delaware's Future Reviewing Company Defenses in the Era of Dodd-Frank*, 36 J. CORP. L. 101 (2010).

1070 Cydney Posner, *Proxy Access Update Regarding the Application of Advance Notice Bylaws and Other Limitations on Nominations*, COOLEY LLP, http://www.cooley.com/64333 (Sept. 30, 2010).

1071 *Id.*

nomination of the candidate not only at the meeting but also from the proxy entirely assuming they complied with the SEC process for excluding nominees from the proxy.

Another type of provision that can potentially be used to reduce the risk that unqualified nominees are elected is a provision that sets forth minimum qualifications for directors.[1072] Delaware courts seem to permit these provisions to require minimum length of experience, type of experience by industry, type of experience by institution, type of experience by level of authority, certain professional degrees or certifications, minimum educational background, and conflict limitations. For example, a director qualification charter amendment requiring that a majority of directors have "substantial experience in line (as distinct from staff) positions in the management of substantial business enterprises or substantial private institutions, who are not officers, employees or stockholders, whether of record or beneficially, of the corporation or any of its subsidiaries" was upheld by the Delaware Supreme Court.[1073] Another common requirement is that the director must own stock in the corporation. As long as the director qualifications are applied on the front end, prior to a director being qualified, rather than on the

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[1072] Set forth below are sample director qualifications provisions for a Texas corporation:

> 2.15 To be eligible to be a nominee for election as a director of the corporation (or, in the case of a nomination brought under Rule 14a-11 of the Exchange Act, to serve as a director of the corporation), the nominee must deliver (in accordance with the time periods prescribed for delivery of notice under Sections 2.10, 2.11 and 2.13 or, in the case of a nomination brought under Rule 14a-11 of the Exchange Act, prior to the time such person is to begin service as a director) to the secretary at the principal executive offices of the corporation a written questionnaire with respect to the background and qualification of such nominee and the background of any other person or entity on whose behalf the nomination is being made (which form of questionnaire shall be provided by the secretary upon written request) and a written representation and agreement (in the form provided by the secretary upon written request) that such nominee (a) is not and will not become a party to (i) any agreement, arrangement or understanding with, and has not given any commitment or assurance to, any person or entity as to how such nominee, if elected as a director of the corporation, will act or vote on any issue or question (a "Voting Commitment") that has not been previously disclosed in writing to the corporation or (ii) any Voting Commitment that could limit or interfere with such nominee's ability to comply, if elected as a director of the corporation, with such nominee's fiduciary duties under applicable law, (b) is not and will not become a party to any agreement, arrangement or understanding with any person or entity other than the corporation with respect to any direct or indirect compensation, reimbursement or indemnification in connection with service or action as a director that has not been previously disclosed in writing to the corporation, and (c) in such nominee's individual capacity and on behalf of any person or entity on whose behalf the nomination is being made, would be in compliance, if elected as a director of the corporation, and will comply with all applicable corporate governance, conflict of interest, confidentiality and stock ownership and trading policies and guidelines of the corporation. The corporation may also require such nominee to furnish such other information as may reasonably be required by the corporation to determine the eligibility of such nominee to serve as an independent director of the corporation or that could be material to a reasonable shareholder's understanding of the independence, or lack thereof, of such nominee.
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> 3.5 When considering any nominations by shareholders for members of the board of directors, the board, or a committee thereof may, in its discretion, consider the qualifications of any such nominees to serve as directors. Such qualifications shall include, but not be limited to, factors such as independence, judgment, skill, diversity, experience with businesses and other organizations of comparable size to the corporation, experience as an officer of a publicly traded company, the interplay of the candidate's experience with the experience of other board members and the extent to which the candidate would be a desirable addition to the board of directors and any committees thereof and assessment of the diversity of the candidate's background, viewpoints, training, professional experience, education and skill set. Subject to Rule 14a-11 promulgated under the Exchange Act, the board, or any committee thereof, may preclude any nominees from serving on the board of directors if the board or such committee, determines in good faith that such nominee does not satisfy the qualifications established by the board or any committee thereof.

[1073] *Stroud v. Grace*, 606 A.2d 75, 93 (Del. 1992).

back end in an attempt to unseat a previously qualified director, director qualification provisions would seem to pass muster under Delaware law.[1074]

Under Texas law, director qualification provisions in either the certificate of formation or bylaws are authorized by TBOC § 21.402.[1075] However, there is no available Texas case law construing one of these certificate amendments or bylaws.

The relationship between director qualification bylaws and Rule 14a-11 is more complex than for advance notice bylaws. If the bylaws only govern a directors ability to serve as a director, then the nominee must be included on the proxy statement even if they do not satisfy the qualifications although the board could refuse to seat the director.[1076] But, if the bylaws are phrased to prevent the director from even being nominated (as the bylaw example given in the footnotes is), then the director could be excluded from the proxy material under the same logic as advance notice bylaws. In order to be able to exclude the director from the proxy materials, the company would need to show the SEC that the qualification was generally applicable across the board, not one that could be satisfied prior to nomination (such as the condition of owning shares listed above), and that the qualification would be valid under state law.[1077] However, SEC staff members have suggested that the SEC staff would look askance at a bylaw provision that looked like an "opt out" of Rule 14a-11 (there is no opt out allowed under the rule) such as by preventing anyone from being nominated during the open window period for proxy access nominations.[1078]

XI. Other Director Considerations.

A. Enforceability of Contracts Violative of Fiduciary Duties

Otherwise valid contracts may be rendered unenforceable if the directors of the party against which the contract is to be enforced breached their fiduciary duties in approving the contract. In *ACE Ltd. v. Capital Re Corp*.,[1079] a case in which the Chancery Court suggested that a "no-talk" provision (i.e., a provision without an effective carve-out permitting it to talk with unsolicited bidders) in a merger was not likely to be upheld and wrote:

> [T]here are many circumstances in which the high priority our society places on the enforcement of contracts between private parties gives way to even more important concerns.

1074 *Kuraz v. Holbrook*, 989 A.2d 140 (Del. Ch. 2010) (reversed in part on other grounds by *Crown EMAK Partners, LLC v. Kurz*, 992 A.2d 377 (Del. 2010).

1075 TBOC § 21.402 provides as follows:

> Sec. 21.402. BOARD MEMBER ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS. Unless the certificate of formation or bylaws of a corporation provide otherwise, a person is not required to be a resident of this state or a shareholder of the corporation to serve as a director. The certificate of formation or bylaws may prescribe other qualifications for directors.

1076 Cydney Posner, *Proxy Access Update Regarding the Application of Advance Notice Bylaws and Other Limitations on Nominations*, COOLEY LLP, http://www.cooley.com/64333 (Sept. 30, 2010).

1077 *Id.*

1078 *Id.*

1079 747 A.2d 95 (Del. Ch. 1999).

One such circumstance is when the trustee or agent of certain parties enters into a contract containing provisions that exceed the trustee's or agent's authority. In such a circumstance, the law looks to a number of factors to determine whether the other party to the contract can enforce its contractual rights. These factors include: whether the other party had reason to know that the trustee or agent was making promises beyond her legal authority; whether the contract is executory or consummated; whether the trustee's or agent's *ultra vires* promise implicates public policy concerns of great importance; and the extent to which the other party has properly relied upon the contract. Generally, where the other party had reason to know that the trustee or agent was on thin ice, where the trustee's or agent's breach has seriously negative consequences for her ward, and where the contract is as yet still unperformed, the law will not enforce the contract but may award reliance damages to the other party if that party is sufficiently non-culpable for the trustee's or agent's breach.

Indeed, Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 193 explicitly provides that a "promise by a fiduciary to violate his fiduciary duty or a promise that tends to induce such a violation is unenforceable on public policy grounds." The comments to that section indicate that "[d]irectors and other officials of a corporation act in a fiduciary capacity and are subject to the rule in this Section." It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the Delaware law of mergers and acquisitions has given primacy to the interests of stockholders in being free to maximize value from their ownership of stock without improper compulsion from executory contracts entered into by boards—that is, from contracts that essentially disable the board and the stockholders from doing anything other than accepting the contract even if another much more valuable opportunity comes along.

But our case law does not do much to articulate an explicit rationale for this emphasis on the rights of the target stockholders over the contract rights of the suitor. The Delaware Supreme Court's opinion in *Paramount v. QVC* comes closest in that respect. That case emphasizes that a suitor seeking to "lock up" a change-of-control transaction with another corporation is deemed to know the legal environment in which it is operating. Such a suitor cannot importune a target board into entering into a deal that effectively prevents the emergence of a more valuable transaction or that disables the target board from exercising its fiduciary responsibilities. If it does, it obtains nothing.

For example, in response to Viacom's argument that it had vested contract rights in the no-shop provision in the Viacom-Paramount Merger Agreement, the Supreme Court stated:

The No-Shop Provision could not validly define or limit the fiduciary duties of the Paramount directors. To the extent that a contract, or a provision thereof, purports to require a board to act or not to act in such a fashion as to limit the exercise of fiduciary duties, it is invalid and unenforceable. Despite the arguments of Paramount and Viacom to the contrary, the Paramount directors

could not contract away their fiduciary obligations. Since the No-Shop Provision was invalid, Viacom never had any vested contract rights in the provision.

As to another invalid feature of the contract, the Court explained why this result was, in its view, an equitable one:

Viacom, a sophisticated party with experienced legal and financial advisors, knew of (and in fact demanded) the unreasonable features of the Stock Option Agreement. It cannot be now heard to argue that it obtain vested contract rights by negotiating and obtaining contractual provisions from a board acting in violation of its fiduciary duties.... Likewise, we reject Viacom's arguments and hold that its fate must rise or fall, and in this instance fall, with the determination that the actions of the Paramount Board were invalid.[1080]

B. Director Consideration of Long-Term Interests.

It has been implicit under Texas law that a director may consider the long-term interests of the corporation. However, because short-term market valuations of a corporation may not always reflect the benefits of long-term decisions and inherent long-term values, article 13.06 was added to the TBCA in 1997 (carried over in TBOC § 21.401) to expressly allow directors to consider the long-term interests of a corporation and its shareholders when considering actions that affect the interest of the corporations.[1081] Although this provision was viewed as a mere codification of existing law, it was intended to eliminate any ambiguity that might exist as to the right of a board of directors to consider long-term interests when evaluating a takeover proposal. There is no similar provision in the DGCL.

C. Liability for Unlawful Distributions.

Both Texas and Delaware impose personal liability on directors who authorize the payment of distributions to shareholders (including share purchases) in violation of the statutory requirements.[1082]

Under Delaware law, liability for an unlawful distribution extends for a period of six years to all directors other than those who expressly dissent, with the standard of liability being negligence.[1083] DGCL § 172, however, provides that a director will be fully protected in relying in good faith on the records of the corporation and such other information, opinions, reports, and statements presented to the corporation by the corporation's officers, employees and other persons. This applies to matters that the director reasonably believes are within that person's professional or expert competence and have been selected with reasonable care as to the various components of surplus and other funds from which distributions may be paid or made.[1084] Directors are also entitled to receive contribution from other directors who may be liable for the distribution and are subrogated to the corporation against shareholders who received the

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1080 *Id.* at 104-05 (internal citations omitted).

1081 TBOC § 21.401; TBCA art. 13.06.

1082 TBOC § 21.316; TBCA art. 2.41(A)(1); DGCL § 174(a).

1083 DGCL § 174.

1084 DGCL § 172.

distribution with knowledge that the distribution was unlawful.[1085] Under the Texas Corporate Statues, liability for an unlawful distribution extends for two years instead of six years and applies to all directors who voted for or assented to the distribution (assent being presumed if a director is present and does not dissent).[1086] A director will not be liable for an unlawful distribution if at any time after the distribution, it would have been lawful.[1087] A similar provision does not exist in Delaware. A director will also not be liable under the Texas Corporate Statues for an unlawful distribution if the director:

(i) relied in good faith and with ordinary care on information relating to the calculation of surplus available for the distribution under the Texas Corporate Statues;

(ii) relied in good faith and with ordinary care on financial and other information prepared by officers or employees of the corporation, a committee of the board of directors of which he is not a member or legal counsel, investment bankers, accountants and other persons as to matters the director reasonably believes are within that person's professional or expert competence;

(iii) in good faith and with ordinary care, considered the assets of the corporation to have a value equal to at least their book value; or

(iv) when considering whether liabilities have been adequately provided for, relied in good faith and with ordinary care upon financial statements of, or other information concerning, any other person that is contractually obligated to pay, satisfy, or discharge those liabilities.[1088]

As in Delaware, a director held liable for an unlawful distribution under the Texas Corporate Statues will be entitled to contribution from the other directors who may be similarly liable. The director can also receive contribution from shareholders who received and accepted the distribution knowing it was not permitted in proportion to the amounts received by them.[1089] The Texas Corporate Statues also expressly provide that the liability of a director for an unlawful distribution provided for under the Texas Corporate Statues[1090] is the only liability of the director for the distribution to the corporation or its creditors, thereby negating any other theory of liability of the director for the distribution such as a separate fiduciary duty to creditors or a tortious violation of the Uniform Fraudulent Transfer Act.[1091] No similar provision is found in the DGCL.

1085 DGCL § 174(b), (c).

1086 TBOC §§ 21.316, 21.317; TBCA art. 2.41(A).

1087 TBOC § 21.316(b); TBCA art. 2.41(A).

1088 TBOC § 21.316; TBCA arts. 2.41(C), 2.41(D).

1089 TBOC § 21.318(a); TBCA arts. 2.41(E), 2.41(F).

1090 TBOC § 21.316; TBCA art. 2.41.

1091 *See* TBOC § 21.316(d); TBCA art. 2.41(G).

D. Reliance on Reports and Opinions.

Both Texas and Delaware provide that a director in the discharge of his duties and powers may rely on information, opinions and reports prepared by officers and employees of the corporation and on other persons as to matters that the director reasonably believes are within that person's professional or expert competence.[1092] In Delaware, this reliance must be made in good faith and the selection of outside advisors must have been made with reasonable care.[1093] In Texas, reliance must be made both in good faith and with ordinary care.[1094]

E. Inspection of Records by Directors.

Both Texas and Delaware have codified the common law right of directors to examine the books and records of a corporation for a purpose reasonably related to the director's service as a director.[1095] The right to receive information in furtherance of a director's performance of his duties does not permit him to use the information to advance his personal interests.[1096]

F. Inspection of Records by Shareholders.

Texas. Under TBOC § 21.218,[1097] a shareholder of a Texas corporation has the right to examine the books and records of the corporation at any reasonable time upon written notice stating a proper purpose if he (i) has been a shareholder for six month or (ii) holds at least 5% of its outstanding shares.[1098] A shareholder's right to inspect corporate books in Texas exists so that the shareholder may "ascertain whether the affairs of the corporation are properly conducted and that he may vote intelligently on questions of corporate policy and management."[1099]

A shareholder's substantive rights to inspect corporate documents and the procedures for demanding an inspection of books and records are independent from the discovery rules in

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1092 *See* TBOC §§ 21.316(c), 3.102; TBCA art. 2.41(D); DGCL § 141(e).

1093 DGCL § 141(e); *see also Brehm v. Eisner*, 746 A.2d 244 (Del. 2000).

1094 TBOC § 21.316(c)(1); TBCA art. 2.41(D).

1095 TBOC § 3.152; TBCA art. 2.44(B); DGCL § 220(d).

1096 *Holdgreiwe v. Nostalgia Network, Inc.*, C.A. No. 12914, 1993 WL 144604 (Del. Ch. April 29, 1993); *Brophy v. Cities Service Co.*, 70 A.2d 5 (Del. Ch. 1949).

1097 TBOC § 21.218 provides as follows:

> Sec. 21.218. EXAMINATION OF RECORDS. (a) In this section, a holder of a beneficial interest in a voting trust entered into under Section 6.251 is a holder of the shares represented by the beneficial interest.
>
> (b) Subject to the governing documents and on written demand stating a proper purpose, a holder of shares of a corporation for at least six months immediately preceding the holder's demand, or a holder of at least five percent of all of the outstanding shares of a corporation, is entitled to examine and copy, at a reasonable time, the corporation's relevant books, records of account, minutes, and share transfer records. The examination may be conducted in person or through an agent, accountant, or attorney.
>
> (c) This section does not impair the power of a court, on the presentation of proof of proper purpose by a beneficial or record holder of shares, to compel the production for examination by the holder of the books and records of accounts, minutes, and share transfer records of a corporation, regardless of the period during which the holder was a beneficial holder or record holder and regardless of the number of shares held by the person.

1098 *See Burton v. Cravey*, 759 S.W.2d 160, 162 (Tex. App. –Houston [1st Dist.] 1988, no writ, disapproved on other grounds, *Huie v. DeShazo*, 922 S.W.2d 920 (Texas 1996).

1099 *Johnson Ranch Royalty Co. v. Hickey*, 31 S.W.2d 150, 153 (Tex. App.—Amarillo 1930, writ ref'd).

litigation.[1100] In *Burton v. Cravey*,[1101] the Court held that objections under the rules of discovery do not apply to a request for inspection of books and records, even those requests that are "overly broad, unduly burdensome, and requires the production of irrelevant information." Further, restrictions and procedural requirements on a shareholder's right of inspection do not apply to a shareholder's discovery requests in ongoing litigation. A shareholder who is also in litigation with the corporation has the ability to use either a books and records request under TBOC § 22.218 or discovery in the litigation.[1102]

Delaware. DGCL § 220 provides that a stockholder has a right to inspect a corporation's books and records for a proper purpose related to his interest as a stockholder.[1103] The most

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1100 *San Antonio Models, Inc. v. Peeples*, 686 S.W.2d 666, 670 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1985, no writ)

1101 *Burton*, 759 S.W.2d at 162.

1102 *San Antonio Models, Inc*., 686 S.W.2d at 670.

1103 DGCL §§ 220(b) and (c) provide:

> (b) Any stockholder, in person or by attorney or other agent, shall, upon written demand under oath stating the purpose thereof, have the right during the usual hours for business to inspect for any proper purpose, and to make copies and extracts from:
>
> (1) The corporation's stock ledger, a list of its stockholders, and its other books and records; and
>
> (2) A subsidiary's books and records, to the extent that:
>
> a. The corporation has actual possession and control of such records of such subsidiary; or
>
> b. The corporation could obtain such records through the exercise of control over such subsidiary, provided that as of the date of the making of the demand:
>
> 1. The stockholder inspection of such books and records of the subsidiary would not constitute a breach of an agreement between the corporation or the subsidiary and a person or persons not affiliated with the corporation; and
>
> 2. The subsidiary would not have the right under the law applicable to it to deny the corporation access to such books and records upon demand by the corporation.
>
> In every instance where the stockholder is other than a record holder of stock in a stock corporation, or a member of a nonstock corporation, the demand under oath shall state the person's status as a stockholder, be accompanied by documentary evidence of beneficial ownership of the stock, and state that such documentary evidence is a true and correct copy of what it purports to be. A proper purpose shall mean a purpose reasonably related to such person's interest as a stockholder. In every instance where an attorney or other agent shall be the person who seeks the right to inspection, the demand under oath shall be accompanied by a power of attorney or such other writing which authorizes the attorney or other agent to so act on behalf of the stockholder. The demand under oath shall be directed to the corporation at its registered office in this State or at its principal place of business.
>
> (c) If the corporation, or an officer or agent thereof, refuses to permit an inspection sought by a stockholder or attorney or other agent acting for the stockholder pursuant to subsection (b) of this section or does not reply to the demand within 5 business days after the demand has been made, the stockholder may apply to the Court of Chancery for an order to compel such inspection. The Court of Chancery is hereby vested with exclusive jurisdiction to determine whether or not the person seeking inspection is entitled to the inspection sought. The Court may summarily order the corporation to permit the stockholder to inspect the corporation's stock ledger, an existing list of stockholders, and its other books and records, and to make copies or extracts therefrom; or the Court may order the corporation to furnish to the stockholder a list of its stockholders as of a specific date on condition that the stockholder first pay to the corporation the reasonable cost of obtaining and furnishing such list and on such other conditions as the Court deems appropriate. Where the stockholder seeks to inspect the corporation's books and records, other than its stock ledger or list of stockholders, such stockholder shall first establish that:
>
> (1) Such stockholder is a stockholder;
>
> (2) Such stockholder has complied with this section respecting the form and manner of making demand for inspection of such documents; and
>
> (3) The inspection such stockholder seeks is for a proper purpose.

important factor in the request for inspection of books and records is the stated "proper purpose." Proper purpose under DGCL § 220 means "a purpose reasonably related to such person's interest as a stockholder."[1104] Proper purpose is usually defined broadly by the Delaware courts, with a few exceptions.

In *City of Westland Police & Fire Retirement System v. Axcelis Technologies, Inc.*,[1105] the Delaware Supreme Court provided guidance on a DGCL § 220 demand in order to determine whether a director was suitable to serve in a director position, and followed the Court of Chancery's decision in *Pershing Square, L.P. v. Ceridian Corp.*,[1106] for qualifications for inspection of books and records relating to suitability of a director:

> Inspection under Section 220 is not automatic upon a statement of a proper purpose. First, a defendant may defeat demand by proving that while stating a proper purpose, plaintiff's true or primary purpose is improper. Second, a plaintiff who states a proper purpose must also present some evidence to establish a credible basis from which the Court of Chancery could infer there are legitimate concerns regarding a director's suitability. That is, a stockholder must establish a credible basis to infer that a director is unsuitable, thereby warranting further investigation. Third, a plaintiff must also prove that the information it seeks is necessary and essential to assessing whether a director is unsuitable to stand for reelection. Finally, access to board documents may be further limited by the need to protect confidential board communications. Thus, accepting that a desire to investigate the "suitability of a director" is a proper purpose does not necessarily expose corporations to greater risk of abuse.[1107]

Delaware courts sometimes allow a DGCL § 220 inspection of books and records even when there is ongoing litigation and similar documents are requested through discovery. The Delaware Court of Chancery has held that "the right of inspection [of books and records] may not necessarily be synonymous with [a] demand for production,"[1108] and the Delaware Supreme Court has held that the standards of inspection of books and records under a DGCL § 220 request are distinct from ordinary discovery in litigation proceedings.[1109]

Recent developments Delaware cases seem to suggest a shift from its traditional outright protection of stockholders' inspection of books and records under DGCL § 220. In *King v.*

> Where the stockholder seeks to inspect the corporation's stock ledger or list of stockholders and establishes that such stockholder is a stockholder and has complied with this section respecting the form and manner of making demand for inspection of such documents, the burden of proof shall be upon the corporation to establish that the inspection such stockholder seeks is for an improper purpose. The Court may, in its discretion, prescribe any limitations or conditions with reference to the inspection, or award such other or further relief as the Court may deem just and proper. The Court may order books, documents and records, pertinent extracts therefrom, or duly authenticated copies thereof, to be brought within this State and kept in this State upon such terms and conditions as the order may prescribe.

1104 8 Del. C. § 220(b).

1105 *Westland Police & Fire Retirement System v. Axcelis Technologies, Inc*., No. 594, 2009 (Del. Aug. 11, 2010).

1106 *Pershing Square, L.P. v. Ceridian Corp.,* 923 A.2d 810 (Del. Ch. 2007).

1107 *Id*. at 818.

1108 *Estate of Polin v. Diamond State Poultry Co*., C.A. No. 6374 (Del. Ch. Apr. 14,1981) slip op. at 7.

1109 *First Corp. v. U.S. Die Casting & Dev. Co*., 687 A.2d 563, 570 (Del. 1997).

Verifone, Inc.,[1110] the Court of Chancery dismissed a stockholder's DGCL § 220 action, holding that the demand was an attempt to avoid discovery restrictions in a previously-filed federal derivative suit. In *King*, the stockholder's derivative suit was dismissed without prejudice, and the court granted the stockholder leave to amend the complaint, suggesting that the stockholder utilize DGCL § 220 in order to establish demand futility. The stockholder subsequently filed a books and records request under DGCL § 220, stating the proper purpose of using the documents to assist in pleading a viable claim for demand excusal in Federal Court. When the request was denied by the company, the stockholder filed a DGCL § 220 action in Delaware. The Chancery Court dismissed the DGCL § 220 action for failure to state a proper purpose, stating that there was no proper purpose because (i) using DGCL § 220 to obtain the documents needed for bringing the derivative suit undermines the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure; (ii) filing a DGCL § 220 action "in order to get discovery in another court conflicts with the well established and sensible policies against subjecting defendants to simultaneous suits in separate forums," and (iii) allowing the stockholder to use DGCL § 220 after filing the federal derivative suit would elicit "perverse incentives" to quickly file derivative suits without proper prior investigation into the documents of the corporation. The Court wrote:

> [S]tockholders who seek books and records in order to determine whether to bring a derivative suit should do so before filing the derivative suit. Once a plaintiff has chosen to file a derivative suit, it has chosen its course and may not reverse course and burden the corporation (and its other stockholders) with yet another lawsuit to obtain information it cannot get in discovery in the derivative suit.

As long as stockholders have a primary proper purpose, the Court "may discount any secondary or ulterior purposes."[1111]

G. Director and Officer Liability for Corporate Debts Incurred If Charter Forfeited.

Directors and officers of corporations incorporated or qualified to do business in Texas may be held personally liable for debts incurred by the corporation if its corporate privileges have been forfeited for the failure to file a tax report or pay a tax or penalty during the period after the report, tax or penalty was due and before the corporate privileges are revived.[1112] This

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[1110] *King v. VeriFone Holdings, Inc.*, C.A. No. 5047-VCS (Del. May 12, 2010).

[1111] *Marathon Partners*, 2004 WL 1728604, at *3, accord *Grimes v. DSC Commc'ns Corp.*, 724 A.2d 561, 565 (Del. Ch. 1998).

[1112] Texas Tax Code § 171.255 (West 2010) provides as follows:

> Sec. 171.255. LIABILITY OF DIRECTOR AND OFFICERS. (a) If the corporate privileges of a corporation are forfeited for the failure to file a report or pay a tax or penalty, each director or officer of the corporation is liable for each debt of the corporation that is created or incurred in this state after the date on which the report, tax, or penalty is due and before the corporate privileges are revived. The liability includes liability for any tax or penalty imposed by this chapter on the corporation that becomes due and payable after the date of the forfeiture.
>
> (b) The liability of a director or officer is in the same manner and to the same extent as if the director or officer were a partner and the corporation were a partnership.
>
> (c) A director or officer is not liable for a debt of the corporation if the director or officer shows that the debt was created or incurred:
>
> (1) over the director's objection; or
>
> (2) without the director's knowledge and that the exercise of reasonable diligence to become acquainted with the affairs of the corporation would not have revealed the intention to create the debt.

liability includes liability to the State for sales taxes, penalties and interest owed by a fraudulent transferee from the corporation under the theory that the corporation had sold its assets to a related party in a sham transaction for the purpose of avoiding tax liability.[1113] There is a further risk of imposition of personal liability on the directors and officers of a corporation for damages resulting from breaches of contractual obligations by the corporation during such period even though the contract in question was properly entered into by the corporation prior to the due date of the report or taxes.[1114]

H. Vote Buying.

Vote buying, empty voting and derivative securities have been the subject of academic, judicial and regulatory scrutiny.[1115] *In Crown EMAK Partners, LLC v. Kurz*,[1116] the Delaware Supreme Court affirmed a Chancery Court holding that there was not improper vote buying where the economic interests and the voting interests of the shares remained aligned after the sale of the voting power of stock whose transfer was restricted, but expressed its concern about the use of corporate resources to purchase votes, as well as about the use of fraud or the exploitation of inside information to influence elections:

> Shareholder voting differs from voting in public elections, in that the shares on which the shareholders' vote depends can be bought and sold. Vote buying in the context of corporate elections and other shareholder actions has been and continues to be an important issue. Several commentators have addressed the corporate voting process and techniques by which shareholder voting rights can be manipulated.
>
> The Court of Chancery characterized vote buying that does not involve the use of corporate resources as "third party vote buying." Here, although Kurz is a director of EMAK, he used his own resources to acquire Boutros's shares. Accordingly, Kurz's actions as a third party do not involve the problem of insiders using corporate resources to "buy" votes.
>
> Vote buying has been described as disenfranchising when it delivers the swing votes. In this case, the Court of Chancery opined that third party vote buying merits judicial review if it is disenfranchising, *i.e.*, if it actually affects the outcome of the vote. Applying those principles to this case, the Court of Chancery

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> (d) If a corporation's charter or certificate of authority and its corporate privileges are forfeited and revived under this chapter, the liability under this section of a director or officer of the corporation is not affected by the revival of the charter or certificate and the corporate privileges.

1113 *See* Texas Tax Code §§ 111.020 (West 2010) (purchaser of business may be held liable for seller's tax liability in absence of certain precautionary measures) and 111.024 (West 2010) (person acquiring business through fraudulent transfer or sham transaction is liable for taxes owed by seller); *see also Green v. State*, 324 S.W.3d 276, 279 (Tex.App.—Austin 2010).

1114 *Taylor v. First Community Credit Union*, 316 S.W.3d 863 (Tex. App.—Houston 2010).

1115 Report of the New York Stock Exchange Commission on Corporate Governance (September 23, 2010) 14; Henry T. Hu and Bernard Black, *The New Vote Buying: Empty Voting and Hidden (Morphable) Ownership*, 79 S. Cal. L. Rev. 811 (2006); Marcel Kahan and Edward Rock, *The Hanging Chads of Corporate Voting*, 96 Georgetown L.J. 1227, 1265-68 (2008).

1116 992 A.2d 377 (Del. 2010), affirming in part and reversing in part the Court of Chancery's holding in *Kurz v. Holbrook*, 989 A.2d 140 (Del. Ch. Feb. 9, 2010). *See supra* notes 1039-1041 and related text.

concluded that the Purchase Agreement between Kurz and Boutros was potentially disenfranchising and "should be subjected to a vote buying analysis," because the "Purchase Agreement provided TBE with the votes they [sic] needed to prevail and disenfranchised what would have been a silent majority against the TBE Consent Solicitation." Therefore, it determined that the Purchase Agreement should be scrutinized closely.

* * *

For many years, Delaware decisions have expressed consistent concerns about transactions that create a misalignment between the voting interest and the economic interest of shares. As then Vice-Chancellor (now Chief Justice) Steele explained, "[g]enerally speaking, courts closely scrutinize vote-buying because a shareholder who divorces property interest from voting interest[] fails to serve the 'community of interest' among all shareholders, since the 'bought' shareholder votes may not reflect rational, economic self-interest arguably common to all shareholders." Again, in this case, the Court of Chancery recognized that "[w]hat legitimizes the stockholder vote as a decision-making mechanism is the premise that stockholders with economic ownership are expressing their collective view as to whether a particular course of action serves the corporate goal of stockholder wealth maximization."

* * *

Guided by these principles, the Court of Chancery scrutinized the Purchase Agreement as follows:

> I find no evidence of fraud in the transaction. The record indicates that Boutros was fully informed about the ongoing consent solicitations. Both factions had made multiple attempts to get him to commit to their side. Although there is no direct evidence establishing that Boutros knew his shares were the swing shares, I conclude that he must have been cognizant of this fact. He cut his deal with Kurz over the weekend before the Monday on which the TBE Consent Solicitation ended. At a time when EMAK's stock was trading on the pink sheets for less than a dollar, Boutros asked for $2.25 per share and received $1.50 per share. Boutros was advised by counsel and bargained to obtain specific terms for the deal, including an absence of representations and warranties and contractual indemnification from Kurz. These are the hallmarks of a transaction in which Boutros understood what he was selling, the circumstances under which he was selling it, and what he was getting in return.
>
> This brings me to the *alignment of interests*. Although Kurz did not take title to the 150,000 shares that Boutros owned, and although I assume the Restricted Stock Grant Agreement prohibits Boutros

> from transferring title to Kurz until March 3, 2011, Boutros nevertheless transferred to Kurz, and *Kurz now bears, 100% of the economic risk* from the 150,000 shares. If the value of EMAK's shares drops further, then Kurz will suffer. If EMAK goes bankrupt and its shares become worthless, then Kurz will have a paper souvenir. Conversely, if EMAK turns itself around and prospers, then Kurz will benefit. Kurz has already paid Boutros. Kurz's only interest lies in how EMAK performs.
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> * * *
>
> We hold that the Court of Chancery correctly concluded that there was no improper vote buying, because the economic interests and the voting interests of the shares remained aligned since both sets of interests were transferred from Boutros to Kurz by the Purchase Agreement.[1117]

I. Right to Resign.

Directors of corporations in trouble may be tempted to resign, especially when they sense that legal action may be imminent which would be time consuming and possibly result in personal liability. The general rule is that a director may resign at any time, for any reason.[1118] There is, however, an exception in circumstances where that resignation would cause immediate harm to the corporation, allow such harm to occur, or leave the company's assets vulnerable to

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[1117] 992 A.2d at 387-390.

[1118] DGCL § 141(b) provides "[a]ny director may resign at any time upon notice given in writing or by electronic transmission to the corporation"; *see In re Telesport Inc.*, 22 B.R. 527, 532-33 n.8 (Bankr. E.D. Ark. 1982) ("Corporate officers [are] entitled to resign . . . for a good reason, a bad reason or no reason at all, and are entitled to pursue their chosen field of endeavor in direct competition with [the corporation] so long as there is no breach of a confidential relationship with [it]."); *Frantz Mfg. Co. v. EAC Indus.*, 501 A.2d 401, 408 (Del. 1985) ("Directors are also free to resign."); *see also* WILLIAM MEADE FLETCHER ET AL., *2 FLETCHER CYCLOPEDIA ON CORPORATIONS* § 345 (1998) ("A director or other officer of a corporation may resign at any time and thereby cease to be an officer, subject to any express charter or statutory provisions to which he or she has expressly or impliedly assented in accepting office, and subject to any express contract made with the corporation."); Bruce H. White & William L. Medford, *Preparing for Bankruptcy; Director Liability in the Zone of Insolvency*, 20-APR. AM. BANKR. INST. J. 30 (2001) ("A Delaware corporate director typically has the right to resign without incurring any liability or breaching any fiduciary duty.").

TBOC § 21.4091 was amended (and TBCA art. 2.32 was similarly amended) in 2007 by H.B. 1737 to provide that although the general rule is that a director's resignation takes effect when received by the corporation, a resignation can provide that it takes effect upon the occurrence of a future event (including, e.g., the director's failure to receive a specified vote for reelection as a director):

> Sec. 21.4091. Resignation of Directors. (a) Except as otherwise provided by the certificate of formation or bylaws, a director of a corporation may resign at any time by providing written notice to the corporation.
>
> (b) The director's resignation takes effect on the date the notice is received by the corporation, unless the notice prescribes a later effective date or states that the resignation takes effect on the occurrence of a future event, such as the director's failure to receive a specified vote for reelection as a director.
>
> (c) If the director's resignation is to take effect on a later date or on the occurrence of a future event, the resignation takes effect on the later date or when the event occurs.
>
> (d) The director's resignation is irrevocable when it takes effect. The director's resignation is revocable before it takes effect unless the notice of resignation expressly states it is irrevocable.

directors known to be untrustworthy.[1119] While the judicial expressions of this exception appear broad, an analysis of the cases suggests that liability results only when the harm to the company is rather severe and foreseeable.[1120] Further and regardless of the timing of the resignation, a director is still liable for breaches of the fiduciary duty made during his tenure.[1121] Resignation does not free a director from the duty not to misuse information received while a director.[1122] Finally, a director may have an interest in staying on the board of directors to help the corporation work through its difficulties in the hope that by helping the corporation survive he is reducing the chances that he will be sued in connection with the corporation's troubles.

[1119] *See Gerdes v. Reynolds*, 28 N.Y.S. 2d 622, 651 (Sup. Ct. 1941) (writing, in the context of a business combination, that the Court "gravely doubt[s]" whether the directors could avoid liability if they sell their shares for a premium, resign and allow a transfer of control of a corporation to a purchaser before the full purchase price is paid and the transferee owns enough shares to elect its own slate of directors, suggesting that "officers and directors . . . cannot terminate their agency or accept the resignation of others if the immediate consequence would be to leave the interests of the company without proper care and protection"); *Xerox Corp. v. Genmoora Corp.*, 888 F.2d 345, 355 (5th Cir. 1989) (discussing a situation where a Texas corporation sold most of its assets and set up a liquidating trust to distribute the proceeds to shareholders and then four of the five directors resigned as liquidating trustees, leaving the liquidating trust in control of the fifth director known to be incompetent and dishonest, Judge Brown referred to the defense that the directors had resigned before the corporate abuse took place as the "Geronimo theory" and wrote "[u]nder this theory, by analogy, if a commercial airline pilot were to negligently aim his airplane full of passengers at a mountain, and then bail out before impact, he would not be liable because he was not at the controls when the crash occurred"; citing *Gerdes*, Judge Brown postulated that "[a] director can breach his duty of care – hence his fiduciary duty – by knowing a transaction that will be dangerous to the corporation is about to occur but taking no steps to prevent it or make his objection known"); *DePinto v. Landoe*, 411 F.2d 297 (9th Cir. 1969) (finding director liable for resigning instead of opposing a raid on his corporation's assets); *Benson v. Braun*, 155 N.Y.S.2d 622, 624-26 (noting that "officers and directors may not resign their offices and elect as their successors persons who they knew intended to loot the corporation's treasury").

[1120] Compare *In re Affiliated Computer Servs., Inc. S'holders Litiga.*, which arose after the founder, chairman, and significant stockholder of public company joined with a private equity firm in offer to take the company private. C.A. No. 2821-VCL, 2009 WL 296078 (Del.Ch. Feb. 6, 2009). A special committee was appointed to consider the proposal, but the terms of the founder's lock up arrangements with the private equity firm made it difficult for the special committee of the Board to act to induce any competing bids, leaving the Board resistant to the offer after months of efforts. A stockholder class action attacking the proposal was filed, the deal languished and ultimately fell apart after a credit crunch hit 2007. In response, the founder demanded the resignation of all of the outside directors, publicly accusing them of breach of fiduciary duty in their dealings with him. The outside directors, in response, sued the founder, seeking a declaratory judgment affirming their actions and stating they would resign after they reviewed the credentials of candidates to replace them. The stockholders then filed an amended complaint asserting derivative claims for breaches of fiduciary duty against the entire Board and asserting grounds to excuse demand. Shortly thereafter, the outside directors resigned and new independent directors took their places and constituted a majority of the Board. In holding the demand would not have been futile and dismissing the complaint on the ground that demand was not excused, the Court held that the directors had not abandoned their duties and commented:

> [B]efore tendering any resignation, the defendant outside directors first insisted on passing on the qualifications of their replacements, to ensure that the board would remain with a majority of independent directors in order to protect the minority stockholders. Far from showing an abandonment of their fiduciary duties at this time, this shows a continuing focus on those duties so long as they remained directors.

Id. at *10.

[1121] *FDIC v. Wheat*, 970 F. 2d 124, 128 (5th Cir. 1992); *District 65 UAW v. Harper & Roe Publishers*, 576 F. Supp. 1468, 1484 (S.D.N.Y 1983).

[1122] *Quark Inc. v. Harley*, C.A. Nos. 96-1046, 96-1048, 96-1061, 1998 U.S. App. LEXIS 3864 at *23 (10th Cir. March 4, 1998); *T.A. Pelsue Co. v. Grand Enter. Inc.*, 782 F. Supp. 1476, 1485-86 (D. Colo. 1991).

J. Majority Vote Resignation Policies.

In *City of Westland v. Axcelis*,[1123] the Delaware Supreme Court addressed the situation where a director who had failed to obtain the requisite majority for reelection resigns in accordance with the company's resignation policy and the resignation was not accepted by the Board. The Board in *Axcelis* had adopted a typical majority-vote-resignation policy that required a director to submit his resignation if he failed to receive a majority vote and the Board rejected his resignation. A shareholder attacking the rejection of the resignation argued in reliance on *Blasius*[1124] that the Board had the burden of showing a "compelling justification" for rejecting the resignation and continuing the director in office. The Court explained its rejection of the argument and application of the business judgment rule as follows:

> The less-than-majority shareholder vote may be viewed as a judgment by the holders of a voting majority that those director-candidates were no longer suitable to serve (or continue to serve) as directors. Correspondingly, the Board's decision not to accept those resignations may be viewed as a contrary, overriding judgment by the Board. At stake, therefore, is the integrity of the Board decision overriding the determination by a shareholder majority. Stated differently, the question arises whether the directors, as fiduciaries, made a disinterested, informed business judgment that the best interests of the corporation require the continued service of those directors, or whether the Board had some different, ulterior motivation.

The Court in *Axcelis* affirmed that director qualifications are matters of Board discretion, reviewable only under the duty of care.

K. Ratification.

Ratification refers to the affirmance of a prior act done by another whereby the act is to be given effect as if done with prior authority:[1125]

> [I]t is often said that shareholders "ratify" transactions between a corporation and its directors, or between the corporation and a third party in which directors have a personal interest. For example, a director would have such an interest in a contract between the corporation and another corporation in which the director serves as an officer. All of a corporation's directors would have such an interest in a plan under which they will receive options to purchase stock issued by the corporation. Valid shareholder ratification, consisting of a vote to approve such a transaction following disclosure of the director's interest and other material facts, binds the corporation to the transaction, in most instances without judicial assessment of its substantive merits.[1126]

1123 No. 594, 2009 (Del. Aug. 11, 2010).

1124 *See supra* note 829.

1125 RESTATEMENT (THIRD) OF AGENCY: RATIFICATION DEFINED § 4.01 (2006).

1126 *Id.* cmt. c.

The question remains, however, whether approval by a majority of disinterested stockholders will, pursuant to DGCL § 144(a)(2),[1127] cure any invalidity of director actions and, by virtue of the stockholder ratification, eliminate any director liability for losses from such actions.[1128] In *Gantler v. Stephens*, the Delaware Supreme Court found that stockholder approval of a going private stock reclassification proposal did not effectively ratify or cleanse the transaction for two reasons:

> First, because a shareholder vote was required to amend the certificate of incorporation, that approving vote could not also operate to "ratify" the challenged conduct of the interested directors. Second, the adjudicated cognizable claim that the Reclassification Proxy contained a material misrepresentation, eliminates an essential predicate for applying the doctrine, namely, that the shareholder vote was fully informed.
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> * * *
>
> [T]he scope of the shareholder ratification doctrine must be limited to its so-called "classic" form; that is, to circumstances where a fully informed shareholder vote approves director action that does not legally require shareholder approval in order to become legally effective. Moreover, the only director action or conduct that can be ratified is that which the shareholders are specifically asked to approve. With one exception, the "cleansing" effect of such a ratifying shareholder vote is to subject the challenged director action to business judgment review, as opposed to "extinguishing" the claim altogether (i.e., obviating all judicial review of the challenged action).[1129]

In *Gantler*, the Court in effect held that stockholder ratification of a transaction that was voidable because of director fiduciary duty breaches in its approval did not validate the transaction. If, however, the stockholders had in an express and separate ratification vote (after full disclosure) ratified the action, the transaction would have been cleansed of breaches of fiduciary duty even if a vote is required by statute and revive the presumptions of the business judgment rule.[1130]

Since *Gantler* only dealt with the infection of action by a conflicted board of directors, *Gantler* does not address holdings of earlier cases regarding the distinction between void and voidable actions, and leaves standing the concept that a void action cannot be ratified so as to give it the retroactive effect of validating the action from the original date. In earlier cases, the Delaware courts have held that a void act (e.g. an *ultra vires* action or an action that does not

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1127 *See supra* notes 284-292 and related text.

1128 *See Michelson v. Duncan*, 407 A.2d 211, 219 (Del. 1979).

1129 965 A.2d 695, 712-13 (Del. 2009).

1130 *See* PRINCIPLES OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS § 5.02 (American Law Institute 2006); *Lifshutz v. Lifshutz*, 199 S.W.3d 9, 21 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2006) ("Transactions between corporate fiduciaries and their corporation are capable of ratification by the shareholders . . . . Ratification by any means, however, is effective only when the officer has fully disclosed all material facts of the transactions to the board of directors or shareholders.").

comply with law or governing documents) cannot be ratified, and thus given retroactive sanctification and effect.[1131]

XII. Asset Transactions.

A. Shareholder Approval.

A sale or exchange of all or substantially all of the assets of an entity may require approval of the owners depending on the nature of the transaction, the entity's organization documents and applicable state law.[1132] In most states, shareholder approval of an asset sale has historically been required if the corporation is selling all or substantially all of its assets.[1133]

1. DGCL.

The Delaware courts have used both "qualitative" and "quantitative" tests in interpreting the phrase "substantially all," as it is used in DGCL § 271, which requires stockholder approval for a corporation to "sell, lease or exchange all or substantially all of its property and assets."[1134]

In *Hollinger Inc. v. Hollinger International, Inc.*,[1135] the sale of assets by a subsidiary with approval of its parent corporation (its stockholder), but not the stockholders of the parent, was alleged by the largest stockholder of the parent to contravene DGCL § 271. Without reaching a conclusion, the Chancery Court commented in dicta that "[w]hen an asset sale by the wholly owned subsidiary is to be consummated by a contract in which the parent entirely guarantees the performance of the selling subsidiary that is disposing of all of its assets and in which the parent is liable for any breach of warranty by the subsidiary, the direct act of the parent's board can, without any appreciable stretch, be viewed as selling assets of the parent itself."[1136] The Chancery Court acknowledged that the precise language of DGCL § 271 only requires a vote on covered sales by a corporation of "its" assets, but found that analyzing dispositions by subsidiaries on the basis of whether there was fraud or a showing that the

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1131 *Triplex Shoe Co. v. Rice*, 152 A. 342, 369 (Del. 1930) (stock issued without proper consideration in violation of charter or DGCL is void; "the act was void and not merely voidable, and . . . is incapable of being cured or validated by an attempted ratification by amendment or other subsequent proceeding"); *see Starr Surgical Co. v. Waggoner*, 588 A.2d 1130 (Del. 1991); C. Stephen Bigler & Seth Barrett Tillman, *Void or Voidable? – Curing Defects in Stock Issuances Under Delaware Law*, 63 Bus. Law. 1109 (2008).

1132 *See* TBCA arts. 5.09, 5.10; TBOC § 10.251. *See also* Byron F. Egan & Curtis W. Huff, *Choice of State of Incorporation - Texas versus Delaware: Is It Now Time To Rethink Traditional Notions?*, 54 SMU L. REV. 249, 287-88 (Winter 2001); Byron F. Egan & Amanda M. French, *1987 Amendments to the Texas Business Corporation Act and Other Texas Corporation Laws*, 25 Bull. of Sec. on Corp., Bank. & Bus. L. 1, 11-12 (No. 1, Sept. 1987).

1133 *See Story v. Kennecott Copper Corp.*, in which New York court held that under New York law the sale by Kennecott of its subsidiary Peabody Coal Company, which accounted for approximately 55% of Kennecott's consolidated assets, was not a sale of "substantially all" Kennecott's assets requiring shareholder approval even though Peabody was the only profitable operation of Kennecott for the past two years. 394 N.Y.S.2d 353 (Sup. Ct. 1977).

1134 *See Gimbel v. The Signal Cos., Inc.*, 316 A.2d 599 (Del. Ch. 1974) (holding that assets representing 41% of net worth but only 15% of gross revenues were not "substantially all"); *Thorpe v. CERBCO, Inc.*, 676 A.2d 436, 443 (Del. 1996) (holding that sale of subsidiary with 68% of assets, which was primary income generator, was not "substantially all"; Court noted that seller would be left with only one operating subsidiary, which was marginally profitable).

1135 858 A.2d 342 (Del. Ch. 2004), *appeal ref'd*, 871 A.2d 1128 (Del. 2004); *see* Subcommittee on Recent Judicial Developments, ABA Negotiated Acquisitions Committee, *Annual Survey of Judicial Developments Pertaining to Mergers and Acquisitions*, 60 Bus Law. 843, 855-58 (2005).

1136 *Hollinger*, 858 A.2d at 375.

subsidiary was a mere alter ego of the parent[1137] was too rigid. Examining the consolidated economics of the subsidiary level sale, the Chancery Court held (1) that "substantially all" of the assets should be literally read, commenting that "[a] fair and succinct equivalent to the term 'substantially all' would be 'essentially everything,' notwithstanding past decisions that have looked at sales of assets around the 50% level," (2) that the principal inquiry was whether the assets sold were "quantitatively vital to the operations of" seller (the business sold represented 57.4% of parent's consolidated EBITDA, 49% of its revenues, 35.7% of the book value of its assets, and 57% of its asset values based on bids for the two principal units of the parent), (3) that the parent had a remaining substantial profitable business after the sale (the Chancery Court wrote: "if the portion of the business not sold constitutes a substantial, viable, ongoing component of the corporation, the sale is not subject to Section 271"[1138]), and (4) that the "qualitative" test focuses on "factors such as the cash-flow generating value of assets" rather than subjective factors such as whether ownership of the business would enable its managers to have dinner with the Queen.[1139]

To address the uncertainties raised by dicta in Vice Chancellor Strine's opinion in *Hollinger*, DGCL § 271 was amended effective August 1, 2005 to add a new subsection (c), which provides as follows:

> (c) For purposes of this section only, the property and assets of the corporation include the property and assets of any subsidiary of the corporation. As used in this subsection, "subsidiary" means any entity wholly-owned and controlled, directly or indirectly, by the corporation and includes, without limitation, corporations, partnerships, limited partnerships, limited liability partnerships, limited liability companies, and/or statutory trusts. Notwithstanding subsection (a) of this section, except to the extent the certificate of incorporation otherwise provides, no resolution by stockholders or members shall be required for a sale, lease or exchange of property and assets of the corporation to a subsidiary.

This amendment answered questions raised by *Hollinger*, but raised or left unanswered other questions (e.g., (i) whether subsection (c) applies in the case of a merger of a subsidiary with a third party even though literally read DGCL § 271 does not apply to mergers), (ii) what happens if the subsidiary is less than 100% owned, and (iii) what additional is meant by the requirement that the subsidiary be wholly "controlled" as well as "wholly owned".[1140]

1137 *Leslie v. Telephonics Office Tech., Inc.*, 1993 WL 547188 (Del. Ch. Dec. 30, 1993).

1138 Quoting R. FRANKLIN BALOTTI & JESSE A. FINKELSTEIN, THE DELAWARE LAW OF CORPORATIONS AND BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS, § 10.2 at 10-7 (3d ed. Supp. 2004).

1139 *See* Subcommittee on Recent Judicial Developments, ABA Negotiated Acquisitions Committee, *Annual Survey of Judicial Developments Pertaining to Mergers and Acquisitions*, 60 Bus. Law. 843, 855-58 (2005); R. FRANKLIN BALOTTI & JESSE A. FINKELSTEIN, THE DELAWARE LAW OF CORPORATIONS AND BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS, § 10.2 (3d ed. Supp. 2004).

1140 *See* Mark A. Morton & Michael K. Reilly, *Clarity or Confusion? The 2005 Amendment to Section 271 of the Delaware General Corporation Law*, X DEAL POINTS – THE NEWSLETTER OF THE COMMITTEE ON NEGOTIATED ACQUISITIONS 2 (Fall 2005), *available at* http://www.potteranderson.com/news-publications-40-35.html; c*f. Weinstein Enter., Inc. v. Orloff*, 870 A.2d 499 (Del. 2005) (discussing "control" in the context of a DGCL § 220 action seeking inspection of certain documents in the possession of a publicly held New York corporation of which the defendant Delaware corporation defendant was a 45.16% stockholder).

In *Esopus Creek Value LP v. Hauf*, the Delaware Chancery Court prohibited a solvent public corporation, whose shares were quoted in the over-the-counter "pink sheets" but which had been unable to generate the financial statements required to file proxy materials with the SEC, from selling substantially all of its assets without first obtaining approval of the corporation's stockholders pursuant to DGCL § 271.[1141] The corporation had emerged from financial difficulties, but its independent auditors would not sign off on the financial statements required by the SEC in connection with a meeting of stockholders. Even though it was solvent, the corporation tried to solve its SEC reporting problem by an agreement to sell substantially all of its assets under § 363 of Chapter 11 of the Bankruptcy Code which would not require approval of the corporation's common stockholders. The Section 363 agreement required approval of the corporation's preferred shareholders who extracted concessions favorable to them (and disadvantageous to the common stockholders) in return for their support of the transaction. The Chancery Court, however, concluded that the transaction resulted in an inequitable reallocation of control over the corporate enterprise and prohibited its consummation without approval of the common stockholders as required by DGCL § 271. The Chancery Court suggested that the corporation should seek an exemptive order from the SEC rather than trying to structure a transaction to avoid approval of the common stockholders pursuant to DGCL § 271.

2. Texas Corporate Statutes.

Difficulties in determining when a shareholder vote is required in Delaware led Texas to adopt a bright line test. TBCA arts. 5.09 and 5.10 provided, in essence, that shareholder approval is required under Texas law only if it is contemplated that the corporation will cease to conduct any business following the sale of assets.[1142] Under TBCA art. 5.10, a sale of all or substantially all of a corporation's property and assets required approval by the shareholders (and shareholders who vote against the sale could perfect appraisal rights). TBCA art. 5.09(A) provided an exception to the shareholder approval requirement if the sale is "in the usual and regular course of the business of the corporation," and a 1987 amendment added section B to TBCA art. 5.09 providing that a sale is:

> in the usual and regular course of business if, [after the sale,] the corporation shall, directly or indirectly, either continue to engage in one or more businesses or

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1141 913 A.2d 593 (Del. Ch. 2006) (relying on *Newcastle Partners, L.P. v. Vesta Ins. Group, Inc.*, 887 A.2d 975 (Del. Ch. 2005), *aff'd* 906 A.2d 807 (Del. 2005) (ordering corporation not to delay further in holding meeting of stockholders even through the auditors failure to sign off on financial statements made it impossible to comply with SEC rules for information required to be furnished to stockholders in connection with stockholder meetings; the Chancery Court suggested that the corporation should seek an exemptive order from the SEC)); *cf. Steel Partners II, L.P. v. Point Blank Solutions, Inc.*, C.A. No. 3695-CC, 2008 WL 3522431 (Del. Ch. Aug. 12, 2008) (discussing situation where the initial complaint was filed to force the holding of a shareholders meeting (which had not taken place for three years) pursuant to DGCL § 211; after a stipulation was entered into for a date to hold the meeting, the company moved for leave of court to postpone the date of the meeting by 90 days based on allegations that the plaintiff and its CEO together own about 40% of the stock and would attempt to install their own directors and then seek to buy the company at the lowest possible price for its own investors; the Chancery Court denied the request reasoning that the best way to deal with the issues presented was to communicate them to the shareholders and let them decide, based on those facts, who they wanted as directors instead of further delaying the exercise of the shareholder franchise); *see* J. Travis Laster & Michelle D. Morris, *How to Avoid a Collision Between the Delaware Annual Meeting Requirement and the Federal Proxy Rules*, 10 DEL. L. REV. 213 (2008).

1142 *See* Byron F. Egan & Curtis W. Huff, *Choice of State of Incorporation – Texas versus Delaware: Is it Now Time to Rethink Traditional Notions?*, 54 SMU L. REV. 249, 287-290 (Winter 2001).

apply a portion of the consideration received in connection with the transaction to the conduct of a business in which it engages following the transaction.[1143]

In *Rudisill v. Arnold White & Durkee, P.C.*[1144] the 1987 amendment to art. 5.09 was applied literally. The *Rudisill* case arose out of the combination of Arnold White & Durke, P.C. ("*AWD*") with another law firm, Howrey & Simon ("*HS*"). The combination agreement provided that all of AWD's assets other than those specifically excluded (three vacation condominiums, two insurance policies and several auto leases) were to be transferred to HS in exchange for a partnership interest in HS, which subsequently changed its name to Howrey Simon Arnold & White, LLP ("*HSAW*"). In addition, AWD shareholders were eligible individually to become partners in HSAW by signing its partnership agreement, which most of them did.

For business reasons, the AWD/HS combination was submitted to a vote of AWD's shareholders. Three AWD shareholders submitted written objections to the combination, voted against it, declined to sign the HSAW partnership agreement, and then filed an action seeking a declaration of their entitlement to dissenters' rights or alternate relief. The Court accepted AWD's position that these shareholders were not entitled to dissenters' rights because the sale was in the "usual and regular course of business" as AWD continued "to engage in one or more businesses" within the meaning of TBCA art. 5.09(B), writing that "AWD remained in the legal services business, at least indirectly, in that (1) its shareholders and employees continued to practice law under the auspices of HSAW, and (2) it held an ownership interest in HSAW, which unquestionably continues directly in that business."[1145] The Court further held that AWD's obtaining shareholder approval when it was not required by TBCA art. 5.09 did not create appraisal rights, pointing out that appraisal rights are available under the statute only "*if special authorization of the shareholders is* ***required***."[1146]

The TBCA approach to whether shareholder approval is required for an asset sale is carried forward into the TBOC. TBOC § 21.455[1147] requires shareholder approval for a sale of

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1143 TBOC §§ 21.451, 21.455 carry forward TBCA arts. 5.09, 5.10.

1144 148 S.W.3d 556 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist] 2004, no pet.).

1145 *Id.* at 563.

1146 *See* Subcommittee on Recent Judicial Developments, *ABA Negotiated Acquisitions Committee, Annual Survey of Judicial Developments Pertaining to Mergers and Acquisitions*, 60 BUS. LAW. 843, 855-60 (2005).

1147 TBOC § 21.455 provides:

> Sec. 21.455. APPROVAL OF SALE OF ALL OR SUBSTANTIALLY ALL OF ASSETS. (a) Except as provided by the certificate of formation of a domestic corporation, a sale, lease, pledge, mortgage, assignment, transfer, or other conveyance of an interest in real property or other assets of the corporation does not require the approval or consent of the shareholders of the corporation unless the transaction constitutes a sale of all or substantially all of the assets of the corporation.
>
> (b) A corporation must approve the sale of all or substantially all of its assets by complying with this section.
>
> (c) The board of directors of the corporation shall adopt a resolution that approves the sale of all or substantially all of the assets of the corporation and:
>
> (1) recommends that the sale of all or substantially all of the assets of the corporation be approved by the shareholders of the corporation; or
>
> (2) directs that the sale of all or substantially all of the assets of the corporation be submitted to the shareholders for approval without recommendation if the board of directors determines for any reason not to recommend approval of the sale.

all or substantially all of the corporation's assets, and TBOC § 21.451(2) [1148] defines "sale of all or substantially all of the assets" so that it does not encompass any asset sale if afterward the corporation (i) continues to engage in one or more businesses or (ii) applies a portion of the consideration received in the asset sale to the conduct of a business in which the corporation engages after the sale.

3. Model Business Corporation Act.

A 1999 revision to the Model Business Corporation Act ("*MBCA*") excludes from the requirement of a shareholder vote any disposition of assets that would not "leave the corporation without a significant continuing business activity."[1149] The revision includes a safe harbor definition of significant continuing business activity: at least 25 percent of the total assets and 25 percent of either income (before income taxes) or revenues from pre-transaction operations.

B. De Facto Merger.

An important reason for structuring an acquisition as an asset transaction is the desire on the part of a buyer to limit its responsibility for liabilities of the seller, particularly unknown or contingent liabilities.[1150] Unlike a stock purchase or statutory combination, where the acquired corporation retains all of its liabilities and obligations, known and unknown, the buyer in an asset purchase has an opportunity to determine which liabilities of the seller it will contractually assume.[1151] The extent to which an agreement between buyer and seller as to which seller liabilities will be assumed by buyer in an asset transaction has been circumscribed by (i) federal and state statutes which impose strict or successor liability on an asset buyer for environmental,

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> (d) The resolution proposing the sale of all or substantially all of the assets of the corporation shall be submitted to the shareholders of the corporation for approval as provided by this subchapter. The board of directors may place conditions on the submission of the proposed sale to the shareholders.
>
> (e) If the board of directors approves the sale of all or substantially all of the assets of the corporation but does not adopt a resolution recommending that the proposed sale be approved by the shareholders of the corporation, the board of directors shall communicate to the shareholders the reason for the board's determination to submit the proposed sale to shareholders without a recommendation.
>
> (f) The shareholders of the corporation shall approve the sale of all or substantially all of the assets of the corporation as provided by this subchapter. After the approval of the sale by the shareholders, the board of directors may abandon the sale of all or substantially all of the assets of the corporation, subject to the rights of a third party under a contract relating to the assets, without further action or approval by the shareholders.

[1148] TBOC § 21.451(2) provides:

> (2) "Sale of all or substantially all of the assets" means the sale, lease, exchange, or other disposition, other than a pledge, mortgage, deed of trust, or trust indenture unless otherwise provided by the certificate of formation, of all or substantially all of the property and assets of a domestic corporation that is not made in the usual and regular course of the corporation's business without regard to whether the disposition is made with the goodwill of the business. The term does not include a transaction that results in the corporation directly or indirectly:
>
> (A) continuing to engage in one or more businesses; or
>
> (B) applying a portion of the consideration received in connection with the transaction to the conduct of a business that the corporation engages in after the transaction.

[1149] MBCA § 12.02(a).

[1150] David I. Albin, Byron F. Egan, Joel I. Greenberg, Mark A. Morton & Scott T. Whittaker, *Special Issues in Asset Acquisitions*, ABA 12th Annual National Institute on Negotiating Business Acquisitions, New Orleans, LA, November 1, 2007, at pages 11-20, *available at* http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=841.

[1151] *Id.*

labor and employment, product liability and tax liabilities incurred by the seller and (ii) common law theories developed by courts in various states requiring asset buyers to be responsible for seller liabilities in particular circumstances.[1152] In certain jurisdictions, the purchase of an entire business where the shareholders of the seller become shareholders of the buyer can cause a sale of assets to be treated as a common law "*de facto merger*," which would result in the buyer becoming responsible as a matter of law for seller liabilities which buyer did not contractually assume.[1153]

Texas has legislatively repealed the *de facto* merger doctrine in TBCA art. 5.10(B), which provides that in relevant part that "[a] disposition of any, all, or substantially all, of the property and assets of a corporation . . . (1) is not considered to be a merger or conversion pursuant to this Act or otherwise; and (2) except as otherwise expressly provided by another statute, does not make the acquiring corporation, foreign corporation, or other entity responsible or liable for any liability or obligation of the selling corporation that the acquiring corporation, foreign corporation, or other entity did not expressly assume."[1154] TBOC § 10.254 carries forward TBCA art. 5.10(B) and makes it applicable to all domestic entities. Although Delaware courts may follow the *de facto* merger doctrine in tort cases,[1155] the DGCL does not have an analogue to TBCA art. 5.10(B) or TBOC § 10.254.

XIII. Dissent and Appraisal Rights.

The corporation statutes of each state contain provisions permitting shareholders to dissent from certain corporate actions and to seek a court directed appraisal of their shares under certain circumstances by following specified procedures.[1156] The principal purpose of these provisions is to protect the rights of minority shareholders who object to a fundamental corporate

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1152 *See* Byron F. Egan, *Acquisition Agreement Issues*, Penn State Law and City Bar Center for CLE, New York City Bar, Sixth Annual Institute on Corporate, Securities, and Related Aspects of Mergers and Acquisitions, New York, NY, Sept. 25, 2009, http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1244.

1153 *See Knapp v. North American Rockwell Corp.*, 506 F.2d 361 (3d Cir. 1974), *cert. den.* 421 U.S. 965 (1975); *Philadelphia Electric Co. v. Hercules, Inc.*, 762 F.2d 303 (3rd Cir. 1985); *SmithKline Beecham Corp. v. Rohm and Haas Corp.*, 89 F.3d 154 (3rd Cir. 1996); *Cargo Partner AG v. Albatrans, Inc.*, 352 F.3d 41 (2d Cir. 2003).

1154 *See C.M. Asfahl Agency v. Tensor, Inc.*, 135 S.W.3d 768, 780-81 (Tex. App.─Houston [1st Dist.] 2004) (quoting TBCA art. 5.10(B)(2) and citing two other Texas cases, and noting that: "This transaction was an asset transfer, as opposed to a stock transfer, and thus governed by Texas law authorizing a successor to acquire the assets of a corporation without incurring any of the grantor corporation's liabilities unless the successor expressly assumes those liabilities. [citations omitted]. Even if the Agency's sales and marketing agreements with the Tensor parties purported to bind their 'successors and assigns,' therefore, the agreements could not contravene the protections that article 5.10(B)(2) afforded Allied Signal in acquiring the assets of the Tensor parties unless Allied Signal expressly agreed to be bound by Tensor parties' agreements with the Agency."). *See* Byron F. Egan & Curtis W. Huff, *Choice of State of Incorporation – Texas versus Delaware: Is it Now Time to Rethink Traditional Notions?*, 54 SMU L. REV., 249, 287-90 (Winter 2001).

1155 *See Sheppard v. A.C.&S Co., Inc.*, where the defendant argued that, as a matter of law and public policy, a successor corporation cannot be required to respond to a claim for punitive damages arising out of the acts of its predecessor which it did not expressly ratify or adopt. In denying the motion for summary judgment, the Court stated, "The question of successor liability for torts has not been directly considered in Delaware." 484 A.2d 521 (Del. Super. Ct. 1984). The Court acknowledged that some of the elements of a *de facto* merger claim, should one exist in Delaware, were present, although the facts before the court did not show a broad and continuous corporate connection in terms of officers, directors or stockholders. The Court stopped short of explicitly accepting the *de facto merger* doctrine, instead refusing to grant summary judgment until more facts were presented.

1156 *See* Christian J. Henrick, *Game Theory and Gonsalves: A Recommendation for Reforming Stockholder Appraisal Actions*, 56 Bus. Law. 697 (2001).

action which the majority approves.[1157] The fundamental corporate actions covered vary from state to state, but generally include mergers and in some states conversions, statutory share exchanges and sales of all or substantially all of the assets of the corporation.[1158] Set forth below is a summary of the dissent and appraisal provisions of the DGCL, the Texas Corporate Statutes and the MBCA.

A. Delaware Law.

1. When DGCL Appraisal Rights Are Triggered.

Delaware courts have considered a variety of remedies available to stockholders who oppose merger transactions. The statutory remedy in Delaware for dissenting stockholders is appraisal pursuant to DGCL § 262.[1159] Under DGCL § 262(b), appraisal rights are only available in mergers and consolidations effected pursuant to enumerated sections of the DGCL.[1160] Delaware law does not extend appraisal rights to other fundamental changes that trigger appraisal rights under the laws of other states, including sales of all or substantially all of the assets of the corporation or amendments to the corporation's articles of incorporation.[1161] Delaware also does not follow the *de facto* merger doctrine, under which a transaction structured to achieve the same result as a merger will have the same effect, including the triggering of appraisal rights.[1162] Delaware instead follows the doctrine of independent legal significance, by which "a given result may be accomplished by proceeding under one section [of the DGCL] which is not possible, or is even forbidden under another."[1163] The Delaware appraisal statute permits a corporation to include a provision in its certificate of incorporation granting appraisal rights under other circumstances.

DGCL § 262(b)(1) carves out certain exceptions when appraisal rights are not available even in mergers and consolidations that otherwise would qualify for appraisal rights. The principal exception is the so-called "market-out exception," pursuant to which appraisal rights

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1157 *Id.*

1158 *See* Stephen H. Schulman & Alan Schenk, *Shareholders' Voting and Appraisal Rights in Corporate Acquisition Transactions*, 38 BUS. LAW. 1529 (1983).

1159 *See generally* R. FRANKLIN BALOTTI & JESSE A. FINKELSTEIN, DELAWARE LAW OF CORPORATIONS & BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS §§ 9.42 et. seq. (3d ed. 2005).

1160 DGCL § 262(b). The enumerated sections are DGCL §§ 251, 252, 254, 257, 258, 263 and 264.

1161 *Compare* DGCL § 262 *with* MBCA § 13.02(a) (providing for appraisal rights in these situations).

1162 *See Hariton v. Arco Elecs., Inc.,* 182 A.2d 22, 25 (Del. Ch. 1962) (refusing to extend appraisal rights under *de facto* merger doctrine to sale of assets pursuant to DGCL § 271; finding that "the subject is one which . . . is within the legislative domain"); *cf. Heilbrunn v. Sun Chem. Corp.*, 150 A.2d 755, 758-59 (Del. 1959) (declining to invoke *de facto* merger doctrine to grant appraisal rights to purchasing corporation in sale of assets).

1163 *Hariton*, 182 A.2d at 25; *see Fed. United Corp. v. Havender*, 11 A.2d 331, 342 (Del. 1940) (holding that preferred stock with accrued dividends that could not be eliminated by charter amendment could be converted into a new security under the merger provision of the Delaware code); *Field v. Allyn*, 457 A.2d 1089, 1098 (Del. Ch. 1983) finding it "well established . . . that different sections of the DGCL have independent significance and that it is not a valid basis for challenging an act taken under one section to contend that another method of achieving the same economic end is precluded by another section"), *aff'd*, 467 A.2d 1274 (Del. 1983). *See* C. Stephen Bigler & Blake Rohrbacher, *Form or Substance? The Past, Present, and Future of the Doctrine of Independent Legal Significance*, 63 Bus. Law. 1 (Nov. 2007).

are not available to any class or series of stock listed on a national securities exchange or held of record by more than two thousand holders.[1164]

In an exception to the market-out exception, DGCL § 262(b)(2) restores appraisal rights to shares otherwise covered by the market-out if the holders of shares are required to accept anything other than: (a) shares of stock of the corporation surviving or resulting from the merger, regardless of whether they are publicly traded or widely held; (b) shares of stock of another corporation that are publicly traded or widely held; (c) cash in lieu of fractional shares; or (d) any combination of shares or fractional shares meeting the requirements of (a), (b) and (c).[1165] DGCL § 262(b)(1) also provides that no appraisal rights shall be available for any shares of stock of the constituent corporation surviving the merger if the holders of those shares were not required to vote to approve the merger.[1166] The exceptions set forth in DGCL §§ 262(b)(1) and

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[1164] DGCL § 262(b)(1) also specifies that depository receipts associated with such shares are governed by the same principles as shares for purposes of appraisal rights.

[1165] DGCL § 262(b)(2).

[1166] *Id.* In a merger in which target company shares are converted into both stock of the surviving corporation and cash beyond that required for fractional shares, appraisal rights would be available. In *Louisiana Municipal Police Employees' Retirement System v. Crawford*, the Court of Chancery treated a special dividend declared prior to a stock for stock merger, but payable only after the effective time of the merger, as an integral part of the merger lacking independent legal significance, and concluded that the Caremark Rx, Inc. stockholders were entitled to appraisal rights. 918 A.2d 1172 (Del. Ch. 2007) (*appeal denied sub nom. Express Scripts, Inc. v. Crawford*, 2007 WL 2768805 (Del. Ch. Mar. 8, 2007)). The Court postponed a vote of the stockholders of Caremark Rx, Inc. on its proposed merger with CVS Corporation for at least 20 days after corrective disclosures that the stockholders have appraisal rights. In reaching the decision that the special dividend was effectively cash consideration to be paid to the Caremark Rx stockholders as part of the proposed merger with CVS, the Court was persuaded by the fact that the payment of the special dividend was specifically conditioned on stockholder approval of the merger agreement and only became due after the effective time of the merger. The Court concluded that those "facts belie the claim that the special dividend has legal significance independent of the merger" and thus "the label 'special dividend' is simply cash consideration dressed up in a none-too-convincing disguise." *Crawford*, 918 A.2d at 1191-92.

The Court stated that the Caremark stockholders "should not be denied their appraisal rights simply because their directors are willing to collude with a favored bidder to 'launder' a cash payment." *Id.* at 1192. The Court, however, postponed (but did not indefinitely enjoin) the vote, finding that there was neither irreparable harm nor extraordinary inequity because the stockholders would have the opportunity to vote in a fully-informed manner on the CVS/Caremark merger, supported by the protection of the appraisal remedy.

The Court also held that a postponement of the stockholder vote was necessary to provide the Caremark stockholders with additional disclosure that the major part of the financial advisors' fee was contingent upon the consummation of a Caremark Rx transaction with CVS or a third party. The proxy statement disclosure was misleading because it did not clearly state that the financial advisors were entitled to the fee only if the initial CVS/Caremark merger was approved. The Court concluded that disclosure of these financial incentives to the financial advisors was material to the stockholder deliberations on the CVS/Caremark Rx merger. *Id.* at 1191.

See C. Stephen Bigler & Blake Rohrbacher, *Form or Substance? The Past, Present, and Future of the Doctrine of Independent Legal Significance*, 63 BUS. LAW. 1, 23-24 (Nov. 2007) (explaining that this CVS decision (which the authors referred to as "*LAMPERS*") seemed to some commentators as inconsistent with the doctrine of independent legal significance ("*ILS*"), noting that a Chancery Court's equitable powers may trump literal compliance with a statute where fiduciary duties are implicated). The authors explain their view of the reaches of ILS as follows:

> The boundaries of ILS as applied by the courts are much narrower than those sometimes assumed by practitioners. Recent cases suggest that the Delaware courts view ILS as applying only where a transaction is effected in accordance with a statutory regime that reaches a result identical to the result either permitted or forbade by another statute. The implications of the distinction between legal review (ILS) and equitable review (the substance-over-form and step-transaction doctrines) for planners of corporate transactions are these: if planners have a choice of structuring a transaction under one or more statutory sections, and what planners propose is legal under one statutory section (and the transaction is structured to comply with that section), because of ILS the validity of the transaction will not be tested under an alternative statute. But if the issue is whether a vote or other stockholder rights exist under a specific statute or contract where there is no alternative statute with which the planners could have

(b)(2) apply equally to stockholders of the surviving corporation and the acquired corporation and to both voting and non-voting shares.

Thus, stated generally, DGCL § 262(b) provides appraisal rights in any merger where the holders of shares receive cash or securities other than stock of a widely held corporation, stock of the surviving corporation, or a mix of the two. Delaware law also provides specifically for appraisal rights in a short-form merger.[1167]

2. Who Is Entitled to DGCL Appraisal Rights.

DGCL § 262(a) extends the right to pursue an appraisal to "any stockholder of a corporation of this State" who owns shares of stock on the date the stockholder demands an appraisal from the corporation and continues to hold the shares through the effective date of the merger or consolidation, and neither votes in favor of the merger or consolidation nor executes a written consent in favor of the transaction.[1168] Only a stockholder of record has standing to pursue an appraisal.[1169]

To qualify for appraisal rights, a stockholder must (a) remain a stockholder continuously through the period commencing on the date the stockholder makes a demand for appraisal through the effective date of the merger or consolidation[1170] and (b) not vote in favor of or consent to the merger or consolidation.[1171]

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complied, the chosen structure may not be dispositive of the outcome, because a court may look beyond the form to the substance of the transaction to resolve the issue.

Accordingly, a merger that amends the certificate of incorporation can be accomplished by compliance with the voting provisions of the merger statutes, and without regard to the class voting requirements of [DGCL] section 242, so long as it is done in accordance with [DGCL] section 251. If a transaction is structured in accordance with the statutory provisions applicable to a sale of assets or a dissolution, it will not be analyzed or subjected to the statutory requirements that would have been applicable if it were a merger. That is, ILS assures that a transaction structured in compliance with one provision of the DGCL will not be tested under the legal standards applicable to a different provision of the DGCL under which the same result would be achieved. But ILS will not preclude a court's invocation of its equitable powers.

Though ILS may be raised in many cases in which the parties dispute the character, substance, or validity of a transaction, the Delaware courts may be disinclined to accept the doctrine unless the defender of a challenged transaction demonstrates its affirmative choice to effect the transaction by complying with an alternative statutory regime. ILS does not apply at all in cases . . . where the primary issue is equitable. If the question is whether a process was unfair or whether fiduciary duties were breached, ILS cannot save the transaction. Moreover, in cases like *Hollinger* and *LAMPERS*, where the validity of a transaction does not rest on compliance with an alternative statutory regime, ILS may not be dispositive. These cases simply involve the question of compliance with a single statute (and may involve equitable review), so ILS does not provide an alternative means of demonstrating the transaction's validity.

Id. *See supra* notes 21, 1134-1140.

1167 *See* DGCL §§ 253(d), 262(b)(2).

1168 DGCL § 262(a).

1169 *Id.*

1170 *Id.*

1171 DGCL § 262(d)(1).

3. Procedural Aspects of DGCL Appraisal.

A stockholder's right to appraisal arises only upon compliance with specific statutory criteria.[1172] The stockholder bears the burden of demonstrating compliance with the statutory requirements.[1173] The statute also imposes specific requirements on the surviving corporation. Corporations are held to the same strict standard as stockholders in fulfilling their obligations under the appraisal statute.[1174]

DGCL § 262(d) requires that a corporation notify each of its stockholders entitled to appraisal rights not less than twenty days prior to the meeting at which the merger or consolidation giving rise to appraisal rights will be considered.[1175] The corporation and its directors also have a fiduciary obligation to inform all stockholders of the proper procedures for obtaining an approval.[1176] The pre-merger notice must explain in detail the process by which a stockholder may perfect the right to appraisal[1177] and include a copy of the statute.[1178]

Each stockholder who elects to demand an appraisal must submit a written demand for appraisal to the corporation before the vote on the merger or consolidation giving rise to appraisal rights.[1179] There is no specific form for the written demand under the DGCL. The Delaware appraisal statute only requires that the demand "reasonably [inform] the corporation of the identity of the stockholder and that the stockholder intends thereby to demand the appraisal of [its] shares."[1180]

Within ten days after the effective date of the merger, the surviving corporation must notify each stockholder who has submitted a written demand and who did not vote in favor of or consent to the merger of the date that the merger became effective.[1181]

1172 *Stephenson v. Commonwealth & S. Corp.*, 156 A. 215, 216 (Del. Ch. 1931) (noting that "a stockholder is required to comply with certain prescribed conditions precedent before his right to an appraisal and payment can arise"), *aff'd on other grounds*, 168 A. 211 (Del. 1933).

1173 *Carl M. Loeb, Rhoades & Co. v. Hilton Hotels Corp.*, 222 A.2d 789, 793 (Del. 1966) (noting that "[t]he claimants [have] the burden of proving compliance with each of the statutory perquisites").

1174 *Jackson v. Turnbull*, C.A. No. 13042, mem. op. at 12-13, 1994 WL 174668 at *6 (Del. Ch. Feb. 8, 1994) (requiring corporation to "strictly comply" with statutory notice requirement).

1175 DGCL § 262(d); DGCL § 262(d)(2) provides that if the merger was approved by written consent pursuant to DGCL § 228 or by the parent company in a merger with a 90% owned subsidiary pursuant to DGCL § 253, the notice shall be given by the corporation not less than ten days after the effective date of such action.

1176 *See Raab v. Villager Indus., Inc.*, 355 A.2d 888, 894 (Del. 1976) (announcing that "[a] Delaware corporation, engaged in § 262 proceedings, henceforth shall have an obligation to issue specific instructions to its stockholders as to the correct manner of executing and filing a valid objection or demand for payment . . . ."), *cert. denied sub nom. Mitchell v. Villager Indus., Inc.*, 429 U.S. 853 (1976).

1177 *Id.* at 894 (holding that notice must advise stockholders as to "(1) the general rule that all such papers should be executed by or for the stockholder of record, fully and correctly, as named in the notice to the stockholder; and (2) the manner in which one may purport to act for a stockholder of record, such as a joint owner, a partnership, a corporation, a trustee, or a guardian").

1178 DGCL § 262(d)(1).

1179 *Id.*

1180 *Id.*

1181 *Id.*

Within 120 days after the effective date of the merger, either the corporation or any stockholder who qualifies for appraisal rights and who has submitted a written demand and not voted in favor of the merger, "and who is otherwise entitled to appraisal rights," may file a petition for appraisal in the Delaware Court of Chancery demanding a determination of the value of the stock of all stockholders entitled to any appraisal.[1182] The petition for appraisal must be filed in the name of the record holder.[1183]

Within twenty days after filing of the petition initiating the appraisal process, the corporation must file with the Register in Chancery a verified list containing the names and addresses of all stockholders who have demanded payment for their shares and with whom an agreement or settlement has not been reached.[1184] The filing of the verified list does not prevent the corporation from contesting any stockholder's eligibility to an appraisal.[1185] At the hearing, the court determines which stockholders have validly perfected their appraisal rights and become entitled to an appraisal.[1186]

4. Valuation under DGCL.

The DGCL establishes the Delaware Court of Chancery's mandate to determine the value of the shares that qualify for appraisal:

> [T]he Court shall determine the fair value of the shares exclusive of any element of value arising from the accomplishment or expectation of the merger or consolidation, together with interest, if any, to be paid upon the amount determined to be the fair value. In determining such fair value, the Court shall take into account all relevant factors.[1187]

The DGCL thus places the obligation to determine the value of the shares squarely on the Court of Chancery. In rejecting an appellant's argument that the Court of Chancery erred by failing to defer to the merger price which was the result of arms-length negotiation in an efficient market, the Delaware Supreme Court in *Golden Telecom, Inc. v. Global GT LP* [1188]explained:

> Section 262(h) neither dictates nor even contemplates that the Court of Chancery should consider the transactional market price of the underlying company. Rather, in determining "fair value," the statute instructs that the court "shall take into account all relevant factors." Importantly, this Court has defined "fair value" as the value to a stockholder of the firm as a going concern, as opposed to the firm's value in the context of an acquisition or other transaction. Determining "fair value" through "all relevant factors" may be an imperfect process, but the General

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1182 DGCL § 262(e).

1183 *Id.*

1184 DGCL § 262(f).

1185 *Raynor v. LTV Aerospace Corp.*, 317 A.2d 43, 46 (Del. Ch. 1974) (noting that filing of verified list "does not . . . constitute an admission by the corporation" as to whether the stockholders listed have met the statutory requirements for appraisal).

1186 DGCL § 262(g).

1187 DGCL § 262(h).

1188 __ A.3d ____ (Del. December 29, 2010).

> Assembly has determined it to be an appropriately fair process. Section 262(h) controls appraisal proceedings, and there is little room for this Court to graft common law gloss on the statute even if we were so inclined.
>
> Section 262(h) unambiguously calls upon the Court of Chancery to perform an *independent* evaluation of "fair value" at the time of a transaction. It vests the Chancellor and Vice Chancellors with significant discretion to consider "all relevant factors" and determine the going concern value of the underlying company. Requiring the Court of Chancery to defer—conclusively or presumptively—to the merger price, even in the face of a pristine, unchallenged transactional process, would contravene the unambiguous language of the statute and the reasoned holdings of our precedent. It would inappropriately shift the responsibility to determine "fair value" from the court to the private parties. Also, while it is difficult for the Chancellor and Vice Chancellors to assess wildly divergent expert opinions regarding value, inflexible rules governing appraisal provide little additional benefit in determining "fair value" because of the already high costs of appraisal actions. Appraisal is, by design, a flexible process. Therefore, we reject Golden's contention that the Vice Chancellor erred by insufficiently deferring to the merger price, and we reject its call to establish a rule requiring the Court of Chancery to defer to the merger price in any appraisal proceeding.

The Chancery Court may perform this duty by hearing the parties' valuation contentions, selecting the most representative analysis, and then making appropriate adjustments.[1189] The court also may "adopt any one expert's model, methodology, and mathematical calculations, *in toto*, if that valuation is supported by credible evidence and withstands a critical judicial analysis on the record."[1190] "When . . . none of the parties establishes a value that is persuasive, the court must make a determination based upon its own analysis."[1191] The appraised value may well be less than the value provided in the transaction giving rise to appraisal rights.[1192]

B. Texas Corporate Statutes.

1. When Texas Statutory Appraisal Rights Are Triggered.

Under the Texas Corporate Statutes and subject to certain limitations, a shareholder of a Texas corporation has the right to dissent from any of the following corporate actions: a merger, a statutory share exchange or the sale of all or substantially all of the corporation's assets other

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1189 *See Onti, Inc. v. Integra Bank*, 751 A.2d 904, 907 (Del. Ch. 1999) ("I can base my appraisal of the companies on the Hempstead Valuation, modifying it where appropriate.").

1190 *M.G. Bancorporation Inc. v. LeBeau*, 737 A.2d 513, 526 (Del. 1999).

1191 *Cooper v. Pabst Brewing Co.*, C.A. No. 7244, mem. op. at 20, 1993 WL 208763, at *8 (Del. Ch. June 8, 1993) (citing *Matter of Shell Oil Co.*, 607 A.2d 1213 (Del. 1992)).

1192 *See Selfe v. Joseph*, 501 A.2d 409, 411 (Del. 1985) ("By opting for the appraisal remedy, dissenting [stockholders] cannot receive the cash-out price; and what they will eventually receive for their shares will depend upon the Court's determination of the appraised value of their shares under [DGCL § 262]."); *see also In re Appraisal of Shell Oil Co.*, C.A. No. 8080, mem. op. at 11, 1992 WL 321250, at *5 (Del. Ch. Oct. 30, 1992) ("An appraisal action will sometimes result in a [stockholder] receiving less after trial than he would have received had he accepted the merger consideration.").

than in the usual and regular course of business;[1193] provided that shareholder approval of the corporate action is required and the shareholder holds shares of a class or series entitled to vote on the corporate action.[1194] The purpose of the dissenters' rights provisions of the Texas Corporate Statutes is to provide shareholders with the opportunity to choose whether to sell their shares at a fair price (as determined by a court) or to be bound by the terms of the corporate action.[1195]

2. Who Is Entitled to Texas Statutory Appraisal Rights.

The Texas Corporate Statutes provide that a shareholder does not have the right to dissent from a plan of merger or exchange in which there is a single surviving or new domestic or foreign corporation, if:

(i) The shares held by the shareholder are part of a class or series, shares of which are on the record date fixed to determine the shareholders entitled to vote on the plan of merger or exchange (a) listed on a national securities exchange; (b) listed on the NASDAQ Stock Market (or successor quotation system) or designated as a national market security on an interdealer quotation system by the National Association of Securities Dealers, Inc., or successor entity; or (c) held of record by not less than 2,000 holders;

(ii) The shareholder is not required by the terms of the plan of merger or exchange to accept for the shareholder's shares any consideration that is different than the consideration (other than cash in lieu of fractional shares that the shareholder would otherwise be entitled to receive) to be provided to any other holder of shares of the same class or series of shares held by the shareholder; and

(iii) The shareholder is not required by the terms of the plan of merger or exchange to accept for the shareholder's shares any consideration other than (a) shares of a corporation that, immediately after the effective time of the merger or exchange, will be part of a class or series, shares of which are listed, or authorized for listing upon official notice of issuance, on a national securities exchange, approved for quotation as a national market security on an interdealer quotation system, or held of record by not less than 2,000 holders; (b) cash in lieu of fractional shares otherwise entitled to be received; or (c) any combination of securities and cash in lieu of fractional shares.[1196]

One reason for denying dissenters' rights under these circumstances is that the shareholders are able to liquidate their investment for fair value in the public market.[1197]

[1193] The Texas Corporate Statutes provide that an asset transaction is in the "usual and regular course of business" of the corporation if thereafter the corporation shall, directly or indirectly, either continue to engage in one or more businesses or apply a portion of the consideration received in connection with the transaction in the conduct of a business in which it engages following the transaction. TBOC § 10.354; TBCA art. 5.09(B).

[1194] TBOC § 10.354; TBCA art. 5.11(A).

[1195] *See generally Massey v. Farnsworth*, 353 S.W.2d 262, 267-68 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston 1961), *rev'd on other grounds*, 365 S.W.2d 1 (Tex. 1963).

[1196] TBOC § 10.354(b); TBCA art. 5.11.B.

[1197] *See* Robert F. Gray, Jr., *Annual Survey of Texas Law Part I: Corporations*, 44 Sw. L.J. 225, 232 (1990).

3. Procedural Aspects of Texas Statutory Appraisal.

A shareholder wishing to object to a merger or exchange may do so only by complying with the relevant statutory procedures.[1198] Unless there is fraud in the transaction, no other remedies are available to recover the value of shares or damages with respect to the objectionable action.[1199] A shareholder who fails to comply with the statutory dissent procedure is deemed to have approved the terms of the merger.[1200]

A Texas corporation whose shareholders would have dissenters' rights for a proposed corporate action must send a notice to each affected shareholder advising of the shareholder's dissenters' rights under the Texas Corporate Statutes, which includes the applicable provisions of the Texas Corporate Statutes and the location of the responsible organization's principal executive offices to which notice of dissent may be sent.[1201] The procedure for shareholder dissent depends on whether the shareholders are asked to act on the plan of merger or exchange by voting in person or by proxy at a meeting of shareholders or by executing a written consent. The following summarizes the relevant procedures for these two situations:

> Matters Submitted to a Vote of the Shareholders at a Meeting. To perfect the dissenting shareholder's rights of dissent and appraisal, the shareholder must give to the corporation prior to the meeting of shareholders a notice objecting to the proposed corporate action, setting out that the shareholder's right to dissent will be exercised if the action is approved, demanding payment of the fair value of the stock, providing to the corporation an address to which a notice relating to the dissent and appraisal procedures may be sent, and stating the number and class of the shares owned by the shareholder and the fair value of the stock as estimated by the shareholder.[1202] The shareholder must vote against the proposed corporate action.[1203] Not later than the tenth day after the date the corporate action submitted to a vote of the shareholders takes effect, the corporation must give notice that the action has been effected to each shareholder who voted against the action and sent notice to the corporation of such shareholder's dissent.[1204]
>
> Matters Approved by Written Consent. If approval of the corporate action is obtained by written consent of the shareholders, the notice regarding dissenters' rights must be provided (i) to each shareholder who consents in writing to the action before the shareholder delivers the written consent and (ii) to each shareholder who is entitled to vote on the action and does not consent in writing

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1198 TBOC § 10.356; TBCA art. 5.12.

1199 TBOC § 10.368; TBCA art. 5.12(G).

1200 TBOC §§ 10.356, 10.368; TBCA arts. 5.12(A), 5.12(G); *see also Hochberg v. Schick Inv. Co.*, 469 S.W.2d 474, 476 (Tex. Civ. App.—Fort Worth 1971, no writ); *see Farnsworth v. Massey*, 365 S.W.2d 1, 3-5 (Tex. 1963).

1201 TBOC §§ 10.355(a), 10.355(c). Under the TBCA, this requirement expressly only exists with respect to actions approved without a meeting by written consent (see TBCA art. 5.12(A)(1)(b)), but proxy statements for meetings at which shareholders are asked to vote on corporate actions in respect of which the shareholders would typically contain this information because of SEC proxy rules (if applicable) or director fiduciary duties of disclosure.

1202 TBOC § 10.356(b); TBCA art. 5.12(A) contains similar requirements.

1203 TBOC § 10.356(b)(1)(A); TBCA art. 5.12(A)(1)(a).

1204 TBOC § 10.355(e); TBCA art. 5.12(A).

to the action before the eleventh day after the date the action takes effect.[1205] To perfect the dissenting shareholder's rights of dissent and appraisal, the shareholder must not execute a consent to the corporate action and must give to the corporation a notice dissenting to the action that demands payment of the fair value of the stock, states the number and class of the shares of the domestic corporation owned by the shareholder and the fair value of the stock as estimated by the shareholder, and is delivered to the corporation not later than the twentieth day after the date the corporation sends to the shareholder a notice regarding the action.[1206]

Not later than the twentieth day after the date a shareholder makes a demand as a dissenter, the shareholder must submit to the corporation any certificates representing the shares to which the demand relates for purposes of making a notation on the certificates that a demand for the payment of the fair value of the shares has been made.[1207] A shareholder's failure to submit the certificates within the required period has the effect of terminating, at the option of the corporation, the shareholder's rights to dissent and appraisal unless a court, for good cause shown, directs otherwise.[1208]

Not later than the twentieth day after the date a corporation receives a demand for payment made by a dissenting shareholder that complies with the statute, the corporation shall respond to the dissenting shareholder in writing by:

(1) accepting the amount claimed in the demand as the fair value of the shares specified in the notice; or

(2) rejecting the demand and including in the response an estimate by the corporation of the fair value of the shares and an offer to pay the amount of the estimate.[1209]

If the corporation accepts the amount claimed in the demand, the corporation shall pay the amount not later than the ninetieth day after the date the action that is the subject of the demand was effected if the shareholder delivers to the corporation endorsed certificates representing the shares if the shares are certificated or signed assignments of the shares if the shares are uncertificated.[1210]

If a dissenting shareholder accepts an offer made by a corporation or if a dissenting shareholder and a corporation reach an agreement on the fair value of the shares, the corporation shall pay the agreed amount not later than the sixtieth day after the date the offer is accepted or the agreement is reached, as appropriate, if the dissenting shareholder delivers to the corporation

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1205 TBOC § 10.355(d); TBCA art. 5.12(A)(1)(b).

1206 TBOC § 10.356(b); TBCA art. 5.12(A) contains similar requirements.

1207 TBOC § 10.356(d); TBCA art. 5.13(B).

1208 TBOC § 10.356(d); TBCA art. 5.13(B); *see, e.g., Parkview Gen. Hosp. v. Waco Constr., Inc.*, 531 S.W.2d 224, 228 (Tex. Civ. App.—Corpus Christi 1975, no writ).

1209 TBOC §§ 10.358(a), (c), (d); TBCA art. 5.12(A).

1210 TBOC § 10.358(b); TBCA art. 5.12(A).

endorsed certificates representing the shares if the shares are certificated or signed assignments of the shares if the shares are uncertificated.[1211]

If a corporation rejects the amount demanded by a dissenting shareholder and the dissenting shareholder and corporation are unable to reach an agreement relating to the fair value of the shares within the sixty day period described above, the dissenting shareholder or corporation may file a petition requesting a finding and determination of the fair value of the dissenting shareholder's shares by a court.[1212] Such a petition must be filed not later than the sixtieth day after the expiration of the sixty-day statutory period.[1213]

4. Valuation under Texas Corporate Statutes.

The fair value of shares of a domestic corporation subject to dissenters' rights is generally the value of the shares on the date preceding the date of the action that is the subject of the appraisal proceedings.[1214] Any appreciation or depreciation in the value of the shares occurring in anticipation of the proposed action or as a result of the action, and control premiums and discounts for minority ownership and lack of marketability, must be specifically excluded from the computation of the fair value of the shares; however, where the corporation has more than one class or series of shares outstanding, the relative rights and preferences of the respective classes or series (other than relative voting rights) must be taken into account.[1215] In computing the fair value of the shares in an appraisal proceeding, the Texas Corporate Statutes provide that consideration must be given to the value of the corporation as a going concern without including in the computation of value any payment for a control premium or minority discount other than a discount attributable to the type of share held by the dissenting shareholder and any limitation placed on the rights and preference of those shares.

C. Model Business Corporation Act.

MBCA § 13.02(a)(3) confers upon certain shareholders not consenting to the sale or other disposition the right to dissent from the transaction and to obtain appraisal and payment of the fair value of their shares. The right is generally limited to shareholders who are entitled to vote on the sale. Some states, such as Delaware, do not give appraisal rights in connection with sales of assets. The MBCA sets forth procedural requirements for the exercise of appraisal rights that must be strictly complied with. A brief summary follows:

1. If the sale or other disposition of the assets of a corporation is to be submitted to a meeting of the shareholders, the meeting notice must state that shareholders are or may be entitled to assert appraisal rights under the MBCA. The notice must include a copy of the section of the statute conferring those rights.[1216] A shareholder desiring to exercise those rights

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[1211] TBOC § 10.358(e); TBCA art. 5.12(A).

[1212] TBOC § 10.361(a); TBCA art. 5.12(B).

[1213] TBOC § 10.361(b); TBCA art. 5.12(B).

[1214] TBOC § 10.362(a); TBCA art. 5.12(A).

[1215] TBOC § 10.362(a); TBCA art. 5.12(A).

[1216] MBCA § 13.20(a).

must deliver to the corporation before the vote is taken a notice of his or her intention to exercise dissenters' rights and must not vote in favor of the proposal.[1217]

2. Following the approval of the sale or other disposition, a specific notice must be sent by the corporation to the dissenting shareholders who have given the required notice, enclosing a form to be completed by those shareholders and specifying the date by which the form must be returned to the corporation and the date the shareholders' stock certificates must be returned for deposit with the corporation. The notice must also state the corporation's estimate of the fair value of the shares and the date by which any withdrawal must be received by the corporation.[1218]

3. Following the receipt by the corporation of the completed form from a dissenting shareholder and the return and deposit of his or her stock certificates, the corporation must pay to each shareholder who has complied with the appraisal requirements and who has not withdrawn his or her demand for payment, the amount of the corporation estimates to be the "fair value" of his or her shares, plus interest, and must accompany this payment with copies of certain financial information concerning the corporation.[1219] Some jurisdictions only require an offer of payment by the corporation, with final payment to await acceptance by the shareholder of the offer.

4. A dissenting shareholder who is not satisfied with the payment by the corporation must timely object to the determination of fair value and present his or her own valuation and demand payment.[1220]

5. If the dissenting shareholder's demand remains unresolved for sixty days after the payment demand is made, the corporation must either commence a judicial proceeding to determine the fair value of the shares or pay the amount demanded by the dissenting shareholder. The proceeding is held in a jurisdiction where the principal place of business of the corporation is located or at the location of its registered office. The court is required to determine the fair value of the shares plus interest.[1221] Under the prior MBCA, it was the shareholder's obligation to commence proceedings to value the shares. Currently forty-six jurisdictions require the corporation to initiate the litigation, while six put this burden on the dissenting shareholder.

Many jurisdictions follow the MBCA by providing that the statutory rights of dissenters represent an exclusive remedy and that shareholders may not otherwise challenge the validity or appropriateness of the sale of assets except for reasons of fraud or illegality. In other jurisdictions, challenges based on breach of fiduciary duty and other theories are still permitted.

1217 MBCA § 13.21(a).

1218 MBCA § 13.22.

1219 MBCA § 13.24.

1220 MBCA § 13.26.

1221 MBCA § 13.30.

XIV. Alternative Entity Fiduciary Duties.

A. General Partnership

1. General. Under the Texas Revised Partnership Act (the "*TRPA*")[1222] and the TBOC (the "*Tex. GP Stats.*"), a partner in a general partnership owes duties of loyalty and care to the partnership, the other partners, and the heirs, legatees or personal representatives of a deceased partner to the extent of their respective partnership interests.[1223] These duties are fiduciary in nature although not so labeled.[1224]

2. Loyalty. The duty of loyalty requires a general partner to place the interests of the partnership ahead of his own interests.[1225] It requires a partner to account to the partnership for any partnership asset received or used by the partner and prohibits a partner from competing with the partnership or dealing with the partnership in an adverse manner. The following fact patterns may evidence a breach of the fiduciary duty of loyalty in the general partnership context on the part of general partners, creating liability to the partnership or the other partners:

- Self-dealing or profiting from dealing with the partnership in ways not contemplated by the partnership agreement;
- Appropriation of partnership opportunities;
- Refusal to distribute profits to other members of the partnership;
- Diversion of an asset of the partnership for a non-intended use;
- Failure to disclose plans and conflicts to partners; and
- A general lack of candor with partners.[1226]

3. Care. The duty of care requires a partner to act as an ordinarily prudent person would act under similar circumstances.[1227] A partner is presumed to satisfy the duty of care if the partner acts on an informed basis, in good faith and in a manner the partner reasonably believes to be in the best interest of the partnership.[1228]

1222 TEX. REV. CIV. STAT. ANN. art. 6132b (Vernon Supp. 2010) [hereinafter "*TRPA*"].

1223 TRPA § 4.04; TBOC § 152.204.

1224 *See Johnson v. Brewer & Pritchard, P.C.*, 73 S.W.3d 193, 199–200 (Tex. 2002) (asserting that since the Court historically has held that partners owe certain fiduciary duties to other partners, it did not have to consider the impact of the TRPA on such duties); Erin Larkin, *What's in a Word? The Effect on Partners' Duties after Removal of the Term "Fiduciary" in the Texas Revised Partnership Act*, 59 BAYLOR L. REV. 895 (2007).

1225 *Meinhard v. Salmon*, 249 N.Y. 458, 463-64, 164 N.E. 545, 546 (N.Y. 1928). Justice Cardozo wrote:

> Joint adventurers, like copartners, owe to one another, while the enterprise continues, the duty of the finest loyalty. Many forms of conduct permissible in a workaday world for those acting at arm's length, are forbidden to those bound by fiduciary ties. A trustee is held to something stricter than the morals of the market place. Not honesty alone, but the punctilio of an honor the most sensitive, is then the standard of behavior. As to this there has developed a tradition that is unbending and inveterate. * * * Only thus has the level of conduct for fiduciaries been kept at a level higher than that trodden by the crowd. It will not consciously be lowered by any judgment of this court.

1226 *See* TRPA § 4.04(b); TBOC § 152.205; ALAN R. BROMBERG & LARRY E. RIBSTEIN, *BROMBERG & RIBSTEIN ON PARTNERSHIP*, § 2.06, at § 6.07 (Aspen Publishers 2003).

1227 TRPA § 4.04(c); TBOC § 152.206(a).

1228 TRPA § 4.04(c), (d); TBOC §§ 152.204(b), 152.206(c).

4. Candor. In addition to the duties of loyalty and care, a partner owes his co-partners a fiduciary duty of candor, sometimes referred to as a duty of disclosure.[1229]

5. Liability. A partner is liable to the partnership and the other partners for violation of a statutory duty that results in harm to the partnership or the other partners and for a breach of the partnership agreement.[1230] Tex. GP Stats. provide that a partner, in that capacity, is not a trustee and is not held to the same standards as a trustee,[1231] which represents a change from cases under Texas pre-TRPA general partnership statute.[1232] A managing partner stands in a higher fiduciary relationship to other partners than partners typically occupy.[1233]

6. Effect of Partnership Agreement. A partnership agreement governs the relations of the partners, but may not (i) unreasonably restrict a partner's statutory rights of access to books and records, (ii) eliminate the duty of loyalty, although the agreement may within reason identify specific types or categories of activities that do not violate the duty of loyalty, (iii) eliminate the duty of care, although the agreement may within reason determine the standards by which the performance of the obligation is to be measured, or (iv) eliminate the obligation of good faith, although the agreement may within reason determine the standards by which the performance of the obligation is to be measured.[1234]

B. Limited Partnership

Case law has adopted fiduciary standards for general partners of limited partnerships mirroring the unbending fiduciary standards espoused in general partnership cases.[1235] Because of their control over partnership affairs, general partners may be subjected to an even higher

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1229 ALAN R. BROMBERG & LARRY E. RIBSTEIN, *BROMBERG & RIBSTEIN ON PARTNERSHIP*, § 2.06, at §§ 6.05(c), 6.06 (Aspen Publishers 2003).

1230 TRPA § 4.05; TBOC § 152.210.

1231 TRPA § 4.04(f); TBOC § 152.204(d).

1232 *See Huffington v. Upchurch*, 532 S.W.2d 576, 579 (Tex. 1976); *Crenshaw v. Swenson*, 611 S.W.2d 886, 890 (Tex. Civ. App.—Austin 1980, writ ref'd n.r.e.) (holding that a managing partner owes his co-partners the highest fiduciary duty recognized in the law).

1233 *See, e.g.*, *Hughes v. St. David's Support Corp.,* 944 S.W.2d 423 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, writ denied); *Conrad v. Judson*, 465 S.W.2d 819, 828 (Tex. Civ. App.—Dallas 1971, writ ref'd n.r.e.); *Huffington*, 532 S.W.2d at 579; *see also Brazosport Bank of Tex. v. Oak Park Townhouses*, 837 S.W.2d 652, 659 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1992, writ granted), *rev'd on other grounds*, 851 S.W.2d 189 (Tex. 1993) (noting that a fiduciary relationship exists between general partners, as well as between general and limited partners); *Crenshaw*, 611 S.W.2d at 890.

1234 TRPA § 1.03(b); TBOC § 152.002.

1235 *See Hughes v. St. David's Support Corp.*, 944 S.W.2d 423, 425–26 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, writ denied) (holding that "in a limited partnership, the general partner stands in the same fiduciary capacity to the limited partners as a trustee stands to the beneficiaries of a trust."); *McLendon v. McLendon*, 862 S.W.2d 662, 676 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1993, writ denied) (holding that "in a limited partnership, the general partner acting in complete control stands in the same fiduciary capacity to the limited partners as a trustee stands to the beneficiaries of a trust."); *Crenshaw v. Swenson*, 611 S.W.2d 886, 890 (Tex. Civ. App.—Austin 1980, writ ref'd n.r.e.); *Watson v. Limited Partners of WCKT, Ltd.*, 570 S.W.2d 179, 182 (Tex. Civ. App.—Austin 1978, writ ref'd n.r.e.); Robert W. Hamilton, *Corporate General Partners of Limited Partnerships*, 1 J. SMALL & EMERGING BUS. L. 73, 73 (1997) (stating that "[g]eneral partners are personally liable for all partnership obligations, including breaches of fiduciary duties owed to the limited partners."); *see also Huffington v. Upchurch*, 532 S.W.2d 576 (Tex. 1976); *Johnson v. Peckham*, 120 S.W.2d 786 (Tex. 1938); *Kunz v. Huddleston*, 546 S.W.2d 685 (Tex. Civ. App.—El Paso 1977, writ ref'd n.r.e.).

fiduciary standard with respect to limited partners.[1236] Those in control of the general partner have been held to the same high standards.[1237]

Since a general partner in a limited partnership has the powers, duties and liabilities of a partner in a general partnership unless applicable law or the partnership agreement provides otherwise, a general partner in a limited partnership has the duties of care and loyalty set forth in the Texas Revised Limited Partnership Act (the "*TRLPA*"),[1238] TRPA § 4.04 and TBOC § 152.204, which basically codify those duties without giving them the "fiduciary" appellation.[1239] Since TRPA and the limited partnership provisions of the TBOC (the "*Tex. LP Stats.*") provide that a general partner's conduct is not to be measured by trustee standards, it may no longer be appropriate to measure general partner conduct in terms of trustee fiduciary standards.[1240] Courts, however, continue to refer to the trustee standard.[1241]

A general partner in a limited partnership owes the duties of care and loyalty to the partnership and the other partners.[1242] The Tex. LP Stats. define the duty of care as requiring a partner to act in the conduct and winding up of the partnership business with the care of an ordinarily prudent person under similar circumstances.[1243] An error in judgment does not by itself constitute a breach of the duty of care.[1244] Further, a partner is presumed to satisfy the duty of care if the partner acts on an informed basis, in good faith and in a manner the partner reasonably believes to be in the best interest of the partnership.[1245] These provisions draw on the corporate business judgment rule in articulating the duty of care. Nevertheless, Texas law does not specify whether the standard of care is one of simple or gross negligence. The sparse case law in this area (pre-dating the TRPA) indicates that a partner will not be held liable for mere negligent mismanagement.[1246]

In Texas, the duty of loyalty is defined as including[1247]:

1236 In *Palmer v. Fuqua*, the Fifth Circuit noted that under Texas law a general partner having exclusive power and authority to control and manage the limited partnership "owe[s] the limited partners an even greater duty than is normally imposed [upon general partners]." 641 F.2d 1146, 1155 (5th Cir. 1981).

1237 *See In re Bennett*, 989 F.2d 779, 790 (5th Cir. 1993) (explaining that when a partner is in complete control of the partnership, the partner owes the highest level of fiduciary duty); *In re USA Cafes, L.P. Litigation*, 600 A.2d 43 (Del. Ch. 1991) (in holding that directors of corporate general partner of limited partnership owe fiduciary duties to the partnership and its limited partners, the court wrote: "those affiliates of a general partner who exercise control over the partnership's property may find themselves owing fiduciary duties to both the partnership and its limited partners").

1238 TEX. REV. CIV. STAT. ANN. art. 6132a-1 (Vernon Supp. 2010) [hereinafter "TRLPA"].

1239 TRLPA §§ 4.03(b), 13.03; TBOC §§ 153.003, 153.152.

1240 TRPA § 4.04(f); TBOC § 152.204(d).

1241 *See McBeth v. Carpenter*, 2009 WL 922071 (C.A.5 (Tex.)); *Hughes v. St. David's Support Corp.,* 944 S.W.2d 423, 425-26 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, writ denied).

1242 TRPA § 4.04(a); TBOC § 152.204(a).

1243 TRPA § 4.04(c); TBOC § 152.206(a).

1244 TRPA § 4.04(c); TBOC § 152.206(a).

1245 TRPA § 4.04(c)-(d); TBOC §§ 152.204(b), 152.206.

1246 *See Ferguson v. Williams*, 670 S.W.2d 327, 331 (Tex. App.—Austin 1984, writ ref'd n.r.e.).

1247 TRPA § 4.04(b); TBOC § 152.205.

1. accounting to the partnership and holding for it any property, profit, or benefit derived by the partner in the conduct and winding up of the partnership business or from use by the partner of partnership property;

2. refraining from dealing with the partnership on behalf of a party having an interest adverse to the partnership; and

3. refraining from competing with the partnership or dealing with the partnership in a manner adverse to the partnership.

These provisions mirror the common areas traditionally encompassed by the duty of loyalty (e.g., self-dealing, conflicts of interest and usurpation of partnership opportunity).[1248] To temper some of the broader expressions of partner duties in older Texas case law and permit a balancing analysis as in the corporate cases, Texas law specifically states that a partner does not breach a duty merely because his conduct furthers his own interest and that the trustee standard should not be used to test general partner conduct.[1249] It does, however, impose on a general partner in a limited partnership the obligation to discharge any duty, and exercise any rights or powers, in conducting or winding up partnership business in good faith and in a manner that the partner reasonably believes to be in the best interest of the partnership.[1250]

A corporation that controls the general partner may owe a duty of loyalty to the limited partnership.[1251] Directors of a corporate general partner who dominate and control the underlying limited partnership can be liable for the corporate general partner's breach of fiduciary duty to the limited partners.[1252] Similarly, the parent and grandparent entities of the managing owner of a Delaware statutory business trust may be liable, directly or indirectly, for exercising control over or aiding and abetting the managing owner's actions to serve its own self-interest in violation of its fiduciary duties to the Delaware statutory business trust, which suffered significant losses as a result of a transfer of certain of its assets to a third party shortly before the transferee's collapse.[1253]

1248 Under Texas law, persons engaged in a partnership owe to one another one of the highest duties recognized in law—the duty to deal with one another with the utmost good faith and most scrupulous honesty. *See Huffington v. Upchurch*, 532 S.W.2d 576, 579 (Tex. 1976); *Smith v. Bolin*, 271 S.W.2d 93, 96 (Tex. 1954); *Johnson v. J. Hiram Moore, Ltd.*, 763 S.W.2d 496 (Tex. App.—Austin 1988, writ denied); s*ee also Brazosport Bank of Tex. v. Oak Park Townhouses*, 837 S.W.2d 652, 659 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1992, writ granted), *rev'd on other grounds*, 851 S.W.2d 189 (Tex. 1993); *Crenshaw v. Swenson*, 611 S.W.2d 886, 890 (Tex. Civ. App.—Austin 1980, writ ref'd n.r.e.).

1249 TRPA § 4.04(e)-(f); TBOC § 152.204(c)-(d).

1250 TRPA § 4.04(d); TBOC § 152.204(b).

1251 *James River-Pennington, Inc. v. CRSS Capital, Inc.*, C.A. No. 13870, 1995 WL 106554, at *11 (Del. Ch. Mar. 6, 1995) (also recognizing also that the general partner's fiduciary duties might be modified by the limited partnership agreement); *Bigelow/Diversified Secondary P'ship Fund 1990 v. Damson/Birtcher Partners*, C.A. No. 16630-NC, 2001 WL 1641239, at *1-2, 8-9 (Del. Ch. Dec. 4, 2001) (holding that various "upstream" entities controlling general partners could owe fiduciary duties to either the partnership or the limited partners, the Court explained: "While mere ownership—either direct or indirect—of the general partner does not result in the establishment of a fiduciary relationship, those affiliates of a general partner who exercise control over the partnership's property may find themselves owing fiduciary duties to both the partnership and its limited partners.").

1252 *In re USACafes, L.P. Litig.*, 600 A.2d 43, 48 (Del. Ch. 1991).

1253 *Cargill, Inc. v. JWH Special Circumstance LLC*, 959 A.2d 1096 (Del. Ch. 2008).

Under the TBOC *limited* partners, as limited partners, generally do not owe fiduciary duties to the partnership or to other partners.[1254] Previously, a literal reading of the TRPA and TRLPA suggested that limited partners owed such duties by virtue of the linkage of TRPA to TRLPA under TRLPA section 13.03(a).[1255] That literal interpretation of the statutes, however, was contrary to the general concept that limited partners are merely passive investors and thus should not be subjected to liability for their actions as limited partners. Further, even before the TBOC was enacted there was some case law to the effect that limited partners do not have fiduciary duties.[1256] Pre TBOC, an exception was made to this general rule in the case where a limited partner actually had or exercised control in management matters (e.g., because of control of the general partner, contractual veto powers over partnership actions or service as an agent of the partnership).[1257] In such situations, the limited partner's conduct could be judged by fiduciary principles.[1258]

The Tex. LP Stats. state in part that except as provided in various statutory provisions or the partnership agreement, a general partner of a limited partnership "has the liabilities of a partner in a partnership without limited partners to the partnership and to the other partners."[1259] This language indicates that the partnership agreement may modify the internal liabilities of a general partner, but it is not clear whether it is an authorization without express limits or whether

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1254 TBOC §§ 153.003(b) ("The powers and duties of a limited partner shall not be governed by a provision of Chapter 152 [the TBOC Chapter dealing with general partnerships] that would be inconsistent with the nature and role of a limited partner as contemplated by this chapter [153]") and 153.003(c) ("A limited partner shall not have any obligation or duty of a general partner solely by reason of being a limited partner").

1255 TRLPA § 13.03(a) provides: "In any case not provided by [TRLPA], the applicable statute governing partnerships that are not limited partnerships [TRPA] and the rules of law and equity, including the law merchant, govern."

1256 *See, e.g., In re Villa West Assocs.*, 146 F.3d 798, 806 (10th Cir. 1998); *In re Kids Creek Partners, L.P.*, 212 B.R. 898, 937 (Bankr. N.D. Ill. 1997).

1257 *McBeth v. Carpenter*, 2009 WL 922071 (C.A.5 (Tex.)) (limited partnerships controlled by the same individual who controlled the general partner, and whose individual conduct was held to violate his fiduciary duties to the limited partners, were held to have fiduciary duties to the other limited partners).

1258 *See RJ Assocs., Inc. v. Health Payors' Org. Ltd. P'ship, HPA, Inc.*, No. 16873, 1999 WL 550350, at *10 (Del. Ch. July 16, 1999) (unpublished mem. op.) (suggesting that, unless a partnership agreement provides to the contrary, any limited partner owes fiduciary duties to the partnership); *KE Prop. Mgmt. Inc. v. 275 Madison Mgmt. Inc.*, Civ. A. No. 12683, 1993 WL 285900, at *4 (Del. Ch. July 27, 1993) (unpublished mem. op.). Limited partners who function as officers or managers of a limited partnership are typically considered agents of the limited partnership, and as agents to owe fiduciary duties, including the duty of loyalty, to the limited partnership and its other partners. *See* American Law Institute, *Restatement of the Law of Agency 2nd* (1958) §§ 13 ("An agent is a fiduciary with respect to matters within the scope of his agency"), 387 ("Unless otherwise agreed, an agent is subject to a duty to his principal to act solely for the benefit of the principal in all matters connected with his agency"), 393 ("Unless otherwise agreed, an agent is subject to a duty not to compete with the principal concerning the subject matter of his agency"), 394 ("Unless otherwise agreed, an agent is subject to a duty not to act or to agree to act during the period of his agency for persons whose interests conflict with those of the principal in matters in which the agent is employed"), and 395 ("Unless otherwise agreed, an agent is subject to a duty to the principal not to use or to communicate information confidentially given him by the principal or acquired by him during the course of or on account of his agency or in violation of his duties as agent, in competition with or to the injury of the principal, on his own account or on behalf of another, although such information does not relate to the transaction in which he is then employed, unless the information is a matter of general knowledge"); *see also Daniel v. Falcon Interest Realty Corp.*, 190 S.W.3d 177 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2005, no pet. hist).

1259 TRLPA § 4.03(b); TBOC § 153.152(a). Note, this language should *not* be mistaken as an authorization for partnership agreements to alter partner liabilities to third parties. The registered limited liability partnership ("*LLP*") provisions in TRPA and the TBOC permit a general partnership to significantly limit the individual liability of its partners for certain acts of other partners by the partnership making a specified filing with the Secretary of State. TRPA § 3.08; TBOC Title 1; TBOC §§ 152.801-152.805.

it would link to Texas general partnership statutes that prohibit elimination of duties and set a "manifestly unreasonable" floor for contractual variation.[1260]

Delaware expressly allows the limitation or elimination of partner fiduciary duties in the partnership agreement.[1261] Although limitations on fiduciary duty in a partnership agreement

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[1260] *See* TRPA § 1.03(b); TBOC § 152.002(b). One additional point applies to limited partnerships that continue to be governed by the TRLPA. When originally drafted, it was the intent of the Partnership Law Committee of the Business Law Section of the State Bar of Texas that the TRLPA be subject to variation by agreement *only* if expressly permitted by the TRLPA; otherwise, the parties were *not* free to agree to provisions in the partnership agreement that differ from those contained in the TRLPA. TRLPA § 4.03 bar committee's cmt. Given the subsequent adoption of the TRPA, with its more flexible approach to contractual modifications of the statutory provisions, and the linkage provision contained in section 13.03 of the TRLPA, there is some question as to whether the more restrictive approach of the TRLPA to contractual modifications continues to have any application. *Cf.* TRLPA § 1.03 bar committee's cmt. Thus, a prudent course for limited partnerships formed before January 1, 2006 was to draft the partnership agreement as if the flexibility afforded by the TRPA applied, but to be aware that any provisions of the partnership agreement that varied the requirements of the TRLPA without express statutory authority were subject to challenge.

"Partnership agreement" is defined to be either a written *or oral* agreement of the partners concerning the affairs of the partnership and the conduct of its business. *See* TRLPA § 1.02(10); TBOC § 151.001(5) (emphasis added).

Some TRLPA provisions permit modification by either a written or oral partnership agreement, while others require the modification to be in the form of a written partnership agreement. *Compare* TRLPA § 4.03(a) and TBOC § 153.152 concerning restrictions on a general partner *with* TRLPA § 11.02 and TBOC § 8.103(c) concerning indemnification of a general partner.

[1261] Section 17-1101(b)-(f) of the Delaware Revised Limited Partnership Act ("*DRLPA*"), DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 6, § 17-1101(b)-(f) (Supp. 2010), provides as follows:

> (b) The rule that statutes in derogation of the common law are to be strictly construed shall have no application to this chapter.
>
> (c) It is the policy of this chapter to give maximum effect to the principle of freedom of contract and to the enforceability of partnership agreements.
>
> (d) To the extent that, at law or in equity, a partner or other person has duties (including fiduciary duties) to a limited partnership or to another partner or to another person that is a party to or is otherwise bound by a partnership agreement, the partner's or other person's duties may be expanded or restricted or eliminated by provisions in the partnership agreement; provided that the partnership agreement may not eliminate the implied contractual covenant of good faith and fair dealing.
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> (e) Unless otherwise provided in a partnership agreement, a partner or other person shall not be liable to a limited partnership or to another partner or to another person that is a party to or is otherwise bound by a partnership agreement for breach of fiduciary duty for the partner's or other person's good faith reliance on the provisions of the partnership agreement.
>
> (f) A partnership agreement may provide for the limitation of elimination of any and all liabilities for breach of contract and breach of duties (including fiduciary duties) of a partner or other person to a limited partnership or to another partner or to an other person that is a party to or is otherwise bound by a partnership agreement; provided, that a partnership agreement may not limit or eliminate liability for any act or omission that constitutes a bad faith violation of the implied contractual covenant of good faith and fair dealing.

DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 6, § 17-1101(b)-(f) (Supp. 2009); *see* RESTATEMENT (SECOND) OF CONTRACTS § 205 ("every contract imposes upon each party a duty of good faith and fair dealing in its performance and its enforcement"). This contractual duty of good faith and fair dealing is to be contrasted with the fiduciary duty of good faith, which is a component of the common law fiduciary duty of loyalty. *See Stone v. Ritter*, 911 A.2d 362 (Del. 2006) and Byron F. Egan, *Fiduciary Duty Issues in M&A Transactions* at 13-27, *available at* http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1166.

See Myron T. Steele, *Judicial Scrutiny of Fiduciary Duties in Delaware Limited Partnerships and Limited Liability Companies*, 32 DEL. J. CORP. L. 1, 25 (2007), in which Delaware Supreme Court Chief Justice Steele argues that parties forming limited partnerships and companies should be free to adopt or reject some or all of the fiduciary duties recognized at common law in the context of corporations, that courts should look to the parties' agreement and apply a

may be respected by courts when they are expressly set forth in the four corners of the partnership agreement, "a topic as important as this should not be addressed coyly."[1262]

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contractual analysis, rather than analogizing to traditional notions of corporate governance, in limited partnership and LLC fiduciary duty cases, and that Delaware courts should analyze limited partnership fiduciary duty cases as follows:

> The courts' approach should be, first, to examine the agreement to determine if the act complained of is legally authorized by statute or by the terms of the agreement itself. If so, a court should then proceed to inquire whether the implementation of the lawful act requires equity to intervene and craft a remedy? At this point, the court should look to the agreement to determine the extent to which it establishes the duties and liabilities of the parties, i.e., their bargained for, negotiated, contractual relationship. Is the agreement silent about traditional fiduciary duties, but creates a fiduciary relationship consistent with those duties thus allowing the court to imply them by default? Does the agreement expand, restrict, or eliminate one or more of the traditional fiduciary duties? Is the contract language creating those duties and liabilities so inconsistent with common law fiduciary duty principles that it can be concluded that the parties consciously modified them in a discernible way? If so, which duties and in what respect were they modified? Finally, without regard to traditional overlays of scrutiny under the common law of corporate governance, has a party breached its implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing?

See infra note 1275 regarding Chief Justice Steele's views in respect of fiduciary duties in the LLC context.

[1262] *Miller v. American Real Estate Partners, L.P.*, C.A. No. 16788, 2001 WL 1045643, at *8 (Del. Ch. Sept. 6, 2001) (unpublished mem. op.). In *Miller*, the general partner contended that the partnership agreement eliminated any default fiduciary duty of loyalty owed by the general partner to the limited partners in section 6.13(d) of the partnership agreement, which read as follows:

> Whenever in this Agreement the General Partner is permitted or required to make a decision (i) in its "sole discretion" or "discretion", with "absolute discretion" or under a grant of similar authority or latitude, the General Partner shall be entitled to consider only such interests and factors as it desires and shall have no duty or obligation to give any consideration to any interest of or factors affecting the Partnership, the Operating Partnership or the Record Holders, or (ii) in its "good faith" or under another express standard, the General Partner shall act under such express standard and shall not be subject to any other or different standards imposed by this Agreement or any other agreement contemplated herein.

In finding that the foregoing provision was not adequate to eliminate the general partner's fiduciary duty of loyalty, Vice Chancellor Strine wrote:

> This is yet another case in which a general partner of a limited partnership contends that the partnership agreement eliminates the applicability of default principles of fiduciary duty, and in which this court finds that the drafters of the agreement did not make their intent to eliminate such duties sufficiently clear to bar a fiduciary duty claim. Here, the drafters of the American Real Estate Partners, L.P. partnership agreement did not clearly restrict the fiduciary duties owed to the partnership by its general partner, a defendant entity wholly owned by defendant Carl Icahn. Indeed, the agreement seems to contemplate that the general partner and its directors could be liable for breach of fiduciary duty to the partnership if they acted in bad faith to advantage themselves at the expense of the partnership.
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> Once again, therefore, this court faces a situation where an agreement which does not expressly preclude the application of default principles of fiduciary is argued to do so by implication. Indeed, this case presents the court with an opportunity to address a contractual provision similar to the one it interpreted on two occasions in *Gotham Partners, L.P. v. Hallwood Realty Partners, L.P.*, and contemporaneously with this case in *Gelfman v. Weeden Investors, L.P.* In each of those cases, this court held that the traditional fiduciary entire fairness standard could not be applied because it was inconsistent with a contractual provision providing a general partner with sole and complete discretion to effect certain actions subject solely to a contract-specific liability standard. The court's decision was based on two factors. First, the court noted the difference between the sole and complete discretion standard articulated in the agreements, which explicitly stated that the general partner had no duty to consider the interests of the partnership or the limited partner in making its decisions, and the traditional notion that a fiduciary acting in a conflict situation has a duty to prove that it acted in a procedurally and substantively fair manner. Second,

Unlike DRLPA, under Tex. LP Stats., the duties of care and loyalty and the obligation of good faith may not be eliminated by the partnership agreement, but the statute leaves room for some modification by contract.[1263] For example, the partnership agreement may not eliminate the duty of care but may determine the standards by which the performance of the obligation is to be measured, if the standards are not "manifestly unreasonable."[1264] In one case decided prior to the passage of the TRPA and the TBOC, the Court stated that, when the parties bargain on equal terms, a fiduciary may contract for the limitation of liability, though public policy would preclude limitation of liability for self-dealing, bad faith, intentional adverse acts, and reckless indifference with respect to the interest of the beneficiary.[1265]

With respect to a partner's duty of loyalty, Tex. LP Stats. provide that the partnership agreement may not eliminate the duty of loyalty, but may identify specific types or categories of activities that do not violate the duty of loyalty, again if not "manifestly unreasonable."[1266] The level of specificity required of provisions in the partnership agreement limiting duties pursuant to Tex. LP Stats. is unknown. In fact, it may depend upon the circumstances, such as the

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> and even more critically, however, each of the agreements indicated that when the sole and complete discretion standard applied, any other conflicting standards in the agreements, other contracts, or under law (including the DRULPA) were to give way if it would interfere with the general partners' freedom of action under the sole and complete discretion standard. That is, in each case, the agreement expressly stated that default principles of fiduciary duty would be supplanted if they conflicted with the operation of the sole and complete discretion standard.
>
> This case presents a twist on *Gotham Partners* and *Gelfman*. Like the provisions in *Gotham Partners* and *Gelfman*, § 6.13(d) sets forth a sole discretion standard that appears to be quite different from the duty of a fiduciary to act with procedural and substantive fairness in a conflict situation. What is different about § 6.13(d), however, is that it does not expressly state that default provisions of law must give way if they hinder the General Partner's ability to act under the sole discretion standard. Rather, § 6.13(d) merely states that other standards in the Agreement or agreements contemplated by the agreement give way to the sole discretion standard. By its own terms, § 6.13(d) says nothing about default principles of law being subordinated when the sole discretion standard applies.
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> * * *
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> This court has made clear that it will not be tempted by the piteous pleas of limited partners who are seeking to escape the consequences of their own decisions to become investors in a partnership whose general partner has clearly exempted itself from traditional fiduciary duties. The DRULPA puts investors on notice that fiduciary duties may be altered by partnership agreements, and therefore that investors should be careful to read partnership agreements before buying units. In large measure, the DRULPA reflects the doctrine of *caveat emptor*, as is fitting given that investors in limited partnerships have countless other investment opportunities available to them that involve less risk and/or more legal protection. For example, any investor who wishes to retain the protection of traditional fiduciary duties can always invest in corporate stock.
>
> But just as investors must use due care, so must the drafter of a partnership agreement who wishes to supplant the operation of traditional fiduciary duties. In view of the great freedom afforded to such drafters and the reality that most publicly traded limited partnerships are governed by agreements drafted exclusively by the original general partner, it is fair to expect that restrictions on fiduciary duties be set forth clearly and unambiguously. A topic as important as this should not be addressed coyly.

Id. at *1-8.

1263 TRLPA §§ 4.03(b), 13.03(a); TRPA § 1.03(b); TBOC §§ 152.002(b); 153.003(a).

1264 TRLPA §§ 4.03(b), 13.03(a); TRPA § 1.03(b); TBOC § 152.002(b)(3).

1265 *Grider v. Boston Co., Inc.*, 773 S.W.2d 338, 343 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1989, writ denied).

1266 TRLPA §§ 4.03(b), 13.03(a); TRPA § 1.03(b)(2); TBOC §§ 152.002(b)(2), 153.003(a).

sophistication and relative bargaining power of the parties, the scope of the activities of the partnership, etc.

Tex. LP Stats. provide that the obligation of good faith may not be eliminated by the partnership agreement, but the agreement may determine the standards by which the performance is to be measured if not "manifestly unreasonable."[1267] Again the parameters of this provision are not readily apparent and probably will depend, at least in part, on the circumstances of any particular case.

Texas law requires a limited partnership to keep in its registered office, and make available to the partners for copying and inspection, certain minimum books and records of the partnership.[1268] This mandate provides a statutory mechanism by which a partner may obtain the documents specified therein, but should not be viewed as in any way limiting a general partner's broader fiduciary duty of candor regarding partnership affairs as developed in case law and as provided in Tex. LP Stats.[1269]

C. Limited Liability Company

The Texas Limited Liability Company Act (the "*LLC Act*")[1270] and the limited liability company ("*LLC*") provisions of the TBOC ("*Tex. LLC Stats.*") do not address specifically whether Manager or Member fiduciary duties exist or attempt to define them,[1271] but implicitly recognize that they may exist in statutory provisions which permit them to be expanded or restricted in the Company Agreement.[1272] The duty of Managers in a Manager-managed LLC and Members in a Member-managed LLC to the LLC is generally assumed to be fiduciary in nature, measured by reference to the fiduciary duties of corporate directors. By analogy to corporate directors, Managers would have the duties of obedience, care and loyalty and should have the benefit of the business judgment rule. Much like a corporate director who, in theory, represents all of the shareholders of the corporation rather than those who are responsible for his being a director, a Manager should be deemed to have a fiduciary duty to all of the Members. Whether Members owe a fiduciary duty to the other Members or the LLC will likely be

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1267 TRLPA §§ 4.03(b), 13.03(a); TRPA § 1.03(b)(4); TBOC §§ 152.002(b)(4), 153.003(a).

1268 TRLPA § 1.07; TBOC §§ 153.551, 153.552.

1269 *See* TRPA § 4.03; TBOC §§ 153.551, 153.552.

1270 TEX. REV. CIV. STAT. ANN. art. 1528n (Vernon Supp. 2010) [hereinafter "LLC Act"].

1271 *See* Elizabeth M. McGeever, *Hazardous Duty? The Role of the Fiduciary in Noncorporate Structures*, 4 BUS. L. TODAY 51, 53 (Mar.–Apr.1995); Robert R. Keatinge et al., *The Limited Liability Company: A Study of the Emerging Entity*, 47 BUS. LAW. 375, 401 (1992) (noting that LLC statutes usually do not specify fiduciary duties of Members or Managers).

1272 LLC Act article 2.20(B) provides that the Regulations may expand or reduce fiduciary duties as follows:

> To the extent that at law or in equity, a member, manager, officer, or other person has duties (including fiduciary duties) and liabilities relating thereto to a limited liability company or to another member or manager, such duties and liabilities may be expanded or restricted by provisions in the regulations.

Similarly, TBOC § 101.401 provides:

> The company agreement of a limited liability company may expand or restrict any duties, including fiduciary duties, and related liabilities that a member, manager, officer, or other person has to the company or to a member or manager of the company.

determined by reference to corporate principles in the absence of controlling provisions in the certificate of formation or Company Agreement.[1273]

The Tex. LLC Stats. allow LLC Company Agreements to expand or restrict the duties (including fiduciary duties) and liabilities of Members, Managers, officers and other persons to the LLC or to Members or Managers of the LLC.[1274] This provision of Texas law was designed, in the same vein as the Delaware Limited Liability Company Act (the "DLLCA") from which it drew inspiration, to allow LLCs the flexibility to address fiduciary duties through contract principles.[1275] Unlike the DLLCA which allows an LLC agreement to eliminate fiduciary duties,[1276] the Tex. LLC Stats. only permit an LLC Company agreement to "restrict" duties.[1277]

1273 *Suntech Processing Sys., L.L.C. v. Sun Commc'ns, Inc.*, No. 05-99-00213-CV, 2000 WL 1780236, at *6 (Tex. App.—Dallas Dec. 5, 2000, pet. denied) (not designated for publication). In *Suntech*, a minority Member of a Texas LLC claimed that the controlling Member owed a fiduciary duty as a matter of law in connection with the winding up of operations and distribution of assets. *Id.* at *5. The Court pointed out that the Regulations expressly provided for a duty of loyalty to the LLC rather than between the Members, and, noting the absence of Texas case law on fiduciary duties of LLC Members and looking to case law regarding fiduciary duties of shareholders of a closely held corporation, held that there was no fiduciary relationship between the Members as a matter of law. *Id.* at *1.

1274 *See* LLC Act § 2.20B; TBOC § 101.401. Prior to the effectiveness of S.B. 555 on September 1, 1997, LLC Act § 8.12 had incorporated by reference the limitation of liability afforded to corporate directors under TMCLA 1302-7.06 and thereby allowed the limitation of Manager liability by a provision in the Articles (now, the Certificate of Formation) to the extent permitted for a director under TMCLA 1302-7.06. S.B. 555 deleted such incorporation by reference of TMCLA 1302-7.06 in favor of the broader authorization now in LLC Act § 2.20B.

1275 DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 6, § 18-1101(a)-(f) (2010). The Delaware Limited Liability Company Act aggressively adopts a "contracterian approach" (i.e., the bargains of the parties manifested in LLC agreements are to be respected and rarely trumped by statute or common law) and does not have any provision which itself creates or negates Member or Manager fiduciary duties, but instead allows modification of fiduciary duties by an LLC agreement as follows:

> **18-1101 CONSTRUCTION AND APPLICATION OF CHAPTER AND LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY AGREEMENT.**
>
> (a) The rule that statutes in derogation of the common law are to be strictly construed shall have no application to this chapter.
>
> (b) It is the policy of this chapter to give the maximum effect to the principle of freedom of contract and to the enforceability of limited liability company agreements.
>
> (c) To the extent that, at law or in equity, a member or manager or other person has duties (including fiduciary duties) to a limited liability company or to another member or manager or to another person that is a party to or is otherwise bound by a limited liability company agreement, the member's or manager's or other person's duties may be expanded or restricted or eliminated by provisions in the limited liability company agreement; provided, that the limited liability company agreement may not eliminate the implied contractual covenant of good faith and fair dealing.
>
> (d) Unless otherwise provided in a limited liability company agreement, a member or manager or other person shall not be liable to a limited liability company or to another member or manager or to another person that is a party to or is otherwise bound by a limited liability company agreement for breach of fiduciary duty for the member's or manager's or other person's good faith reliance on the provisions of the limited liability company agreement.
>
> (e) A limited liability company agreement may provide for the limitation or elimination of any and all liabilities for breach of contract and breach of duties (including fiduciary duties) of a member, manager or other person to a limited liability company or to another member or manager or to another person that is a party to or is otherwise bound by a limited liability company agreement; provided, that a limited liability company agreement may not limit or eliminate liability for any act or omission that constitutes a bad faith violation of the implied contractual covenant of good faith and fair dealing.

(f) Unless the context otherwise requires, as used herein, the singular shall include the plural and the plural may refer to only the singular. The use of any gender shall be applicable to all genders. The captions contained herein are for purposes of convenience only and shall not control or affect the construction of this chapter.

See RESTATEMENT (SECOND) OF CONTRACTS and related Comment which provide:

§ 205. Duty of Good Faith and Fair Dealing

Every contract imposes upon each party a duty of good faith and fair dealing in its performance and its enforcement.

Comment:

a. Meanings of "good faith." Good faith is defined in Uniform Commercial Code § 1-201(19) as "honesty in fact in the conduct or transaction concerned." "In the case of a merchant" Uniform Commercial Code § 2-103(1)(b) provides that good faith means "honesty in fact and the observance of reasonable commercial standards of fair dealing in the trade." The phrase "good faith" is used in a variety of contexts, and its meaning varies somewhat with the context. Good faith performance or enforcement of a contract emphasizes faithfulness to an agreed common purpose and consistency with the justified expectations of the other party; it excludes a variety of types of conduct characterized as involving "bad faith" because they violate community standards of decency, fairness or reasonableness. The appropriate remedy for a breach of the duty of good faith also varies with the circumstances.

b. Good faith purchase. In many situations a good faith purchaser of property for value can acquire better rights in the property than his transferor had. See, e.g., § 342. In this context "good faith" focuses on the honesty of the purchaser, as distinguished from his care or negligence. Particularly in the law of negotiable instruments inquiry may be limited to "good faith" under what has been called "the rule of the pure heart and the empty head." When diligence or inquiry is a condition of the purchaser's right, it is said that good faith is not enough. This focus on honesty is appropriate to cases of good faith purchase; it is less so in cases of good faith performance.

c. Good faith in negotiation. This Section, like Uniform Commercial Code § 1-203, does not deal with good faith in the formation of a contract. Bad faith in negotiation, although not within the scope of this Section, may be subject to sanctions. Particular forms of bad faith in bargaining are the subjects of rules as to capacity to contract, mutual assent and consideration and of rules as to invalidating causes such as fraud and duress. See, for example, §§ 90 and 208. Moreover, remedies for bad faith in the absence of agreement are found in the law of torts or restitution. For examples of a statutory duty to bargain in good faith, see, e.g., National Labor Relations Act § 8(d) and the federal Truth in Lending Act. In cases of negotiation for modification of an existing contractual relationship, the rule stated in this Section may overlap with more specific rules requiring negotiation in good faith. See §§ 73, 89; Uniform Commercial Code § 2-209 and Comment.

d. Good faith performance. Subterfuges and evasions violate the obligation of good faith in performance even though the actor believes his conduct to be justified. But the obligation goes further: bad faith may be overt or may consist of inaction, and fair dealing may require more than honesty. A complete catalogue of types of bad faith is impossible, but the following types are among those which have been recognized in judicial decisions: evasion of the spirit of the bargain, lack of diligence and slacking off, willful rendering of imperfect performance, abuse of a power to specify terms, and interference with or failure to cooperate in the other party's performance.

e. Good faith in enforcement. The obligation of food faith and fair dealing extends to the assertion, settlement and litigation of contract claims and defenses. See, e.g., §§ 73, 89. The obligation is violated by dishonest conduct such as conjuring up a pretended dispute, asserting an interpretation contrary to one's own understanding, or falsification of facts. It also extends to dealing which is candid but unfair, such as taking advantage of the necessitous circumstances of the other party to extort a modification of a contract for the sale of goods without legitimate commercial reason. See Uniform Commercial Code § 2-209, Comment 2. Other types of violation have been recognized in judicial decisions: harassing demands for assurances of performance, rejection of performance for unstated reasons, willful failure to mitigate damages, and abuse of a power to determine compliance or to terminate the contract. For a statutory duty of good faith in termination, see the federal Automobile Dealer's Day in Court Act, 15 U.S.C. §§ 1221-25 (1976).

In *Kuroda v. SPJS Holdings, L.L.C.*, CA No. 4030-CC (Del. Ch. April 15, 2009), a dispute among members of an LLC, the Chancellor dismissed plaintiff's allegations that the defendant members had breached the implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing by failing to pay him monies due, disparagements and threats because plaintiff had "failed to articulate a contractual benefit he was denied as a result of defendants' breach of an implied provision in the contract," and explained:

> The implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing inheres in every contract and "requires 'a party in a contractual relationship to refrain from arbitrary or unreasonable conduct which has the effect of preventing the other party to the contract from receiving the fruits' of the bargain." The implied covenant cannot be invoked to override the express terms of the contract. Moreover, rather than constituting a free floating duty imposed on a contracting party, the implied covenant can only be used conservatively "to ensure the parties' 'reasonable expectations' are fulfilled." Thus, to state a claim for breach of the implied covenant, Kuroda "must allege a specific implied contractual obligation, a breach of that obligation by the defendant, and resulting damage to the plaintiff." General allegations of bad faith conduct are not sufficient. Rather, the plaintiff must allege a specific implied contractual obligation and allege how the violation of that obligation denied the plaintiff the fruits of the contract. Consistent with its narrow purpose, the implied covenant is only rarely invoked successfully.

This contractual duty of good faith and fair dealing is to be contrasted with the fiduciary duty of good faith, which is a component of the common law fiduciary duty of loyalty. *See Stone v. Ritter*, 911 A.2d 362 (Del. 2006) and Byron F. Egan, *Fiduciary Duty Issues in M&A Transactions* at 13-27, available at http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1166. DLLCA §§ 18-1101(a)-(f) are counterparts of, and virtually identical to, §§ 17-1101(a)-(f) of the Delaware Revised Limited Partnership Act. *See* DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 6, § 17-1101 (2009). Thus, Delaware cases regarding contractual limitation of partner fiduciary duties should be helpful in the LLC context.

See Myron T. Steele, *Judicial Scrutiny of Fiduciary Duties in Delaware Limited Partnerships and Limited Liability Companies*, 32 DEL. J. CORP. L. 1, 25 (2007), in which Delaware Supreme Court Chief Justice Steele argues that parties forming limited liability companies should be free to adopt or reject some or all of the fiduciary duties recognized at common law, that courts should look to the parties' agreement and apply a contractual analysis, rather than analogizing to traditional notions of corporate governance, in LLC fiduciary duty cases, and that:

> Delaware's Limited Liability Company Act does not specify the duties owed by a member or manager. It does, however, like the Limited Partnership Act, provide for a default position "to the extent, at law or in equity" limited liability companies have "duties (including fiduciary duties)." These duties, in turn, "may be expanded or restricted or eliminated" in the agreement, provided that the "agreement may not eliminate the implied contractual covenant of good faith and fair dealing."
>
> The same issues and considerations that arise in limited partnerships arise in governance disputes in limited liability companies. There is an assumed default to traditional corporate governance fiduciary duties where the agreement is silent, or at least not inconsistent with the common law fiduciary duties. Lack of clarity in the agreements on this point may confuse the court and cause it to focus improperly when addressing the conduct complained of in a derivative action or in an action to interpret, apply, or enforce the terms of the limited liability company agreement. Predictably, but not necessarily correctly, Delaware courts will gravitate toward a focus on the parties' status relationship and not their contractual relationship in the search for a legal and equitable resolution of a dispute unless the agreement explicitly compels the court to look to its terms and not to the common law fiduciary gloss.

See supra note 1261 and related text regarding Chief Justice Steele's views in respect of fiduciary duties in the limited partnership context.

In *Fisk Ventures, LLC v. Segal*, 2008 WL 1961156 (Del. Ch. 2008), Delaware Chancellor William Chandler wrote that LLCs are creatures of contract and that a prerequisite to any breach of contract analysis is to determine if there is a *duty* in the document that has been breached. The Chancellor quoted in footnote 34 Chief Justice Steele's article entitled *Judicial Scrutiny of Fiduciary Duties in Delaware Limited Partnerships and Limited Liability Companies*, 32 Del. J. Corp. L. 1, 4 (2007) ("Courts should recognize the parties' freedom of choice exercised by contract and should not superimpose an overlay of common law fiduciary duties…"), and found no provision in the LLC Agreement at issue that: "create[d] a code of conduct for all members; on the contrary, most of those sections expressly claim to limit or waive liability." The Chancellor wrote:

> There is no basis in the language of the LLC Agreement for Segal's contention that all members were bound by a code of conduct, but, even if there were, this Court could not enforce such a code because there is no limit whatsoever to its applicability".

In addressing the breach of fiduciary duty claims asserted by plaintiff, the Chancellor focused on Delaware LLC Act § 18-1101(c) which allows for the complete elimination of all fiduciary duties in an LLC agreement. The Court then read the subject LLC Agreement to eliminate fiduciary duties because it flatly stated that:

> No Member shall have any duty to any Member of the Company except as expressly set forth herein or in other written agreements. No Member, Representative, or Officer of the Company shall be liable to the Company or to any Member for any loss or damage sustained by the Company or to any Member, unless the loss or damage shall have been the result of gross negligence, fraud or intentional misconduct by the Member, Representative, or Officer in question….

Because the foregoing LLC Agreement exception for gross negligence, fraud or intentional misconduct did not create a fiduciary duty and the LLC Agreement did not otherwise expressly articulate fiduciary obligations, the foregoing LLC Agreement provision was held to be sufficient to eliminate defendant's fiduciary duties.

The Chancellor considered and disposed of plaintiff's "implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing" claim as follows:

> Every contract contains an implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing that "requires a 'party in a contractual relationship to refrain from arbitrary or unreasonable conduct which has the effect of preventing the other party to the contract from receiving the fruits' of the bargain." Although occasionally described in broad terms, the implied covenant is not a panacea for the disgruntled litigant. In fact, it is clear that "a court cannot and should not use the implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing to fill a gap in a contract with an implied term unless it is clear from the contract that the parties would have agreed to that term had they thought to negotiate the matter." Only rarely invoked successfully, the implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing protects the spirit of what was *actually bargained and negotiated for* in the contract. Moreover, because the implied covenant is, by definition, *implied*, and because it protects the *spirit* of the agreement rather than the form, it cannot be invoked where the contract itself expressly covers the subject at issue.
>
> Here, Segal argues that Fisk, Rose and Freund breached the implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing by frustrating or blocking the financing opportunities proposed by Segal. However, neither the LLC Agreement nor any other contract endowed him with the right to unilaterally decide what fundraising or financing opportunities the Company should pursue, and his argument is "another in a long line of cases in which a plaintiff has tried, unsuccessfully, to argue that the implied covenant grants [him] a substantive right that [he] did not extract during negotiation." Moreover, the LLC Agreement *does* address the subject of financing, and its specifically requires the approval of 75% of the Board. Implicit in such a requirement is the right of the Class B Board representatives to disapprove of and therefore block Segal's proposals. As this Court has previously noted, "[t]he mere exercise of one's contractual rights, without more, cannot constitute … a breach [of the implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing]." Negotiating forcefully and within the bounds of rights granted by the LLC agreement does not translate to a breach of the implied covenant on the part of the Class B members.

In *Kelly v. Blum*, 2010 WL 629850 (Del.Ch. February 24, 2010), the Chancery Court denied motions for summary judgment, dealing with (among other things) fiduciary duties in a merger challenged by a minority member/manager of an LLC who was squeezed out in a merger into a sister company of the majority member. The Court held that: (i) the claims of the minority were direct rather than derivative, (ii) the managers and majority members owed traditional fiduciary duties to the minority member in the absence of any express provisions in the operating agreement to limit fiduciary duties, and (iii) the corporate parent of the majority member and the surviving member could be liable for aiding and abetting breaches of fiduciary duty. In so holding, the Court explained:

> Though few Delaware cases deal specifically with the distinction between derivative and direct claims in the LLC context, Sections 18-1001 to 18-1004 of the Delaware Limited Liability Company Act ("LLC Act") were modeled, in significant part, on the corporate derivative suit. Consequently, "case law governing corporate derivative suits is equally applicable to suits on behalf of an LLC," and I look to corporate case law to determine the proper method for distinguishing between derivative actions brought on behalf of Marconi and Kelly's direct claims.
>
> The distinction between the rights of an LLC and the individual rights of its members is often quite narrow. Though several early Delaware cases addressing this distinction relied largely on the "amorphous and confusing concept of 'special injury,'" the Delaware Supreme Court expressly disavowed use of that concept in *Tooley*. In *Tooley*, the Court stated that determining whether a claim is derivative or direct depends solely upon two questions: First, "who suffered the alleged

harm," the LLC or its members, and second, "who would receive the benefit of any recovery or other remedy," the LLC or its members, individually. In answering these questions, the Court looks to the nature of the wrong alleged, not merely at the form of words used in the complaint.

In the second count of the Complaint, Kelly claims that, by virtue of their status as Members or Managers of Marconi, Defendants Blum, Breen, Kestenbaum, MBC Investment, and MBC Lender each "owed various fiduciary duties to Kelly as the minority equity owner." Kelly further avers that these Defendants violated their duties of loyalty and care to him by entering into a self-interested Merger on terms that were unfair to Kelly.

The basic approach of the LLC Act is to "provide members with broad discretion in drafting the [LLC] Agreement and to furnish default provisions when the members' agreement is silent." In the case of fiduciary duties, the LLC Act permits LLC contracting parties to expand, restrict, or eliminate duties, including fiduciary duties, owed by members and managers to each other and to the LLC. Section 18-1101(c) does not specify a statutory default provision as do other sections of the LLC Act; rather, it implies that some default fiduciary duties may exist "at law or in equity," inviting Delaware courts to make an important policy decision and determine the default level of those duties.

Accepting that invitation, Delaware cases interpreting Section 18-1101(c) have concluded that, despite the wide latitude of freedom of contract afforded to contracting parties in the LLC context, "in the absence of a contrary provision in the LLC agreement," LLC managers and members owe "traditional fiduciary duties of loyalty and care" to each other and to the company. Thus, unless the LLC agreement in a manager-managed LLC explicitly expands, restricts, or eliminates traditional fiduciary duties, managers owe those duties to the LLC and its members and controlling members owe those duties to minority members. Therefore, I must determine whether the 2008 LLC Agreement expanded, restricted, or eliminated the default fiduciary duties the Managers (Blum, Breen, and Kestenbaum) and controlling Members (MBC Investment and MBC Lender) owed to Kelly, and whether a breach of any existing duty would support a direct, as opposed to a derivative, claim.

In large measure, the 2008 LLC Agreement is silent on the issue of duties owed by Managers to the LLC and its Members, with the exception of Sections 7.5 and 7.9. In its entirety, Section 7.5, entitled "Duties," states that

> [t]he Board of Managers shall manage the affairs of the Company in a prudent and business-like manner and shall devote such time to the Company affairs as they shall, in their discretion exercised in good faith, determine is reasonably necessary for the conduct of such affairs.

In relevant part, Section 7.9, which limits the monetary liability of Managers, states that

> [i]n carrying out their duties hereunder, the Managers shall not be liable for money damages **for breach of fiduciary duty to the Company nor to any Member** for their good faith actions or failure to act ... but only for their own willful or fraudulent misconduct or willful breach of their contractual or **fiduciary duties** under this Agreement.

(Emphasis added).

I do not read these clauses, individually or collectively, as "explicitly disclaim[ing or limiting] the applicability of default principles of fiduciary duty." Indeed, far from limiting such duties, Section 7.9 suggests that the parties intended traditional fiduciary duties to apply. Additionally, Section 7.5 does not limit the Managers' duties so much as place control of Marconi's affairs in the board of Managers, rather than the Members, allowing each Manager the discretion to determine the amount of time she must devote to running Marconi.

Because no clause in the 2008 LLC Agreement explicitly restricts or eliminates the default applicability of fiduciary duties, I find that Blum, Breen, and Kestenbaum, as Managers of Marconi, were required to treat Kelly in accordance with such traditional fiduciary duties. Furthermore, if the allegations in Kelly's Complaint are true, then Blum, Breen, and Kestenbaum entered the Merger largely intending to profit from a "premeditated scheme to squeeze Kelly out of Marconi and seize control of the FCC license" held by Marconi-actions that support a claim for breach of the duty of loyalty. Thus, drawing reasonable inferences in Kelly's favor, I find that his

Complaint alleges sufficient facts to support his claim that the Managers breached these duties by entering into a Merger designed solely to eliminate Kelly's interest in Marconi.

Even though Kelly alleged facts that, if true, are sufficient to show that Blum, Breen, and Kestenbaum may have breached their fiduciary duties, those Defendants still might avoid liability because the 2008 LLC Agreement contains an exculpatory provision limiting the monetary liability of Managers. Section 18-1101(e) of the LLC Act permits members, in their LLC agreement, to limit or eliminate a manager's or member's liability for "breach of contract and breach of duties (including fiduciary duties)," except for liability arising from a "bad faith violation of the implied contractual covenant of good faith and fair dealing." While somewhat analogous to 8 *Del. C.* § 102(b)(7), which authorizes a corporation to adopt provisions limiting liability for a director's breach of the duty of care, Section 18-1101(e) goes further by allowing broad exculpation of *all* liabilities for breach of fiduciary duties-including the duty of loyalty.

Here, Section 7.9 of the 2008 LLC Agreement eliminates the Managers' monetary liability for all conduct except "willful or fraudulent misconduct or willful breach of ... contractual or fiduciary duties under this Agreement." Although the default duties of loyalty and care remain, this provision requires more than application of a standard like entire fairness and requires that Kelly allege facts showing scienter. That is, under Section 7.9, liability attaches only where a Manager willfully breaches his fiduciary duties.

* * *

Even under Defendants' proffered standard, however, their motion to dismiss Count II must be denied because Kelly alleges facts suggesting that a significant level of mistrust and rancor towards Kelly existed among the other Managers, particularly Blum, and that these Managers actually and specifically intended to extinguish Kelly's membership interest in Marconi, knowing that such action would harm Kel1y. Because these allegations, if true, support Kelly's claim that Defendants' willful self-dealing led to an unfair Merger that was not an arm's length transaction, I deny the motion to dismiss Count II as to the Managers, Blum, Breen, and Kestenbaum.

* * *

As with LLC managers, "in the absence of provisions in the LLC agreement explicitly disclaiming the applicability of default principles of fiduciary duty," controlling members in a manager-managed LLC owe minority members "the traditional fiduciary duties" that controlling shareholders owe minority shareholders. Controlling shareholders-typically defined as shareholders who have voting power to elect directors, cause a break-up of the company, merge the company with another, or otherwise materially alter the nature of the corporation and the public shareholder's interests-owe certain fiduciary duties to minority shareholders. Specifically, and very pertinently to this case, such fiduciary duties include the duty "not to cause the corporation to effect a transaction that would benefit the fiduciary at the expense of the minority stockholders."

* * *

Because the 2008 LLC Agreement is silent as to what duties controlling members owe minority members, I find that MBC Investment and MBC Lender owed Kelly traditional fiduciary duties, including, among others, the duty not to cause Marconi to enter a transaction that would benefit the controlling Members at the expense of Kelly, Marconi's minority Member. I also find that Kelly has stated facts that, if true, are sufficient to show that MBC Investment and MBC Lender did, with the aid of their appointed Managers, effect the Merger in order to benefit themselves at the expense of Kelly. Thus, Kelly has stated a direct claim that is not subject to any exculpation provision in the Agreement, and I deny Defendants' motion to dismiss Count II of Kelly's Complaint as to MBC Investment and MBC Lender.

In *Related Westpac LLC v. JER Snowmass LLC*, C.A. No. 501 (Del. Ch. July 23, 2010), the Delaware Chancery Court held that one member of an LLC could not force another to advance funds in a joint redevelopment project and consent to related projects, finding that the partner's refusal was permitted by the project's operating agreements. In so deciding, the Court refused to find that a condition of reasonableness to the right to refuse consent:

> In this decision, I dismiss the complaint. Under the operating agreements that govern the LLCs, the defendant member could not unreasonably withhold its consent to certain decisions. But as to the type of decisions at issue in this case — so-called "material actions" — the defendant member was not subject to such a constraint and had contractually bargained to remain free to give or deny its consent if that was in its own commercial self-interest. Here, the plaintiff operating

> member seeks to have the court impose a contractual reasonableness overlay on a contract that is clearly inconsistent with the parties' bargain. Delaware law respects contractual freedom and requires parties like the operating member to adhere to the contracts they freely enter. The operating agreements here preclude the relief the operating member seeks, including its attempt to end-run the operating agreements by arguing that the defendant member had a fiduciary duty to act reasonably in granting consent. Under the plain terms of the operating agreements, the defendant member had bargained for the right to give consents to decisions involving material actions or not, as its own commercial interests dictated. Having bargained for that freedom and gained that concession from the operating member, the defendant member is entitled to the benefit of its bargain and the operating member cannot attempt to have the court write in a reasonableness condition that the operating member gave up. The words "not unreasonably withheld" are well known and appear in other sections of the operating agreements. They do not qualify the defendant member's right to deny consent to major decisions involving a material action.
>
> Likewise, the operating agreements clearly state the sole remedy the operating member has if the defendant member fails to meet a capital call. The operating member again seeks to have this court impose a remedy inconsistent with the plain terms of the operating agreements. This court cannot play such a role, and the operating member's claims relating to the capital call are dismissed because they are inconsistent with the operating agreements.

In Texas a common-law duty of good faith and fair dealing does not exist in all contractual relationships. *Blackmon-Dunda v. Mary Kay, Inc.*, 2009 WL 866214 (Tex.App.-Dallas). Rather, the duty arises only when a contract creates or governs a special relationship between the parties. *Subaru of Am. v. David McDavid Nissan*, 84 S.W.3d 212, 225 (Tex. 2002). A "special relationship" has been recognized where there is unequal bargaining power between the parties and a risk exists that one of the parties may take advantage of the other based upon the imbalance of power, e.g., insurer-insured (*see Arnold v. Nat'l County Mut. Fire Ins. Co.*, 725 S.W.2d 165, 167 (Tex.1987). The elements which make a relationship special are absent in the relationship between an employer and an employee. *See City of Midland v. O'Bryant*, 18 S.W.3d 209, 215 (Tex. 2000). While there are no reported Texas cases as to whether a contractual duty of good faith and fair dealing exists between Members in an LLC, or between Managers and Members in a Texas LLC, it is likely that the duty of good faith and fair dealing exists in those LLC relationships, just as fiduciary duties likely exist, except in each case to the extent that the duty has been restricted by contract as permitted by the Tex. LLC Stats. *See supra* notes 1234 and 1260.

1276 DLLCA § 18-1101(e) provides:

> (e) A limited liability company agreement may provide for the limitation or elimination of any and all liabilities for breach of contract and breach of duties (including fiduciary duties) of a member, manager or other person to a limited liability company or to another member or manager or to another person that is a party to or is otherwise bound by a limited liability company agreement; provided, that a limited liability company agreement may not limit or eliminate liability for any act or omission that constitutes a bad faith violation of the implied contractual covenant of good faith and fair dealing.

In re Atlas Energy Resources LLC Unitholder Litigation, Consolidated C.A. No. 4589-VCN (Del Ch. Oct. 28, 2010), involved breach of fiduciary duty claims arising from a merger between a publicly traded LLC and its controlling unitholder, the Chancery Court held that an LLC agreement eliminated the traditional fiduciary duties of the LLC's directors and officers, replacing them with a contractually-defined duty of good faith, which was not breached, but did not address the duties of the controlling unitholder, which were held to be equivalent to those of a controlling shareholder of a Delaware corporation. The Court commented that LLCs are creatures of contract designed to afford the maximum amount of freedom of contract, private ordering, and flexibility to the parties involved. One aspect of this flexibility, the Court wrote, is that parties to an LLC agreement can contractually expand, restrict, modify or fully eliminate the fiduciary duties owed by its members, subject to certain limitations, but in the absence of explicit provisions in the LLC agreement to the contrary, the traditional fiduciary duties owed by corporate directors and controlling shareholders apply in the LLC context. Because this LLC agreement did not eliminate the fiduciary duties of the controlling unitholder, it owed directly to the LLC's minority unitholders the traditional fiduciary duties that controlling shareholders owe minority shareholders. Since the merger created a conflict between the controlling unitholder's interest in acquiring the balance of the LLC for the lowest possible price and the minority unitholders' interest in obtaining a high price for their units and the LLC agreement did not address this conflict of interest, the Court evaluated the merger under the entire fairness standard of review in order to assure that the controlling unitholder "has been assiduous in fulfilling those duties", held that "plaintiffs' allegations as to price and process, adequately suggest that the merger was not entirely fair to the public unitholders," and denied defendants' motion to dismiss the claim for breach of fiduciary duty by the controlling unitholder.

Although the Tex. LLC Stats., unlike their Delaware counterpart, do not include provisions that expressly emphasize the principles of freedom of contract and enforceability of LLC Company Agreements that expand, restrict or eliminate liability for breach of fiduciary duties, the legislative history and scope of LLC Act section 2.20B, the precursor to TBOC section 101.401, indicate that there may be more latitude to exculpate Managers and Members for conduct that would otherwise breach a fiduciary duty under the Tex. LLC Stats. than under provisions of the TBOC and the TBCA relating specifically to corporations. Provisions in Company Agreements purporting to limit fiduciary duties need to be explicit and conspicuous as coyness can lead to unenforceability.[1278] A provision which purports to limit fiduciary duties in

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DLLCA § 18-1101(e) was followed in *In re Heritage Organization, LLC*, 2008 WL 5215688 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. Dec. 12, 2008), which involved a bankruptcy trustee's breach of fiduciary duty claims against former officers of a bankrupt Delaware LLC which had an LLC agreement that eliminated fiduciary duties in the following sweeping language:

> The Manager shall not be required to exercise any particular standard of care, nor shall he owe any fiduciary duties to the Company or the other Members. Such excluded duties include, by way of example, not limitation, any duty of care, duty of loyalty, duty of reasonableness, duty to exercise proper business judgment, duty to make business opportunities available to the company, and any other duty which is typically imposed upon corporate officers and directors, general partners or trustees. The Manager shall not be held personally liable for any harm to the Company or the other Members resulting from any acts or omissions attributed to him. Such acts or omissions may include, by way of example but not limitation, any act of negligence, gross negligence, recklessness, or intentional misconduct.

Faced with this broad clause, the bankruptcy court in *Heritage* held that the defendants had no fiduciary duties to breach, and thus rejected the trustee's breach of fiduciary duty claim. *Cf. Kahn v. Portnoy*, CA No. 3515-CC (Del. Ch. December 11, 2008) (under freedom of contract principles, fiduciary duties held to be defined, but not eliminated, by LLC agreement).

1277 *See supra* note 1272 and related text.

1278 *Solar Cells, Inc. v. True N. Partners, LLC,* No. CIV.A.19477, 2002 WL 749163, at *4 (Del. Ch. Apr. 25, 2002). In *Solar Cells*, Chancellor Chandler enjoined the merger of an LLC with an affiliate of the controlling owner on the basis of the Delaware "entire fairness" doctrine notwithstanding an operating agreement section providing in relevant part as follows:

> Solar Cells and [First Solar] acknowledge that the True North Managers have fiduciary obligations to both [First Solar] and to True North, which fiduciary obligations may, because of the ability of the True North Managers to control [First Solar] and its business, create a conflict of interest or a potential conflict of interest for the True North Mangers. Both [First Solar] and Solar Cells hereby waive any such conflict of interest or potential conflict of interest and agree that neither True North nor any True North Manager shall have any liability to [First Solar] or to Solar Cells with respect to any such conflict of interest or potential conflict of interest, provided that the True North managers have acted in a manner which they believe in good faith to be in the best interest of [First Solar].

Chancellor Chandler noted that the above clause purports to limit liability stemming from any conflict of interest, but that Solar Cells had not requested that the Court impose liability on the individual defendants; rather it was only seeking to enjoin the proposed merger. Therefore, exculpation for personal liability would have no bearing on whether the proposed merger was inequitable and should be enjoined. Further, Chancellor Chandler wrote that "even if waiver of liability for engaging in conflicting interest transactions is contracted for, that does not mean that there is a waiver of all fiduciary duties [for the above quoted provision] expressly states that the True North Managers must act in 'good faith.'"

Noting that the LLC was in financial distress and that the owners had been negotiating unsuccessfully to develop a mutually acceptable recapitalization, the Chancellor found that the managers appointed by the controlling owners appeared not to have acted in good faith when they had adopted the challenged plan of merger by written consent without notice to the minority managers. Chancellor Chandler commented:

> The fact that the Operating Agreement permits action by written consent of a majority of the Managers and permits interested transactions free from personal liability does not give a fiduciary free reign to approve any transaction he sees fit regardless of the impact on those to whom he owes a fiduciary duty.

the LLC context "to the maximum extent permitted by the laws in effect at the effective date of this Company Agreement, as such Agreement may be amended from time to time" probably is not adequate.

While courts may be tempted to find contractual limitations on fiduciary duties ambiguous in particular situations where it appears that the provision is allowing a fiduciary to get away with something egregious, they should generally recognize the ability of LLCs to contractually limit fiduciary duties. In *McConnell v. Hunt Sports Enterprises*,[1279] the court stated that Members (of what was apparently a Member-managed LLC) are generally in a fiduciary relationship and would ordinarily be prohibited from competing with the LLC. The court, however, recognized the validity of a provision in the Ohio LLC's operating agreement (the equivalent of a Texas LLC's Company Agreement) providing:

> Members may Compete. Members shall not in any way be prohibited from or restricted in engaging or owning an interest in any other business venture of any nature, including any venture which might be competitive with the business of the Company.

The Ohio court in *McConnell* found that this provision clearly and unambiguously permitted a Member to compete against the LLC to obtain a hockey franchise sought by the LLC.[1280] The court noted the trial court's finding that the competing Members had not engaged in willful misconduct, misrepresentation or concealment.[1281]

Persons who control Members can be held responsible for fiduciary duty breaches of the Members.[1282] A legal claim exists in some jurisdictions for aiding and abetting a breach of fiduciary duty, whether arising under statute, contract, common law or otherwise.[1283]

1279 725 N.E.2d 1193 (Ohio App. 1999).

1280 *Id*. at 1215.

1281 *Id*. at 1214. *But see Dragt v. Dragt/DeTray, LLC*, 161 P.3d 473 (Wash. App. 2007) (holding that non-managing members of a Washington LLC do not owe fiduciary duties to other members unless fiduciary duties are imposed under the operating agreement).

1282 In *Bay Center Apartments Owner, LLC v. Emery Bay PKI, LLC*, 2009 WL 1124451 (Del.Ch.), Delaware Vice Chancellor Strine wrote that "in the absence of a contrary provision in the LLC agreement, the manager of an LLC owes the traditional fiduciary duties of loyalty and care to the members of the LLC," and held that LLC agreement provisions that "Members shall have the same duties and obligations to each other that members of a limited liability company formed under the Delaware Act have to each other" and "except for any duties imposed by this Agreement . . . each Member shall owe no duty of any kind towards the Company or the other Members in performing its duties and exercising its rights hereunder or otherwise" had the effect of leaving in place the traditional Delaware common law fiduciary duties. The Vice Chancellor then summarized those duties as follows in footnote 33:

> The Delaware LLC Act is silent on what fiduciary duties members of an LLC owe each other, leaving the matter to be developed by the common law. The LLC cases have generally, in the absence of provisions in the LLC agreement explicitly disclaiming the applicability of default principles of fiduciary duty, treated LLC members as owing each other the traditional fiduciary duties that directors owe a corporation. Moreover, when addressing an LLC case and lacking authority interpreting the LLC Act, this court often looks for help by analogy to the law of limited partnerships. In the limited partnership context, it has been established that "[a]bsent a contrary provision in the partnership agreement, the general partner of a Delaware limited partnership owes the traditional fiduciary duties of loyalty and care to the Partnership and its partners." (Citations omitted)

The Tex. LLC Stats., which are based on TBCA article 2.35-1, provide that, unless the articles of organization, certificate of formation, Regulations or Company Agreement provide otherwise, a transaction between an LLC and one or more of its Managers or officers, or between an LLC and any other LLC or other entity in which one or more of its Managers or officers are Managers, directors or officers or have a financial interest, shall be valid notwithstanding the fact that the Manager or officer is present or participates in the meeting of Managers, or signs a written consent, which authorizes the transaction or the Manager's votes are counted for such purpose, if any of the following is satisfied:

(i) The material facts as to the transaction and interest are disclosed or known to the governing authority, and the governing authority in good faith authorizes the transaction by the approval of a majority of the disinterested Managers or Members (as appropriate) even though the disinterested Managers or Members are less than a quorum; or

(ii) The material facts as to the transaction and interest are disclosed or known to the Members, and the transaction is approved in good faith by a vote of the Members; or

(iii) The transaction is fair to the LLC as of the time it is authorized, approved or ratified by the Managers or Members.[1284]

In a joint venture, the duty of a Manager to all Members could be an issue since the Managers would often have been selected to represent the interests of particular Members. The issue could be addressed by structuring the LLC to be managed by Members who would then appoint representatives to act for them on an operating committee which would run the business in the name of the Members. In such a situation, the Members would likely have fiduciary duties analogous to partners in a general partnership.[1285]

XV. Conclusion.

SEC disclosure requirements SOX and Dodd-Frank significantly influence the governance of the internal affairs of public companies, including executive compensation processes, and are increasingly influencing best practices for private companies and nonprofit organizations. While SOX, Dodd-Frank and related SEC and SRO requirements have changed many things, state corporation law remains the principal governor of the internal affairs of corporations. State statutes are still supplemented to a large degree by evolving adjudications of the fiduciary duties of directors and officers.

The court then held the owner and manager of the LLC personally liable for the fiduciary duty breaches of the LLC's managing member.

See also In re USACafes, L.P. Litigation, 600 A.2d 43, 48 (Del. Ch. 1991); *Carson v. Lynch Multimedia Corp.*, 123 F. Supp. 2d 1254, 1264 (D. Kan. 2000).

1283 *Fitzgerald v. Cantor*, No. CIV.A.16297-NC, 1999 WL 182573, at *1 (Del. Ch. Mar. 25, 1999) (holding that the elements of a claim for aiding and abetting a breach of fiduciary duty are: (1) the existence of a fiduciary relationship; (2) the fiduciary breached its duty; (3) a defendant, who is not a fiduciary, knowingly participated in a breach; and (4) damaged to the plaintiff resulted from the concerted action of the fiduciary and the non-fiduciary.

1284 LLC Act § 2.17; TBOC § 101.255 as amended in the 2009 Legislative Session by S.B. 1442 § 44. *See infra* Appendix D.

1285 *Id.*; *see* TRPA § 4.04; *see also* TBOC § 152.204.

Appendix A

SUMMARY OF THE SARBANES-OXLEY ACT OF 2002

On July 30, 2002, President Bush signed the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 (H.R. 3763) ("*SOX*")[1] intended to protect investors by improving the accuracy and reliability of corporate disclosures made pursuant to the securities laws. This is the "tough new corporate fraud bill" trumpeted by the politicians and in the media. Among other things, SOX amends the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (the "*1934 Act*") and the Securities Act of 1933 (the "*1933 Act*"). On July 21, 2010, President Obama signed the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act ("*Dodd-Frank*")[2] into law which affects some of the provisions of SOX and SEC rules thereunder.

Although SOX does have some specific provisions, and generally establishes some important public policy changes, it is implemented in large part through rules adopted by the Securities and Exchange Commission ("*SEC*"). Set forth below is a summary of SOX and related SEC rulemaking.

To What Companies Does SOX Apply. SOX is generally applicable to all companies required to file reports with the SEC under the 1934 Act ("*reporting companies*") or that have a registration statement on file with the SEC under the 1933 Act, in each case regardless of size (collectively, "*public companies*" or "*issuers*"). Some of the SOX provisions apply only to companies listed on a national securities exchange[3] ("*listed companies*"), such as the New York Stock Exchange ("*NYSE*"), the American Stock Exchange ("*AMEX*") or the NASDAQ Stock Market ("*NASDAQ*")[4] (the national securities exchanges and NASDAQ are referred to collectively as "*SROs*"), but not to companies traded on the NASD OTC Bulletin Board or

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1 Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-204, 116 Stat. 745 (codified in several sections of 15 U.S.C.A.) ("*SOX*"); see Byron F. Egan, *The Sarbanes-Oxley Act and Its Expanding Reach*, 40 TEXAS JOURNAL OF BUSINESS LAW 305 (Winter 2005), which can be found at http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=505; Byron F. Egan, *Communicating with Auditors After the Sarbanes-Oxley Act*, 41 TEXAS JOURNAL OF BUSINESS LAW 131 (Fall 2005); Byron F. Egan, *Communications with Accountants After the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (including Attorney Letters to Auditors re Loss Contingencies, Attorney Duties under SOX §§ 303 and 307, and Options Backdating)* (Oct. 24, 2006), which can be found at http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=624; and Byron F. Egan, *Responsibilities of Attorneys and Other M&A Professionals After the Sarbanes-Oxley Act* (Nov. 7, 2008), which can be found at http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1035.

2 H.R. 4173, 111th Cong. (2nd Sess. 2010). See **Appendix B**.

3 A "national securities exchange" is an exchange registered as such under 1934 Act §6. There are currently nine national securities exchanges registered under 1934 Act §6(a): American Stock Exchange (AMEX), Boston Stock Exchange, Chicago Board Options Exchange (CBOE), Chicago Stock Exchange, Cincinnati Stock Exchange, International Stock Exchange, New York Stock Exchange (NYSE), Philadelphia Stock Exchange and Pacific Stock Exchange.

4 A "national securities association" is an association of brokers and dealers registered as such under 1934 Act §15A. The National Association of Securities Dealers ("*NASD*") is the only national securities association registered with the SEC under 1934 Act §15A(a). The NASD partially owns and operates The NASDAQ Stock Market ("*NASDAQ*"), which has filed an application with the SEC to register as a national securities exchange.

quoted in the Pink Sheets or the Yellow Sheets.[5] Small business issuers[6] that file reports on Form 10-QSB and Form 10-KSB are subject to SOX generally in the same ways as larger companies although some specifics vary (references herein to Forms 10-Q and 10-K include Forms 10-QSB and 10-KSB).

SOX and the SEC's rules thereunder are applicable in many, but not all, respects to (i) investment companies registered under the Investment Company Act of 1940 (the *"1940 Act"*) and (ii) public companies domiciled outside of the U.S. (*"foreign companies"*).[7]

Companies that file periodic reports with the SEC solely to comply with covenants under debt instruments, to facilitate sales of securities under Rule 144 or for other corporate purposes (*"voluntary filers"*), rather than pursuant to statutory or regulatory requirements to make such filings, are not issuers and generally are not required to comply with most of the corporate governance provisions of SOX.[8] The SEC's rules and forms implementing SOX that require disclosure in periodic reports filed with the SEC apply to voluntary filers by virtue of the fact that voluntary filers are contractually required to file periodic reports in the form prescribed by the rules and regulations of the SEC.[9] The SEC appears to be making a distinction in its rules between governance requirements under SOX (which tend to apply only to statutory "issuers")

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5 The OTC Bulletin Board, the Pink Sheets and the Yellow Sheets are quotation systems that do not provide issuers with the ability to list their securities. Each is a quotation medium that collects and distributes market maker quotes to subscribers. These interdealer quotations systems do not maintain or impose listing standards, nor do they have a listing agreement or arrangement with the issuers whose securities are quoted through them. Although market makers may be required to review and maintain specified information about the issuer and to furnish that information to the interdealer quotation system, the issuers whose securities are quoted on the systems do not have any filing or reporting requirements to the system. *See* SEC Release No. 33-8820 (April 9, 2003).

6 *"Small business issuer"* is defined in 1934 Act Rule 0-10(a) as an issuer (other than an investment company) that had total assets of $5 million or less on the last day of its most recent fiscal year, except that for the purposes of determining eligibility to use Forms 10-KSB and 10-QSB that term is defined in 1934 Act Rule as a United States (*"U.S."*) or Canadian issuer with neither annual revenues nor *"public float"* (aggregate market value of its outstanding voting and non-voting common equity held by non-affiliates) of $25,000,000 or more. Some of the rules adopted under SOX apply more quickly to larger companies that are defined as *"accelerated filers"* under 1934 Act Rule 12b-2 (generally issuers with a public common equity float of $75 million or more as of the last business day of the issuer's most recently completed second fiscal quarter that have been reporting companies for at least 12 months).

7 Many of the SEC rules promulgated under SOX's directives provide limited relief from some SOX provisions for the *"foreign private issuer,"* which is defined in 1933 Act Rule 405 and 1934 Act Rule 3b-4(c) as a private corporation or other organization incorporated outside of the U.S., as long as:

- More than 50% of the issuer's outstanding voting securities are not directly or indirectly held of record by U.S. residents;
- The majority of the executive officers or directors are not U.S. citizens or residents;
- More than 50% of the issuer's assets are not located in the U.S.; and;
- The issuer's business is not administered principally in the U.S.

8 *Question 1*, SEC's Division of Corporation Finance: Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 – Frequently Asked Questions, posted November 8, 2002 (revised November 14, 2002) at www.sec.gov/divisions/corpfin/faqs/soxact2002.htm.

9 *Id.*

and disclosure requirements (which tend to apply to all companies filing reports under the 1934 Act).

While SOX is generally applicable only to public companies, there are three important exceptions: (i) SOX §§ 802 and 1102 make it a crime for any person to alter, destroy, mutilate or conceal a record or document so as to (x) impede, obstruct or influence an influence an investigation or (y) impair the object's integrity or availability for use in an official proceeding; (ii) SOX § 1107 makes it a crime to knowingly, with the intent to retaliate, take any action harmful to a person for providing to a law enforcement officer truthful information relating to the commission of any federal offense; and (iii) SOX § 904 raises the criminal monetary penalties for violation of the reporting and disclosure requirements of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (*"ERISA"*). These three provisions are applicable to private and nonprofit entities as well as public companies.[10]

Further, the principles of SOX are being applied by the marketplace to privately held companies and nonprofit entities. Private companies that contemplate going public, seeking financing from investors whose exit strategy is a public offering or being acquired by a public company may find it advantageous or necessary to conduct their affairs as if they were subject to SOX.[11]

Accounting Firm Regulation. SOX creates a five-member board appointed by the SEC and called the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board (the *"PCAOB"*) to oversee the accounting firms that serve public companies and to establish accounting standards and rules. SOX does not address the accounting for stock options, but the PCAOB would have the power to do so.[12] The PCAOB is a private non-profit corporation to be funded by assessing public companies based on their market capitalization. It has the authority to subpoena documents from public companies. The PCAOB is required to notify the SEC of any pending PCAOB investigations involving potential violations of the securities laws. Additionally, SOX provides that the PCAOB should coordinate its efforts with the SEC's enforcement division as necessary to protect ongoing SEC investigations.

Restrictions on Providing Non-Audit Services to Audit Clients. SOX and the SEC rules thereunder restrict the services accounting firms may offer to clients. Among the services that audit firms may not provide for their audit clients are (1) bookkeeping or other services related to the accounting records or financial statements of the audit client; (2) financial information systems design and implementation; (3) appraisal or valuation services, fairness

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[10] Byron F. Egan, *Responsibilities of M&A Professionals After the Sarbanes-Oxley Act* (Oct. 4, 2007), which can be found at http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=838.

[11] *See* Joseph Kubarek, *Sarbanes-Oxley Raises the Bar for Private Companies*, NACD-Directors Monthly (June 2004 at 19-20); Peter H. Ehrenberg and Anthony O. Pergola, *Why Private Companies Should Not Ignore the Sarbanes-Oxley Act*, Wall Street Lawyer (December 2002 at 12-13).

[12] SOX § 101. On August 22, 2008, in Free Enterprise Fund v. Public Company Accounting Oversight Board, No. 07-5127, 2008 WL 3876143 (D.C. Cir. Aug. 22, 2008), the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia upheld SOX and the creation of the PCAOB as constitutional holding that the PCAOB does not encroach upon the appointments clause, separation of powers principles or the non-delegation doctrines of the U.S. Constitution.

opinions, or contribution-in-kind reports; (4) actuarial services; (5) internal audit outsourcing services; (6) management functions or human resources; (7) broker or dealer, investment adviser, or investment banking services; (8) legal services; and (9) expert services unrelated to the audit. Accounting firms may generally provide tax services to their audit clients, but may not represent them in tax litigation or in respect of certain aggressive tax transactions.[13]

Enhanced Audit Committee Requirements/Responsibilities. SOX provides, and the SEC has adopted rules such that, audit committees of listed companies (i) must have direct responsibility for the appointment, compensation and oversight (including the resolution of disagreements between management and the auditors regarding financial reporting) of the auditors,[14] (ii) must be composed solely of independent directors, which means that each member may not, other than as compensation for service on the board of directors or any of its committees (x) accept any consulting, advisory or other compensation from the issuer, directly or indirectly, or (y) be an officer or other affiliate of the issuer,[15] and (iii) are responsible for establishing procedures for the receipt, retention, and treatment of complaints regarding accounting, internal accounting controls, or auditing matters, and the confidential, anonymous submission by employees of the issuer (*"whistleblowers"*) of concerns regarding any questionable accounting or auditing matters.[16] Whistleblowers are protected against discharge or discrimination by an issuer.[17]

Issuers are required to disclose (i) the members of the audit committee and (ii) whether the audit committee has an *"audit committee financial expert"* and, if so, his or her name.[18]

SOX requires that auditors report to audit committees regarding (a) all critical accounting policies and practices to be used and (b) all alternative treatments of financial information within

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13 SOX § 201; Strengthening the Commission's Requirements Regarding Auditor Independence, Securities Act Release No. 8183, Exchange Act Release No. 47,265, 68 Fed. Reg. 6006 (Feb. 5, 2003), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8183.htm, as amended by Strengthening the Commission's Requirements Regarding Auditor Independence; Correction, Release No. 33-8183A (March 31, 2003), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8183a.htm [hereinafter the *"Title II Release"*]; Public Company Accounting Oversight Board; Order Approving Proposed Ethics and Independence Rules Concerning Independence, Tax Services, and Contingent Fees and Notice of Filing and Order Granting Accelerated Approval of the Amendment Delaying Implementation of Certain of these Rules, Exchange Act Release No. 34-53677 (April 19, 2006), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/pcaob/2006/34-53677.pdf; PCAOB Release No. 2005-014 (July 26, 2005), *available at* http://www.pcaobus.org/rules/docket_017/2005-07-26_release_2005-014.pdf, amended by http://www.pcaobus.org/rules/docket_017/2005-11-22_release_2005-020.pdf.

14 SOX § 202; Title II Release.

15 SOX § 301; Standards Relating to Listed Company Audit Committees, Securities Act Release No. 8220, Exchange Act Release No. 47,654, 68 Fed. Reg. 18,788 (April 16, 2003), *available at* www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8220.htm.

16 *Id.*

17 SOX § 806.

18 SOX § 407; Disclosure Required by Sections 406 and 407 of the Sarbanes Oxley Act of 2002, Securities Act Release No. 8177, Exchange Act Release No. 47,235, 68 Fed. Reg. 5110 (Jan. 23, 2003) (*codified at* 17 C.F.R. 229.406(a) (2004)), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8177.htm, as amended by Disclosure Required by Sections 406 and 407 of the Sarbanes Oxley Act of 2002; Correction, Release No. 33-8177A (March 31, 2003) *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8177a.htm.

generally accepted accounting principles for financial reporting in the U.S. (*"GAAP"*) that have been discussed with management.[19]

SOX requires audit committee preapproval of all auditing services and non-audit services provided by an issuer's auditor.[20] The audit committee may delegate the preapproval responsibility to a subcommittee of one or more independent directors.[21]

CEO/CFO Certifications. SOX contains *two* different provisions that require the chief executive officer (*"CEO"*) and chief financial officer (*"CFO"*) of each reporting company to sign and certify company SEC periodic reports, with possible criminal and civil penalties for false statements. The result is that CEOs and CFOs must each sign two separate certifications in their companies' periodic reports, one certificate being required by rules adopted by the SEC under an amendment to the 1934 Act (the *"SOX §302 Certification"*) and the other being required by an amendment to the Federal criminal code (the *"SOX §906 Certification"*).[22] Chairpersons of boards of directors who are not executive officers are not required to certify the reports.

Improperly Influencing Auditors. Pursuant to SOX, the SEC has amended its rules to specifically prohibit officers and directors and "persons acting under [their] direction" (which would include attorneys), from coercing, manipulating, misleading or fraudulently influencing an auditor "engaged in the performance of an audit" of the issuer's financial statements when the officer, director or other person "knew or should have known" that the action, if successful, could result in rendering the issuer's financial statements filed with the SEC materially misleading.[23]

Enhanced Attorney Responsibilities. The SEC has adopted under SOX rules of professional responsibility for attorneys representing public companies before the SEC, including: (1) requiring an attorney to report evidence of a material violation of any U.S. law or fiduciary duty to the chief legal officer (*"CLO"*) or the CEO of the company; and (2) if corporate executives do not respond appropriately, requiring the attorney to report to an appropriate committee of independent directors or to the board of directors.[24]

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19 SOX § 204; Title II Release.

20 SOX § 202; Title II Release.

21 Title II Release.

22 SOX §§ 302 and 906; Management's Report on Internal Control Over Financial Reporting and Certification of Disclosure in Exchange Act Periodic Reports, Securities Act Release No. 8238, Exchange Act Release No. 47,986, 68 Fed. Reg. 36,636 (June 18, 2003), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8238.htm.

23 SOX § 303; Improper Influence on Conduct of Audits, Exchange Act Release No. 47,890, 68 Fed. Reg. 31,820 (May 28, 2003) (*codified at* 17 C.F.R. 240 (2004)), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/34-47890.htm.

24 SOX § 307; Implementation of Standards of Professional Conduct for Attorneys, Securities Act Release No. 8185, Exchange Act Release No. 47,276, 68 Fed. Reg. 6296 (Feb. 6, 2003) (*codified at* 17 C.F.R. § 205 (2004)), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8185.htm.

CEO/CFO Reimbursement to Issuer. SOX provides that, if an issuer is required to restate its financial statements owing to noncompliance with securities laws, the CEO and CFO must reimburse the issuer for (1) any bonus or incentive or equity based compensation received in the 12 months prior to the restatement and (2) any profits realized from the sale of issuer securities within the preceding 12 months.[25]

Insider Trading Freeze During Plan Blackout. Company executives and directors are restricted from trading stock during periods when employees cannot trade retirement fund-held company stock (*"blackout periods"*).[26] These insiders are prohibited from engaging in transactions in any equity security of the issuer during any blackout period when at least half of the issuer's individual account plan participants are not permitted to purchase, sell or otherwise transfer their interests in that security.[27]

Insider Loans. SOX prohibits issuers from making loans to their directors or executive officers.[28] There are exceptions for existing loans, for credit card companies to extend credit on credit cards issued by them, for securities firms to maintain margin account balances and for certain regulated loans by banks.[29]

Disclosure Enhancements. Public companies are generally required to publicly disclose in "plain English" additional information concerning material changes in their financial condition or operations on an increasingly "real time" basis.[30] As instructed by SOX, the SEC has adopted rules changes designed to address reporting companies' use of "non-GAAP financial measures" in various situations, including (i) Regulation G which applies whenever a reporting company publicly discloses or releases material information that includes a non-GAAP financial measure and (ii) amendments to Item 10 of Regulation S-K to include a statement concerning the use of non-GAAP financial measures in filings with the SEC.[31] Form 8-K was amended to require disclosure for all public companies of additional items and accelerated disclosure of others.[32]

SOX amends §16(a) of the 1934 Act to require officers, directors and 10% shareholders to file with the SEC Forms 4 reporting (i) a change in ownership of equity securities or (ii) the purchase or sale of a security based swap agreement involving an equity security "*before the end*

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25 SOX § 304.

26 SOX § 306; Insider Trades During Pension Fund Blackout Periods, Exchange Act Release No. 47,225, 68 Fed. Reg. 4338 (Jan. 28, 2003), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/34-47225.htm.

27 *Id.*

28 SOX § 402.

29 *Id.*

30 SOX § 409.

31 Conditions for Use of Non-GAAP Financial Measures, Securities Act Release No. 8176, Exchange Act Release No. 47,226, 68 Fed. Reg. 4820 (Jan. 30, 2003), available at http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8176.htm.

32 Additional Form 8-K Disclosure Requirements and Acceleration of Filing Date, Release No. 33-8400, (March 16, 2004), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8400.htm, as amended by Additional Form 8-K Disclosure Requirements and Acceleration of Filing Date; Correction, Release No. 33-8400A, (Aug. 4, 2004), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8400a.htm.

of the second business day following the business day on which the subject transaction has been executed…"[33] and the SEC has amended Regulation S-T to require insiders to file Forms 3, 4 and 5 (§16(a) reports) with the SEC on EDGAR.[34] The rules also require an issuer that maintains a corporate website to post on its website all Forms 3, 4 and 5 filed with respect to its equity securities by the end of the business day after filing.[35]

SOX also requires the SEC to regularly and systematically review corporate filings, with each issuer to be reviewed at least every three years.[36] Material restatements, the level of market capitalization and price volatility are factors specified for the SEC to consider in scheduling reviews.

Internal Control Over Financial Reporting. SOX § 404 directs the SEC to prescribe rules mandating inclusion in Annual Reports on Form 10-K of (i) a report by management on the issuer's internal control over financial reporting ("*ICFR*") and (ii) a PCAOB registered accounting firm's attestation report on the effectiveness of the issuer's ICFR.[37] The rules implementing SOX § 404 define ICFR as a process designed by, or under the supervision of, the issuer's principal executive and principal financial officers, or persons performing similar functions, and effected by the issuer's board of directors, management and other personnel, to provide reasonable assurance regarding the reliability of financial reporting and the preparation of financial statements for external purposes in accordance with GAAP and includes those policies and procedures that:

- Pertain to the maintenance of records that in reasonable detail accurately and fairly reflect the transactions and dispositions of the assets of the issuer;
- Provide reasonable assurance that transactions are recorded as necessary to permit preparation of financial statements in accordance with GAAP, and that receipts and expenditures of the issuer are being made only in accordance with authorizations of management and directors of the issuer; and
- Provide reasonable assurance regarding prevention or timely detection of unauthorized acquisition, use or disposition of the issuer's assets that could have a material effect on the financial statements.[38]

The SEC rules implementing SOX § 404[39] require each reporting company to include in its Annual Report on Form 10-K an ICFR report of management that includes:

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33 SOX § 403.

34 Ownership Reports and Trading by Officers, Directors and Principal Security Holders, Exchange Act Release No. 46,421, 67 Fed. Reg. 56,462 (Sept. 3, 2002), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/34-46421.htm.

35 *Id.*

36 SOX § 408.

37 SOX § 404, 15 U.S.C.A. § 7262 (West Supp. 2010) [hereinafter *"SOX § 404"*].

38 17 C.F.R. § 240.13a-15 (2010) (with regard to Regulation 13A); 17 C.F.R. § 240.15d-15 (2010) (with regard to Regulation 15D).

- A statement that it is management's responsibility to establish and maintain adequate ICFR for the issuer;[40]

- A statement identifying the framework[41] used by management to evaluate the effectiveness of the issuer's ICFR; and

- Management's assessment of the effectiveness of the issuer's ICFR as of the end of the issuer's most recent fiscal year, including a statement as to whether or not the issuer's ICFR is effective. The assessment must include disclosure of any "material weaknesses" in the issuer's ICFR identified by management. Management is not permitted to conclude that the issuer's ICFR is effective if there are one or more material weaknesses in the issuer's ICFR.

In addition to management's assessment on ICFR and subject to the phase-in described below,[42] the Annual Report on Form 10-K must include an attestation report of the issuer's auditor as to the effectiveness of the issuer's ICFR.[43] SOX § 404(b) requires the auditor to "attest to, and report on, the assessment made by the management of the issuer," and SOX § 103(a)(2)(A)(iii) requires that each audit report describe the scope of the auditor's testing of the issuer's ICFR structure and procedures and present, among other information: (1) the findings of the auditor from such testing; (2) an evaluation of whether such internal control structure and procedures provide reasonable assurance that transactions are recorded as

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39 1933 Act Release No. 33-8238, 1934 Act Release No. 34-47986 (June 5, 2003) titled "Management's Report on Internal Control Over Financial Reporting and Certification of Disclosure in Exchange Act Periodic Reports," which can be found at http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8238.htm (the "*Internal Control Release*").

40 Controls over financial reporting may be preventive controls or detective controls. Preventive controls have the objective of preventing errors or fraud that could result in a misstatement of the financial statements from occurring (*e.g.*, segregation of duties; two check signers). Detective controls have the objective of detecting errors or fraud that has already occurred that could result in a misstatement of the financial statements (*e.g.*, regular reconciliation of accounts payable and accounts receivable). Effective ICFR often includes a combination of preventive and detective controls. PCAOB Accounting Standards PCAOB Release 2007-005A (June 12, 2007) at A-8.

41 The framework on which management's evaluation is based must be a suitable, recognized control framework that is established by a body or group that has followed due-process procedures, including the broad distribution of the framework for public comment. The SEC staff has indicated that the evaluative framework set forth in the 1992 Treadway Commission report on internal controls (also known as the "*COSO Report*"), which is available at http://www.coso.org, will be a suitable framework, and that foreign private issuers will be permitted to use the framework in effect in their home countries. In the COSO Report, the term "*control environment*" encompasses the attitudes and values of executives and directors and the degree to which they recognize the importance of method, transparency, and care in the creation and execution of their company's policies and procedures. A proper control environment is one factor an external auditor considers when called upon to evaluate ICFR pursuant to SOX § 404. Stephen Wagner and Lee Dittmar, *The Unexpected Benefits of Sarbanes-Oxley*, Best Practice, HARVARD BUS. REV. 133, 134 (April 2006).

42 *See infra* notes 53 and 54 and related text.

43 17 C.F.R. § 210.2-02 (2010); Amendments to Rules Regarding Management's Report on Internal Control Over Financial Reporting, 1934 Act Release No. 34-55928 (June 20, 2007), available at http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/2007/33-8809.pdf.

necessary to permit preparation of financial statements in accordance with GAAP; and (3) a description of any material weaknesses in such ICFR. The SEC believes that a single audit opinion directly on the effectiveness of the issuer's ICFR is consistent with both SOX § 404 and SOX § 103, and its rules now so require.[44]

Under these SOX § 404 rules, management must disclose any material weakness and will be unable to conclude that the issuer's ICFR is effective if there are one or more material weaknesses in such control.[45] The term "material weakness" is now defined in 1934 Act Rule 12b-2 as "a deficiency, or combination of deficiencies, in internal control over financial reporting, such that there is a reasonable possibility that a material misstatement of the registrant's annual or interim financial statements will not be prevented or detected on a timely basis."[46] The SOX § 404 rules require reporting companies to perform quarterly evaluations of changes that have materially affected, or are reasonably likely to materially affect, the issuer's ICFR.[47]

Compliance with the SOX § 404 rules proved difficult and expensive for issuers. In response, on May 23, 2007 the SEC issued interpretive guidance intended to help public companies strengthen their ICFR while reducing unnecessary costs, particularly at smaller companies, by focusing company management on the internal controls that best protect against the risk of a material financial misstatement and enabling issuers to scale and tailor their evaluation procedures according to the facts and circumstances.[48] This guidance was principles based to afford flexibility to issuers and, notwithstanding requests from some commentators for

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44 Amendments to Rules Regarding Management's Report on Internal Control Over Financial Reporting, 1934 Act Release No. 34-55928 (June 20, 2007), available at http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/2007/33-8809.pdf; SOX § 103(a)(2)(A)(iii), as amended by Dodd-Frank, states that "each registered public accounting firm shall --

> in each audit report describe the scope of the auditor's testing of the internal control structure and procedures of the issuer, required by section 404(b), and present (in such report or in a separate report) --
>
> (I.) the findings of the auditor from such testing;
>
> (II.) an evaluation of whether such internal control structure and procedures –
>
> > (aa) include maintenance of records that in reasonable detail accurately and fairly reflect the transactions and dispositions of the assets of the issuer;
> >
> > (bb) provide reasonable assurance that transactions are recorded as necessary to permit preparation of financial statements in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles, and that receipts and expenditures of the issuer are being made only in accordance with authorizations of management and directors of the issuer; and
>
> (III.) a description, at a minimum, of material weaknesses in such internal controls, and of any material noncompliance found on the basis of such testing."

45 *Id*.

46 Amendments to Rules Regarding Management's Report on Internal Control Over Financial Reporting, 1934 Act Release No. 34-55928 (June 20, 2007), available at http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/2007/33-8809.pdf.

47 *Id*. §§ 13a-15(a), 15d-15(f).

48 Commission Guidance Regarding Management's Report on Internal Control Over Financial Reporting Under Section 13(a) or 15(d) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, 1934 Act Release No. 34-55929 (June 20, 2007), available at http://www.sec.gov/rules/interp/2007/33-8810.pdf.

more specific guidance, does not contain detailed rules, which the SEC feared some issuers might learn how to game. An issuer that performs an evaluation of ICFR in accordance with the interpretive guidance satisfies the annual evaluation required by 1934 Act Rules 13a-15 and 15d-15.

Then on May 24, 2007, the PCAOB adopted Auditing Standard No. 5, An Audit of Internal Control Over Financial Reporting That Is Integrated With An Audit of Financial Statements ("*AS 5*"),[49] that was approved by the SEC on July 25, 2007[50] and that superseded PCAOB Auditing Standard No. 2 ("*AS 2*"), which was adopted by the PCAOB in March 2004 and approved by the SEC in June 2004. This AS 5 standard applies to audits of all companies required by SEC rules to obtain an audit of ICFR. In adopting AS 5, the PCAOB commented that AS 5 results from the PCAOB's monitoring of auditors' implementation of AS 2 and that while the PCAOB observed significant benefits produced by the ICFR audit under AS 2, it also noted that the related effort has appeared greater than necessary to conduct an effective audit.[51] Based on these observations, and in light of the approaching date for smaller companies to comply with the SOX § 404 reporting requirements, the PCAOB adopted AS 5 to achieve four objectives:

1. Focus the Internal Control Audit on the Most Important Matters – AS 5 focuses auditors on those areas that present the greatest risk that an issuer's ICFR will fail to prevent or detect a material misstatement in the financial statements. It does so by incorporating certain best practices designed to focus the scope of the audit on identifying material weaknesses in internal control, before they result in material misstatements of financial statements, such as using a top-down approach to planning the audit. It also emphasizes the importance of auditing higher risk areas, such as the financial statement close process and controls designed to prevent fraud by management. At the same time, it provides auditors a range of alternatives for addressing lower risk areas, such as by more clearly demonstrating how to calibrate the nature, timing and extent of testing based on risk, as well as how to incorporate knowledge accumulated in previous years' audits into the auditors' assessment of risk and use the work performed by companies' own personnel, when appropriate.

2. Eliminate Procedures that Are Unnecessary to Achieve the Intended Benefits – After examining the ICFR audit processes to determine whether the previous standard encouraged auditors to perform procedures that are not necessary to

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[49] PCAOB Auditing Standard No. 5 may be found at http://pcaobus.org/Standards/Auditing/Pages/Auditing_Standard_5.aspx.

[50] Public Company Accounting Oversight Board: Order Approving Proposed Auditing Standard No. 5, An Audit of Internal Control Over Financial Reporting that is Integrated with an Audit of Financial Statements, a Related Independence Rule, and Conforming Amendments, 1934 Act Release No. 34-56152 (July 27, 2007), available at http://www.sec.gov/rules/pcaob/2007/34-56152.pdf.

[51] Press Release, Public Company Accounting Oversight Board, Board Approves New Audit Standard For Internal Control Over Financial Reporting and, Separately, Recommendations on Inspection Frequency Rule (May 24, 2007), *available at* http://pcaobus.org/News/Releases/Pages/05242007_BoardApprovesNewAuditStandard.aspx.

achieve the intended benefits of the audit, the PCAOB decided not to include detailed requirements to evaluate management's own evaluation process and to clarify that an internal control audit does not require an opinion on the adequacy of management's process. As another example, AS 5 refocuses the multi-location direction on risk rather than coverage by removing the requirement that auditors test a "large portion" of the company's operations or financial position.

3. Make the Audit Clearly Scalable to Fit the Size and the Complexity of Any Company – In coordination with PCAOB's ongoing project to develop guidance for auditors of smaller, less complex companies, AS 5 explains how to tailor internal control audits to fit the size and complexity of the company being audited. AS 5 does so by including notes throughout the standard on how to apply the principles in the standard to smaller, less complex companies, and by including a discussion of the relevant attributes of smaller, less complex companies as well as less complex units of larger companies.

4. Simplify the Text of the Standard – AS 5 eliminates the previous standard's discussion of materiality, thus clarifying that the auditor's evaluation of materiality for purposes of an ICFR audit is based on the same long-standing principles applicable to financial statement audits. AS 5 conforms certain terms to the SEC's rules and guidance, such as the definition of "material weakness" and use of the term "entity-level controls"[52] instead of "company-level controls."

Compliance with the rules regarding management's report on ICFR is required as follows: accelerated filers have been required to comply with the management report on ICFR requirements for fiscal years ending on or after November 15, 2004, and all other domestic issuers (including small business issuers) have been required to comply with the SOX § 404(a) requirement of including management's report on ICFR for fiscal years ending on or after December 15, 2007.

The SOX § 404(b) requirement of including the auditor's attestation report was originally scheduled to apply to all domestic issuers, including non-accelerated filers, for fiscal years ending on or after June 15, 2010. Dodd-Frank altered this landscape by adding § 404(c) to SOX, which provides that SOX § 404(b) shall not apply with respect to any audit report prepared for an issuer that is neither a 'large accelerated filer' nor an 'accelerated filer' as those terms are defined in Rule 12b-2 of the Commission (17 C.F.R. 240.12b-2)."[53] Therefore, issuers with an

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[52] Entity level controls include tone at the top and corporate governance, including the effectiveness of the audit committee.

[53] Dodd-Frank § 989G. Rule 12b-2 defines an accelerated filer as an issuer who: (i) had an aggregate worldwide market value of the voting and non-voting common equity held by its non-affiliates of $75 million or more, but less than $700 million, as of the last business day of the issuer's most recently completed second fiscal quarter; (ii) has been subject to the requirements of 1934 Act §§ 13(a) or 15(d) for a period of at least twelve calendar months; (iii) has filed at least one annual report pursuant to 1934 Act §§ 13(a) or 15(d); and (iv) is not eligible to use the requirements for smaller reporting companies for its annual and quarterly reports. A large accelerated filer, as the name implies, differs only in the aggregate worldwide market value, which in such a filers' case is $700 million or more.

aggregate worldwide market value below $75 million no longer have to comply with the requirements of SOX § 404(b) by having an auditor attest to their internal controls. Dodd-Frank also commissioned a study, with results due in 9 months, to determine how the SEC could reduce the burden of compliance for small Accelerated Filers with market cap between $75 million and $250 million.[54] Part of the mandate of the study is to consider whether reduction of the burden or even a complete exemption would help encourage companies to list on U.S. exchanges. Perhaps in the future Congress will restrict the applicability SOX § 404(b) even further.

In response to Dodd-Frank the SEC has recently revised its rules to provide that SOX § 404(b) applies only to accelerated and large accelerated filers.[55] For example, the SEC amended Item 308 of Regulation S-K so that the disclosure of an attestation report is necessary only if an attestation report is included in the annual report.[56] Further, the SEC changed Rule 2-02(f) of Regulation S-X to clarify that only auditors filing reports for accelerated and large accelerated filers are required to include an assessment of ICFR.[57]

Codes of Ethics. As instructed by SOX, the SEC has adopted rules that require reporting companies to disclose on Form 10-K:

- Whether the issuer has adopted a code of ethics that applies to the issuer's principal executive officer, principal financial officer, principal accounting officer or controller, or persons performing similar functions; and

- If the issuer has not adopted such a code of ethics, the reasons it has not done so.[58]

Record Retention. SOX and SEC rules thereunder prohibit (1) destroying, altering, concealing or falsifying records with the intent to obstruct or influence an investigation in a matter in Federal jurisdiction or in bankruptcy and (2) auditor failure to maintain for a seven-year period all audit or review work papers pertaining to an issuer.[59]

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54 *Id.*

55 Internal Control Over Financial Reporting in Exchange Act Periodic Reports of Non-Accelerated Filers, 1934 Act Release No. 34-62914 (September 15, 2010), available at http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/2010/33-9142.pdf.

56 *Id.*

57 *Id.* The SEC also revised some of the instructions for Form 20-F and Form 40-F to clarify that the attestation report is only required for accelerated and large accelerated filers. The SEC amended Rule 2-02(f) of Regulation S-X, Item 308 of Regulation S-K, Item 15 of Form 20-F, and General Instruction B.(6) of Form 40-F.

58 SOX § 407; Disclosure Required by Sections 406 and 407 of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, Securities Act Release No. 8177, Exchange Act Release No. 47,235, 68 Fed. Reg. 5110 (Jan. 23, 2003) (*codified at* 17 C.F.R. 229.406(a) (2004)), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8177.htm, as amended by Disclosure Required by Sections 406 and 407 of the Sarbanes Oxley Act of 2002; Correction, Release No. 33-8177A (March 31, 2003) *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8177a.htm.

59 SOX Title VIII; Retention of Records Relevant to Audits and Reviews, Securities Act Release No. 8180, Exchange Act Release No. 47,241, 68 Fed. Reg. 4862 (January 30, 2003) (*codified in* 17 C.F.R. § 210 (2004)), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-8180.htm.

Whistleblower Protection. Under SOX § 806, whistleblower protection is extended to individuals who report (to particular federal agencies, to Congress, or to a supervisor) conduct the individual reasonably believes constitutes a violation of: (a) the federal securities laws; (b) SEC rules; or (c) any provision of federal law relating to fraud against shareholders.[60] SOX § 806 forbids a public company and its officers, employees, contractors, subcontractors, and agents from discharging, demoting, suspending, threatening, harassing, or in any way discriminating against an employee because the employee provided information or assisted in an investigation the employee reasonably believed constituted a violation of SOX, any rule or regulation of the SEC, or any provision of federal law relating to fraud against shareholders.[61] Furthermore, SOX § 806 protects a whistleblower even if his or her report of wrongdoing is incorrect, provided the whistleblower reasonably believed that what he or she reported constituted a violation.[62] Employees are also protected if they file, cause to be filed, testify in, participate in, or otherwise assist in a proceeding filed (or about to be filed) relating to any rule or regulation of the SEC or any provision of federal law relating to fraud against shareholders.[63] Employers (and in some cases individuals) found to have retaliated against a whistleblower may be subject to administrative, civil, and criminal sanctions.[64]

Dodd-Frank §§ 922 and 929A significantly expand the provisions for whistle-blower protection in SOX § 806 by: (i) covering private subsidiaries or affiliates of publicly traded companies whose financial information is included in the consolidated financial statements of such companies and covering nationally recognized statistical rating organizations; (ii) increasing the current 90-day statute of limitations to 180 days; (iii) providing a right to a jury trial in SOX actions removed to federal district courts; and (iv) prohibiting pre-dispute arbitration agreements and any other "agreement, policy, form, or condition of employment" that requires a waiver of rights under SOX. Dodd-Frank's § 922 amends the 1934 Act by including a provision requiring the SEC to provide a monetary award to individuals who provide "original information" to the SEC that results in sanctions exceeding $1 million and giving the SEC discretion to award between 10% and 30% of the total amount of the sanctions.

Also, Dodd-Frank's § 922 affords whistle-blowers a private right of action that they may pursue directly in federal court, in contrast to SOX actions, which require an employee to exhaust administrative remedies by first filing a claim with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Criminal and Civil Sanctions. SOX mandates maximum sentences of 20 years for such crimes as mail and wire fraud, and maximum sentences of up to 25 years for securities fraud.

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60 SOX § 806(a), 18 U.S.C.A. § 1514A (West Supp. 2010); *see* 29 C.F.R. § 1980 (2010).

61 *Id.*

62 *Id.*

63 *Id.*

64 *See Id.*

Civil penalties are also increased.[65] SOX restricts the discharge of such obligations in bankruptcy.[66]

SOX, as a response to the abuses which led to its enactment, will also influence courts in dealing with common law fiduciary duty claims.[67]

Further Information. For further information regarding SOX, see Byron F. Egan, *Responsibilities of M&A Professionals After the Sarbanes-Oxley Act* (Oct. 4, 2007), which can be found at http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=838; see Byron F. Egan, *The Sarbanes-Oxley Act and Its Expanding Reach*, 40 TEXAS JOURNAL OF BUSINESS LAW 305 (Winter 2005), which can be found at http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=505; Byron F. Egan, *Communicating with Auditors After the Sarbanes-Oxley Act*, 41 TEXAS JOURNAL OF BUSINESS LAW 131 (Fall 2005); and Byron F. Egan, *Responsibilities of Attorneys and Other M&A Professionals After the Sarbanes-Oxley Act* (Nov. 7, 2008), which can be found at http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1035.

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65 SOX Titles IX and XI.

66 SOX § 803.

67 *See* Leo E. Strine, Jr., *Derivative Impact? Some Early Reflections on the Corporation Law Impacts of the Enron Debacle*, 57 BUS. LAWYER 1371 (Aug. 2002).

DODD-FRANK WALL STREET REFORM AND CONSUMER PROTECTION ACT
CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AND EXECUTIVE COMPENSATION MATTERS
CHART SUMMARY

Corporate Governance	Governmental Action Required	Description	Comments
Proxy access (Section 971)	SEC adopted Release No. 34-62764	Companies must include eligible director nominees by eligible shareholders in the company's proxy materials. • Eligible shareholders must own at least 3% of total voting power entitled to elect directors and must have held the shares for at least 3 years. • The nominee's candidacy and board membership must not violate applicable law or stock exchange rules, and the nominee must meet the stock exchange's independence requirements. The nominee need not be independent from the nominating shareholder. • The maximum number of nominees that can be included is 25% of the company's board (rounded down), but no less than one (regardless of whether there is a classified board). Priority of nominations is given to shareholders with the highest percentage of voting securities. • A nominating shareholder must file a Schedule 14N with the SEC no earlier than 150 days and no later than 120 days before the anniversary of the mailing date for the prior year's proxy statement. The Schedule 14N contains information about the nominating shareholder and the nominee(s). Shareholders may also require companies to include in proxy materials shareholder proposals to amend the company's governing documents regarding director nomination procedures and disclosures. Thus, if approved, a shareholder proposal could expand proxy access (but could not limit the new proxy access rules).	• Proxy access is effective for the 2011 proxy season.* Proxy access will be effective for smaller reporting companies in the 2014 proxy season. • Eligible shareholders must hold both investment power and voting power of the applicable shares. Eligible shareholders cannot hold the shares for the purpose of changing control of the company or gaining more board seats than permitted under the proxy access rules. • Shareholders may aggregate their holdings with other shareholders to meet the eligibility requirements. • If the company decides to include a nominee in its proxy materials, it must notify the nominating shareholder at least 30 days before filing the definitive proxy statement with the SEC. • If the company seeks to exclude a nominee, it must provide notice to the nominating shareholder no later than 14 days after the deadline for submitting nominations to the company. The nominating shareholder then has 14 days after receiving such notice to respond and/or correct any deficiencies. If the company continues to believe it can exclude the nominee, the company must provide notice to the SEC no later than 80 days before filing the definitive proxy statement. • Action Items: (1) Assess shareholder base (2) Evaluate shareholder engagement (3) Review bylaws and board committee charters to determine if changes need to be made (4) Assess board size and makeup

* The SEC has stayed the effectiveness of the proxy access rule pending resolution of a lawsuit filed in federal court challenging the legality of the proxy access rule. It is unclear whether the legal issues will be resolved before the 2011 proxy season. As a result, the proxy access rule might not be effective for the 2011 proxy season.

Corporate Governance	Governmental Action Required	Description	Comments
Chairman/CEO disclosures (Section 972)	SEC to establish rules by January 17, 2011	• Requires the SEC to adopt rules requiring proxy statement disclosure of whether the Chairman and CEO are the same person and why or why not.	• Similar disclosure is already required by SEC rules
Broker discretionary voting authority (Section 957)	• SEC to establish rules • No deadline	• Brokers prohibited from exercising discretionary authority with respect to director elections, executive compensation or any other significant matter as determined by the SEC.	• Prohibition with respect to director elections and executive compensation take effect immediately. Other significant matters will be determined by the SEC. • The NYSE already prohibits its member firms from exercising discretionary authority with respect to director elections and approval of equity compensation plans (or material amendments thereto).

Executive Compensation	Governmental Action Required	Description	Comments
Say-on-pay votes – annual meetings (Section 951)	SEC adopted Release No. 34-63768	• Two advisory votes are required for the first annual or other shareholder meeting occurring on or after January 21, 2011, at which directors are elected (i.e., required for the 2011 proxy season): (1) vote to approve compensation of named executive officers as disclosed pursuant to Item 402 of Regulation S-K in the proxy statement (2) vote on whether future shareholder votes on executive compensation should take place every one, two, or three years • Companies must hold an advisory shareholder vote on executive compensation every one, two, or three calendar years. • Companies must hold an advisory shareholder vote on the frequency of say-on-pay votes (i.e., whether such votes should occur every one, two, or three years) at least once every six calendar years. • With respect to the vote on the frequency of	• Advisory votes are non-binding. • Say-on-pay votes for small reporting companies are not required until January 21, 2013. • Say-on-pay votes do not require the filing of a preliminary proxy statement. • A Form 8-K must be filed within 150 days after the meeting (and in any event no later than 60 days before the deadline for shareholders submitting Rule 14a-8 proposals for the next meeting) to disclose the company's decision regarding the frequency of say-on-pay votes in light of the results of the shareholders' frequency vote. • Companies must disclose in the CD&A whether and, if so, how their compensation policies and decisions have taken into account the results of the most recent say-on-pay vote. • Companies must disclose in the proxy statement the current frequency of say-on-pay votes and when the next frequency vote would occur.

Executive Compensation	Governmental Action Required	Description	Comments
		say-on-pay votes, shareholders must be given four voting choices: one year, two years, three years, or abstain. If the proxy is returned and no choice is selected, the proxy may be voted in accordance with management's recommendation if (1) the company includes its frequency recommendation in the proxy statement, (2) the proxy card permits shareholders to abstain, and (3) the proxy card contains language regarding how uninstructed shares will be voted in bold. • The SEC did not mandate a particular form of shareholder resolution with respect to say-on-pay votes, but it did provide the following nonexclusive example resolution: "RESOLVED, that the compensation paid to the company's named executive officers, as disclosed pursuant to Item 402 of Regulation S-K, including the Compensation Discussion and Analysis, compensation tables and narrative discussion, is hereby APPROVED."	• <u>Action items</u>: Consider providing an overview in the CD&A to summarize key compensation actions taken during the year. (1) Consider making CD&A clearer (including use of graphics) and focusing more on analysis. (2) Board to determine the frequency of say-on-pay votes it desires to recommend.
Say-on-pay votes - golden parachutes (Section 951)	SEC adopted Release No. 34-63768	• Advisory vote required for the first shareholder meeting occurring on or after April 25, 2011 at which shareholders are being asked to approve an acquisition, merger, consolidation or sale of all or substantially all the company's assets. • Disclosure is required of agreements that the target company or acquiring company has with any of the target company's or acquiring company's named executive officers concerning any compensation that is based on or otherwise relates to the transaction and the amount of such compensation in tabular form. • If the target company's shareholders are voting to approve the transaction, then the target company must disclose agreements that it and the acquiring company has with the target company's named executive officers, but the advisory vote would apply only to agreements between the target company and its named	• Advisory vote is non-binding. • Vote must be a separate vote from the transaction itself. • Applies to smaller reporting companies as well. • Vote not required if the agreements were already subject to an annual meeting say-on-pay vote and the more detailed tabular disclosure was made (regardless of the outcome of such vote).

Executive Compensation	Governmental Action Required	Description	Comments
		executive officers. • If the acquiring company's shareholders are voting to approve the transaction, then the acquiring company must disclose golden parachute agreements that it has with its and the target's named executive officers, but only the agreements between the acquiring company and its named executive officers would be subject to an advisory vote of the acquiring company's shareholders.	
Executive officer pay-versus-performance disclosure (Section 953(a))	• SEC to establish rules • No deadline	• SEC must establish rules that require proxy statement disclosure that shows the relationship between executive compensation actually paid and the financial performance of the company.	• The company's financial performance may take into account any change in the value of company shares and any dividends paid. • The disclosure may be in graphical or narrative form
CEO pay equity disclosure (Section 953(b))	• SEC to amend executive compensation disclosure rules • No deadline	• SEC must establish rules that require proxy statement disclosure of: (1) median of annual total compensation of all company employees other than the CEO; (2) annual total compensation of the CEO; and (3) the ratio of the two amounts.	• Total compensation of employees to be calculated in same manner as that for named executive officers under Item 402(c)(2)(x) of Regulation S-K. • <u>Action items</u>: (1) Ensure procedures are in place to calculate total compensation of employees in accordance with Item 402(c)(2)(x) of Regulation S-K.
Executive compensation clawbacks (Section 954)	• SEC to establish rules to direct national securities exchanges to develop listing standards • No deadline	• SEC must establish rules directing national securities exchanges to require listed companies to implement an executive compensation clawback policy. • Clawback policy must provide that if a company is required to restate its financial statements due to material noncompliance with any financial reporting requirement under securities laws, the company will recover from any current or former executive officer who received incentive-based compensation (including stock options) during the three-year period before the restatement an amount equal to the incentive-based compensation actually paid less what would have been paid under the restated financial statements.	• No misconduct required. • Clawback policies would be disclosed in the proxy statement. • Section 304 of Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX) provided for a more limited clawback against CEOs and CFOs only in cases of misconduct and for compensation received for the year following reinstatement. • <u>Action items</u>: (1) Design and implement a clawback policy that complies with the Act and exchange rules.

Executive Compensation	Governmental Action Required	Description	Comments
Disclosures regarding hedging by employees or directors (Section 955)	• SEC to establish rules • No deadline	• SEC must establish rules that require proxy statement disclosure as to whether company employees or directors are permitted to hedge any decrease in the market value of company equity securities.	• Item 403 of Regulation S-K requires disclosure of pledges of company securities by executive officers and directors. • Action items: (1) Review insider trading policies to determine whether such hedging transactions are prohibited for directors and all employees. If not, consider revising insider trading policy to: (i) prohibit all such hedging transactions; (ii) require pre-approval for hedging transactions; or (iii) otherwise restrict hedging transactions.
Disclosure of say-on-pay votes by institutional investment managers (Section 951)	• SEC to establish rules • No deadline	• Institutional investment managers that file Form 13F (i.e., exercise investment discretion over $100MM or more of U.S. public company equity or certain other securities) must disclose at least annually how they voted on say-on-pay votes.	• Applies to both annual meeting and golden parachute say-on-pay votes.

Compensation Committees	Governmental Action Required	Description	Comments
Independence (Section 952(a))	• SEC to establish rules within 360 days after enactment	• SEC must establish rules directing national securities exchanges to require that listed company compensation committee members be "independent." • In determining "independence," the national securities exchanges must consider: (1) source of compensation of a member, including any consulting, advisory, or other compensatory fee paid by the company (2) whether the member is affiliated with the company.	• Language is similar to language used in Rule 10A-3(b) regarding independence of Audit Committee members. • Should apply only to listed companies, not OTCBB or pink sheet companies. • Action items: (1) Evaluate the independence of current compensation committee members to determine whether any changes should be made to the composition of the committee membership.
Independence of advisors (Section 952(a))	• SEC to determine independence factors. • No deadline.	• Compensation committees of listed companies must take into consideration independence factors determined by the SEC when selecting a	• Factors are to be "considered;" factors are not prohibitions. • Action items:

Compensation Committees	Governmental Action Required	Description	Comments
		compensation consultant, legal counsel or other advisors. • SEC to determine the independence factors, which must include: (1) the provision of other services to the company by the advisor; (2) the amount of fees paid by the company as a percentage of total revenue of the advisor; (3) the policies and procedures of the advisor that are designed to prevent conflicts of interest; (4) any business or personal relationship of the advisor with a member of the compensation committee; (5) any stock of the company owned by the advisor.	(1) Consider the independence of current advisors to the compensation committee. (2) Review company policies to address conflicts of interests with compensation consultants, legal counsel, and other advisors.
Authority (Section 952(a))	None specified	• Listed company compensation committees must have authority to retain compensation consultants, independent legal counsel and other advisors. The committees are directly responsible for the appointment, compensation and oversight of the work of such advisors. • Companies must provide appropriate funding for the compensation committees to pay the reasonable fees of such advisors.	• This provision does not: (1) require the compensation committee to implement the recommendations of the advisors; (2) affect the ability of the compensation committee to exercise its own judgment.
Disclosure (Section 952(a))	• SEC to establish rules • No deadline	• For annual shareholder meetings occurring on or after July 21, 2011, proxy statements must disclose: (1) whether the compensation committee retained or received advice from a compensation consultant; (2) whether the work of the compensation consultant raised any conflict of interest and, if so, the nature of the conflict and how it was addressed.	• Item 407(e)(3)(iii) of Regulation S-K requires disclosure of fees paid to compensation consultants in certain circumstances.

Other Securities Act and Exchange Act Reforms	Governmental Action Required	Description	Comments
Regulation FD – Credit rating agencies (Section 939B)	SEC adopted Release No. 34-63003	• SEC amended Regulation FD to eliminate the exception for disclosures to credit rating agencies.	• Credit rating agencies are now required to publicly disclose their rating methodology and the company data relied upon in determining the ratings. As a result, it is unclear whether entering into a confidentiality agreement with the rating agency would allow the company to qualify for the confidentiality agreement exception.
Beneficial ownership reporting (Section 929R)	SEC may issue rules	• The SEC may establish rules to shorten the 10-day period for filing an initial Schedule 13D and Form 3.	
Beneficial ownership definition (Section 766(b))	SEC may issue rules	• Owners of security-based swaps (to be defined by the SEC) may be deemed owners of underlying equity securities to the extent that the swaps provide incidents of ownership comparable to direct ownership of the equity security.	
Regulation D amendments-Rule 506 (Section 926)	SEC to establish rules within one year	• SEC must establish rules that prohibit "bad actors" from relying on Rule 506 to exempt offerings. • "Bad actors" include any person: (1) barred by a state securities, banking or insurance authority or federal banking authority from engaging in the business of securities, insurance or banking or associating with an entity regulated by such authority; or (2) convicted of a felony or misdemeanor in connection with purchase or sale of securities or making a false filing with the SEC.	

Other Securities Act and Exchange Act Reforms	Governmental Action Required	Description	Comments
Regulation D amendments-Accredited investors (Section 413(a))	• SEC to establish rules • No deadline	• In determining whether an individual is an "accredited investor," the calculation of the net worth of the individual must exclude the value of his or her primary residence.	• This change is effective immediately. • The mortgage indebtedness secured by the primary residence should also be excluded from the net worth calculation, except to the extent the indebtedness exceeds the value of the primary residence. • SEC must review the definition of "accredited investor" as it applies to individuals at least once every four years. • Action items: (1) Update accredited investor questionnaires and other private placement documents where appropriate to reflect this change in determining accredited investor status. (2) If the company is in the process of conducting a private placement, it should obtain supplements to already-completed accredited investor questionnaires and other private placement documents to ensure subscribers continue to be accredited investors under the revised standards.
Smaller public company exemption from Sarbanes-Oxley internal control audit requirements (Section 989G(a))	• SEC to study the effects of Section 404(b) of SOX on mid-size companies ($75MM - $250MM market cap) • SEC adopted Release No. 34-62914	• Companies that are not large-accelerated filers or accelerated filers are exempt from Section 404(b) requirements for an external audit of internal controls. • The SEC must report the results of its study to Congress no later than 9 months after the date of enactment.	
Whistleblower protection (Section 922)	SEC to establish rules within 270 days	• In any enforcement action relating to a violation of securities laws that results in monetary sanctions in excess of $1MM, the SEC must pay the whistleblower(s) between 10% and 30% of the collected amount. • The Act provides whistleblowers a private right of action for retaliation or discrimination because of a lawful act by the whistleblower. The private right of action includes reinstatement, 2x back pay, and reimbursement for litigation costs.	

Appendix C

BUSINESS LEADERS MUST ADDRESS CYBERSECURITY RISK

By: Steven R. Jacobs and Stephanie L. Chandler

Assuring cybersecurity has become a necessity for businesses across all industries. According to an FBI study in March 2009, cybercrime — with over $1 trillion in annual revenues — is now the largest illegal global business. Any business with computers and internet access is vulnerable not only from outsiders waiting to pounce but also from within the enterprise as a result of human error or bad intentions. Given the size of this problem, it is not surprising that the National Association of Corporate Directors has stated that to make real progress in the cybersecurity area, businesses must treat cybersecurity as a matter of "corporate best practices" and not just a technology issue. Companies face the risk of substantial damage from loss of customer confidence, decrease in market value and damage to their reputations as well as litigation and regulatory risks in the event of a cybersecurity breach. As October draws near, Cybersecurity Awareness Month sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security may be the perfect time for you to refocus on whether your business has adequately planned for the security of its assets.

From a regulatory perspective, federal and state laws create obligations on how companies must protect data and maintain cybersecurity. Under federal law, certain industries have heightened obligations as a result of laws such as HIPAA and Graham-Leach-Bliley. In addition, the federal securities laws, including Sarbanes–Oxley, or SOX, require that corporate leadership maintain adequate controls over their systems which could be implicated upon a cybersecurity breach. Finally, boards of directors of all companies have fiduciary duties to their companies, such as the duty of care, resulting in individual exposure for corporate leadership upon the occurrence of a loss caused by a cybersecurity breach. While this article is focused on the duties of directors, recent Delaware cases have found officers generally have the same duties as directors.

State governments have also been active in legislating protections for data related to consumers and employees residing in their states. Numerous states have made it impossible for a company to shield itself from negative media exposure upon the occurrence of a breach by requiring public announcements regarding the nature and scope of the breach and direct notification of the individuals impacted. In addition to the reactive legislation, many states, such as California, Nevada, and Oregon, have adopted proactive requirements that require businesses to implement and maintain "reasonable" security procedures and practices appropriate to the nature of the information and to protect personal information from unauthorized access, destruction, use, modification, or disclosure. The next wave of regulation arrived in March of this year with the new Massachusetts requirements for companies that possess data related to Massachusetts residents mandating the development, implementation, maintenance, and monitoring of a "comprehensive, written information security program" in order to protect personal information records. Thus, even if you are a business leader with facilities located solely within the state of Texas, if you have customers in one of these states or do business with

an independent contractor or have a sales representative in one of these states, the requirements may apply to your company.

While it is impossible to eliminate all risks, there appears to be a gap in board and senior executive oversight over managing cybersecurity risks. In 2008, Carnegie Mellon CyLab conducted a survey measuring the degree of oversight by boards and senior executives of their organizations' information, software systems and networks. Based upon data from 703 individuals serving on U.S.–listed public company boards, only 36% indicated that their board had any direct involvement with cybersecurity oversight. In addition, only 8% said their boards had a risk committee separate from the Audit Committee and, of this 8%, only half oversaw cybersecurity.

Not attending to cybersecurity risks could result in enforcement action by the SEC as well as private civil litigation. Starting this year, public companies are required to describe the board's role in risk oversight in their proxy statements including how the board administers its oversight function. In adopting this rule, the SEC explained that "disclosure about the board's involvement in the oversight of the risk management process should provide important information to investors about how a company perceives the role of its board and the relationship between the board and senior management in managing the material risks facing the company." Coupled with the existing internal controls requirements, the effectiveness of a board's risk oversight could be called into question upon the occurrence of a cybersecurity breach which has caused the company damage.

In addition to the federal laws, all directors have a duty of care to their companies under state corporation laws. Under Delaware law, the duty of care requires a director to perform his duties with such care as an ordinarily prudent man would use in similar circumstances. Although a director must act diligently and with the level of due care appropriate to the particular situation, the Delaware courts have held that action (or inaction) will constitute a breach of a director's fiduciary duty of care only if the director's conduct rises to the level of gross negligence. Compliance with the duty of care requires active consideration of the issues facing the company. While the standard for proving a breach of duty is high, given the current business environment and the fact that any cybersecurity breach will be viewed with perfect hindsight, directors should insist that they be given information on the company's cybersecurity measures on a regular basis..

Given this background, what should boards of directors be doing to fulfill their obligations with respect to cybersecurity. In many ways, the traditional advice to directors still rings true. Directors should attend board meetings regularly; they should take time to review, digest, and evaluate all materials and other information provided to them; they should take reasonable steps to assure that all material information bearing on a decision has been considered by the directors or by those upon whom the directors will rely; they should actively participate in board deliberations, ask appropriate questions, and discuss each proposal's strengths and weaknesses; they should seek out the advice of legal counsel, financial advisors, and other professionals, as needed; they should, where appropriate, reasonably rely upon information, reports, and opinions provided by officers, experts or board committees; and they should take sufficient time (as may be dictated by the circumstances) to reflect on decisions before making them.

However, the very nature of dealing with cybersecurity risks should lead to certain specific actions by directors. Cybersecurity should be given a much higher priority level within organizations so that cybersecurity efforts are given an appropriate level of funding given the potential size of the risk. The company's chief technology officer should be required to report to the board or to the audit or risk committee on a regular basis much like the chief financial officer. All personnel should be appropriately trained and companies should adopt data security policies, document retention policies and internet usage policies such as email and social media policies.

Companies should have regularly-scheduled action items concerning cybersecurity. If the company outsources its information technology functions, the board should ensure that the company maintains audit rights, including SAS 70 audits (which allow a company's auditors to rely upon the internal controls of a service organization) of the internal controls of the provider and the contracts should provide adequate definition of the level of security maintained for the data. Even companies that do not outsource, however, must carefully choose vendors and products for their internal systems. For example, when choosing among vendors, leadership needs to consider whether the vendor should have external validation such as FIPS, CIP and PCI DSS compliance. Contract terms should include necessary protections to prevent a cybersecurity breach event and to properly allocate responsibility should a breach occur.

Companies should seriously consider adopting cybersecurity programs. These programs should include certain key elements such as designating an employee who is in charge of compliance; identifying material risks to the company, and the administrative, physical and technical safeguards that are to be applied to protect the confidentiality and integrity of information (such as utilizing virtual private networks or encryption software for transmissions of sensitive data); and continuous testing and monitoring of the program once implemented.

Boards may also want to consider purchasing cybersecurity insurance. Often, a company's existing coverage may provide some protection in the event of a cybersecurity breach. New policies are emerging which provide broader coverage for these types of risks. Policies now cover a company's own losses, network related business interruption insurance as well as losses in the event of lawsuits.

Companies that are not proactive and argue that the costs of compliance exceed their available resources and budgetary constraints are making a high risk choice. Every organization should at least take initial steps to assess risks and compliance shortfalls and address high-priority risks one at a time. The cost of reacting to a cybersecurity failure could be more than you bargained for.

This article is published as an informational resource. It is not intended nor should it be used as a substitute for legal advice or opinion which can be rendered only when related to specific fact situations.

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For more information on Jackson Walker L.L.P.'s Cybersecurity practice, see www.jw.com/cybersecurity.

Appendix D

OPTIONS BACKDATING ISSUES

PCAOB Issues Audit Practice Alert Regarding Timing and Accounting for Stock Option Grants. On July 28, 2006, the PCAOB issued its staff Practice Alert No. 1, entitled "Matters Relating to Timing and Accounting for Options Grants"[1] (the *"Alert"*) that was prompted by recent reports and disclosures about issuer practices related to the granting of stock options, including the "backdating" of such grants, which indicate that some issuers' actual practices in granting options might have been inconsistent with the manner in which these transactions were initially recorded and disclosed.[2] The Alert noted that some issuers have announced restatements of previously issued financial statements as a result of these practices and that some of these practices could result in legal and other contingencies that may require recognition of additional expense or disclosure in financial statements.

As of September 4, 2007, more than 140 companies were undergoing some form of investigation involving their stock option grants, and more are likely to come under scrutiny.[3] Further, among nearly 150 late filers of quarterly results in the second quarter, roughly 50 companies disclosed delays resulting from stock option grant reviews.[4]

The Alert advises auditors that these stock option grant practices may have implications for audits of financial statements or of internal control over financial reporting and discusses factors that may be relevant in assessing the risks related to these matters. As a result of this Alert, together with SEC investigations, media, analyst and shareholder activist inquiries, and litigation surrounding option grant practices of other issuers, auditors are making more detailed and far reaching requests for documentation and representations from their clients about stock option grants than in prior years. Further, the significantly expanded executive compensation and related person disclosures that will be required for all proxy and information statements filed on or after December 15, 2006 by the amendments to SEC Regulation S-K items 402 and 404 adopted by the SEC on July 26, 2006 (the *"2006 Executive Compensation Rules"*)[5] will require specific information regarding option granting practices.

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1 http://www.pcaobus.org/News_and_Events/News/2006/07-28.aspx

2 *See* David I. Walker, "Some Observations on the Stock Options Backdating Scandal of 2006," Boston University School of Law Working Paper Series, Law and Economics Working Paper No. 06-31, available at http://www.bu.edu/law/faculty/scholarship/workingpapers/2006.html, in which the author suggests that the options backdating phenomena in the companies he surveyed is less about accounting fraud and executive greed than about a broad based effort to compensate rank-and-file employees as well as officers.

3 *See* Options Scorecard, Wall Street Journal Online (September 4, 2007), available at http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-optionsscore06-full.html.

4 *See* "Is Your Target an Option Timer?", Securities Mosaic (September 25, 2006).

5 1933 Act Release No. 33-8732A (August 29, 2006) "Executive Compensation and Related Person Disclosure," *available at* http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/2006/33-8732a.pdf (the *"2006 Executive Compensation Release"*).

Vocabulary.

"*At-the-money*" options are stock options granted with an exercise price equal to the fair market value (usually the closing price) of the issuer's stock on the grant date.

"*Backdating*" involves setting the grant date of an employee stock option that precedes the actual date of the corporate action required to effect the grant in order to provide a lower exercise price, and hence a higher value, to the recipient.

"*Bullet-dodging*" is the converse of spring loading and involves granting of stock options after the issuer's release of negative information that can reasonably be expected to have a negative impact on the market value of the stock.

"*Discounted*" or "*In-the-Money*" options are stock options granted with an exercise price less than the fair market value of the stock at the time of grant (usually the closing price of the issuer's stock on the grant date).

"*Grant date*" or "*measurement date*" under APB 25 is the first date on which both of the following are known: (1) the number of options that an individual employee is entitled to receive and (2) the option or purchase price. Under APB 25, even if documents related to an award of options are dated "as of" an earlier date, the measurement date does not occur until the date the terms of the award and its recipient are actually determined.

"*Spring-loading*" or "*spring-dating*" involves granting stock options in advance of the issuer's release of material information that can reasonably be expected to have a positive effect on the market price of the stock.

GAAP Accounting for Options. The Alert notes that under generally accepted accounting principles for financial reporting in the U.S. (*"GAAP"*), the recorded value of a stock option depends, in part, on the market price of the underlying stock on the date that the option is granted and the exercise price specified in the option. Where discounted options were granted, the issuer would ordinarily record initially the amount of the discount as compensation cost in the period of grant. If proper recording of the compensation cost was not made, the errors may cause the issuer's financial statements, including related disclosures, to be materially misstated. Periods subsequent to the grant of an option may also be affected by improper accounting for a grant because option cost is generally expensed over the period during which the issuer receives the related services, most commonly its vesting period.

The specific accounting treatment for an option will be determined by whichever of the following is applicable:

APB 25. Under Accounting Principles Board (*"APB"*) Opinion No. 25, *Accounting for Stock Issued to Employees* (*"APB 25"* or *"Opinion 25"*), which defined the method many companies used to account for stock options until recently, there was no compensation expense recorded if the option was issued with an exercise price not less than the fair market price (usually the closing price) of the stock on the date of grant (the *"measurement date"*) entitling the employee to purchase a fixed number of shares for a fixed price for a fixed period of time and vesting based on continued service over a specified period of time. If on the measurement

date the fair market value of the stock exceeded the option exercise price, then the issuer would have to record the amount of the discount as compensation expense in the period of grant.[6]

FAS 123(R). An option granted today is accounted for under Financial Accounting Statement No. 123(R), titled "Accounting for Stock Based Compensation" (*"FAS 123(R)"*),[7] which requires a charge to earnings of the fair value of the option (often determined under the Black-Scholes method) over the vesting period. An option exercise price which is lower than the fair market value on the date of grant will increase the value of the option and hence the charge to earnings.

Background. In 2005 Dr. Erik Lie of the University of Iowa published a paper[8] that showed that before 2003 a number of public companies had an uncanny ability to choose grant dates coinciding with the lowest stock prices around the time of the grant.[9] Media analyses suggested that "the odds of this happening by chance were extraordinarily remote – around one in 300 billion."[10] Suspecting that such patterns were not the result of chance but of some manipulation, the SEC and other federal and state law enforcement groups began to investigate. The scandal had mushroomed to the point that on September 6, 2006 the SEC was investigating over 100 companies concerning possible fraudulent reporting of stock option grants involving a variety of companies ranging from Fortune 500 companies to smaller cap issuers and spanning multiple industry sectors, with a large number from the technology sector.[11] More companies have announced internal investigations into their option granting practices, often with

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6 In a letter dated September 19, 2006 from the SEC Chief Accountant to the Chairman of Center for Public Company Audit Firms, American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (the *"SEC Options Guidance"*), the importance of the measurement date was emphasized:

> The accounting under Opinion 25 relies heavily on the determination of the *measurement date*, which is defined as "the first date on which are known both (1) the number of shares that an individual employee is entitled to receive and (2) the option or purchase price, if any." Under Opinion 25, the final amount of compensation cost of an option is measured as the difference between the exercise price and the market price of the underlying stock at the measurement date. As such, for the purpose of determining compensation cost pursuant to Opinion 25, it is important to determine whether a company's stock option granting practices resulted in the award of stock options with an exercise price that was lower than the market price of the underlying stock at the date on which the terms and recipients of those stock options were determined with finality.

7 Financial Accounting Standards Board (*"FASB"*) Statement of Financial Accounting Standards (*"SFAS"*) No. 123 R (revised 2004), *Share-Based Payment*, applies to issuer reporting periods beginning after June 15, 2005 (December 15, 2005 for small business issuers).

8 Erik Lie, *On the timing of CEO stock option awards*, 51 MGMT. SCI. 801,802 (2005).

9 "Testimony Concerning Options Backdating" by Christopher Cox, Chairman, U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, before the U.S. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs on September 6, 2006, which can be found at http://www.sec.gov/news/testimony/2006/ts090606cc.htm.

10 Charles Forelle and James Bandler, *The Perfect Payday – Some CEO's reap millions by landing stock options when they are most valuable. Luck – or something else?*, Wall St. J., March 18, 2006, at A1.

11 "Testimony Concerning Executive Compensation and Options Backdating Practices" by Linda Thomsen, Director, Division of Enforcement, U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, before the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance on September 6, 2006, which can be found at http://www.sec.gov/news/testimony/2006/ts090606lt.htm.

announcements that the filing of SEC reports is being delayed pending completion of the investigation.[12]

The incidence of backdating may have substantially decreased after the implementation of the shortened filing deadline for reports of option grants specified by SOX § 403, which resulted in the SEC requiring the reporting of an option grant on Form 4 within two days of the date of grant.[13]

Backdating.

When Was Option Granted. An option is "granted" under an employee stock option plan, and a "measurement date" under APB 25 occurs, when the person authorized by the plan to make the grant (typically the compensation or stock options committee of the board of directors) takes the requisite corporate action to effect the grant in accordance with the terms of the plan. A committee can act either at a meeting at which a quorum is present or by unanimous written consent. A written consent is effective on the later of the date specified in the consent or the date on which all directors have signed the consent to the action and filed with the minutes of the Board or committee, as the case may be.[14] The "unanimous" requirement may make the written consent problematic when one of the persons who must sign the consent has a disabling self interest that would prohibit voting because he or she is to receive an option.[15]

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[12] *See* Options Scorecard, Wall Street Journal Online (September 4, 2007), available at http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-optionsscore06-full.html.

[13] *See* Byron F. Egan, *Responsibilities of M&A Professionals After the Sarbanes-Oxley Act* (Oct. 4, 2007) - Accelerated §16(a) Reporting, at 63-68, *available at* http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=838.

[14] DGCL § 141(f) and TBCA art. 9.10A both authorize boards of directors and committees thereof to act by unanimous written consent. *See* C. Stephen Bigler & Pamela H. Sudell, *Delaware Law Developments: Stock Option Backdating and Spring-Loading*, 40 Rev. Sec. & Comm. Reg. 115, 116-117 (May 16, 2007) ("Section 141(f) generally provides that an action may be taken 'if all members of the board of directors or committee, as the case may be, consent thereto in writing, or by electronic transmission and the writing or writings are filed with the minutes of proceedings of the board of directors, or committee.' Thus, for purposes of Delaware law, an action taken by written consent is not taken until the written consent has been executed by all of the members of the board or committee and has been filed with the minutes. * * * Ultimately, the date on which the written consent was signed by all the directors or committee and filed with the minutes is a factual question that must be determined from the company's records, the recollections of the relevant directors or committee members, and the officers responsible for preparing, disseminating, retrieving and filing the signed written consents. * * * Acting at an in-person or a telephonic meeting would help avoid potential issues resulting from the uncertainty surrounding when actions are legally effective when the directors act by written consent.")

[15] In *Solstice Capital II, Ltd. P'ship v. Ritz*, 2004 WL 765939 (not reported in A.2d) (Del. Ch. April 6, 2004), Delaware Chancellor Chandler held that a written consent to the removal of an officer was invalid because it was not signed by all of the directors even though it was signed by all of the disinterested directors, and explained:

> Action by written consent requires unanimity of the entire board, not just the unanimity of the disinterested directors. There is no exception to this rule, even if a director has an interest in the transaction at issue. This comports with the notion that directors should participate actively and engage in discussion before voting at meetings. The policy underlying board action by written consent is that "meetings should be required except where the decision is so clear that the vote is unanimous and in writing." Unless there is

The SEC Chief Accountant recognized that corporate formalities do not always keep up with what the issuer's governing authority intended and thought it was accomplishing. In a letter dated September 19, 2006 from the SEC Chief Accountant to the Chairman of Center for Public Company Audit Firms, American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (the *"SEC Options Guidance"*), the SEC Chief Accountant recognized:

> [T]here may also be situations where an at-the-money grant was actually decided with finality, but there were unimportant delays in the completion of administrative procedures to document the grant that did not involve misrepresentation of the option granting actions. In those situations, if compensation cost would not have otherwise been recorded pursuant to Opinion 25, short delays in completing the administrative procedures to finalize the grant would not result in an accounting consequence.[16]

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unanimous written consent, the only way to remove Puchek as the CEO is at a special meeting of the board.

Action on a compensation issue was found not to be in good faith where it was taken by unanimous written consent without any deliberation or advice from any expert in *Official Committee of Unsecured Creditors of Integrated Health Services, Inc. v. Elkins*, No. CIV.A.20228-NC, 2004 WL 1949290 (Del. Ch. Aug. 24, 2004).

[16] In the SEC Options Guidance, the SEC Chief Accountant elaborated as follows:

> Typically, a company's corporate governance provisions, stock option plans, and applicable laws specify the actions required in order to effect the grant of a stock option (collectively referred to as "required granting actions"). Absent provisions of the option or company practices that indicate the terms of the award could change at a later date, the date when these actions are completed in full has generally been regarded as the measurement date.
>
> However, we understand that some companies have accounted for their option grants using a measurement date that is other than the date at which all required granting actions have been completed. Two such examples that we have become aware of are as follows.
>
> > a) Companies may have been awarding stock options by obtaining oral authorization from the board of directors (or compensation committee thereof) and subsequently completing the documents evidencing the award at a later date, or
> >
> > b) Companies may have delegated the authority to award options to a member or committee of management. That member or committee of management determined option awards to be made to subordinates within specific parameters previously communicated by the board of directors (or compensation committee thereof) and obtained any appropriate approvals at a later date.
>
> The delay in completion of all required granting actions suggests that options terms may not have been final until the completion of those actions. Nonetheless, some companies that utilized the practices described above have asserted that the measurement date occurred before the required granting actions were completed because all option terms and recipients were final and known at an earlier date, and the completion of required granting actions represented only an administrative delay, rather than a period during which any of the terms of the award remained under consideration or subject to change.
>
> The staff believes that a conclusion that a measurement date occurred before the completion of required granting actions must be considered carefully, as the fact that the applicable corporate governance provisions, terms of the stock option plans, or applicable

Consequences. Backdating of options can be a valid corporate action that does not violate any fiduciary duties if the action is taken by an informed board or committee,[17] but it may

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> laws require certain procedures to be completed in order to effect a stock option grant suggests that option terms may not have been final (or "known") until those procedures were completed. * * *
>
> In many cases, when options were awarded before (or in the absence of) completion of required granting actions, the terms cannot be considered to have been determined with finality until (and unless) such actions were completed. Indeed, as evidenced by some of the option granting practices and patterns of conduct that the staff has become aware of, awarding options in a manner that did not comply with the required granting actions does suggest that the terms and recipients of the options may have been subject to change. For example, in the event that the company's stock price declined prior to finalizing the required granting actions, the company may have retracted awards (e.g., failed to follow through with the initially determined awards) or lowered the exercise price of options. This type of practice indicates that, for all awards (including those awards for which the terms were not changed), the terms and recipients were not determined with finality (and therefore were not "known") prior to the completion of all required granting actions. Similarly, any evidence indicating that the preparation of documentation was done in a manner calculated to disguise the true nature of the option granting actions would preclude a company from concluding that a measurement date occurred prior to the completion of all required granting actions. **If a company operated as if the terms of its awards were not final prior to the completion of all required granting actions (such as by retracting awards or changing their terms), the staff believes the company should conclude that the measurement date for all of its awards (including those awards that were not changed) would be delayed until the completion of all required granting actions.**
>
> On the other hand, in certain instances where a company's facts, circumstances, and pattern of conduct evidence that the terms and recipients of a stock option award were determined with finality on an earlier date prior to the completion of all required granting actions, it may be appropriate to conclude that a measurement date under Opinion 25 occurred prior to the completion of these actions. This would only be the case, however, when a company's facts, circumstances, and pattern of conduct make clear that the company considered the terms and recipients of the awards to be *fixed and unchangeable* at the earlier date. The practices described in the preceding paragraph would, of course, preclude a company from concluding that a measurement date occurred prior to the completion of all required granting actions.
>
> In evaluating whether a company's facts and circumstances do support a conclusion that the terms of stock option awards were fixed ("known") prior to the completion of all required granting actions, it is important that all information be considered. * * *
>
> Any analysis will be heavily dependent upon the particular facts and circumstances of each company, and evidence of fraudulent or manipulative conduct would affect the analysis. * * *

[17] On July 6, 2006, SEC Commissioner Paul S. Atkins in his "Remarks Before the International Corporate Governance Network 11th Annual Conference," *available at* http://www.sec.gov/news/speech/2006/spch070606psa.htm, commented, "Backdating of options sounds bad, but the mere fact that options were backdated does not mean that the securities laws were violated. Purposefully backdated options that are properly accounted for and do not run afoul of the company's public disclosure are legal. Similarly, there is no securities law issue if backdating results from an administrative, paperwork delay. A board, for example, might approve an options grant over the telephone, but the board members' signatures may take a few days to trickle in. One could argue that the grant date is the date on which the last director signed, but this argument does not necessarily reflect standard corporate practice or the logistical practicalities of getting many geographically dispersed and busy, part-time people

still not comply with the requirements of the option plan which was approved by the shareholders if it results in the granting of in-the-money options.[18] Most option plans specify

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to sign a document. It also ignores that these actions reflect a true meeting of the minds of the directors, memorialized by executing a unanimous written consent."

Speeches by SEC members or staff are the expressions of the speakers themselves, and are not to be construed as representations of the Commission itself.

[18] In the SEC Options Guidance, the SEC Chief Accountant addressed the accounting consequences where an issuer's consistent practice may not have complied with the terms of the applicable plan and suggested that more flexibility may be appropriate with respect to grants to rank and file employees:

> We understand that, in certain circumstances, the validity of past option grants has been called into question, even though both the company and the affected employees have and continue to comply with the terms of such options. For example, an option plan may preclude grants that are in-the-money at the grant date, or may contain a cap on the number of options that may be issued. Notwithstanding these restrictions, options that may not have complied with the terms of the plan were awarded to employees. This could arise due to some of the practices described in this letter.
>
> Questions have arisen as to whether an option can be accounted for as a fixed option with a measurement date on the date that the terms and recipient of the award were determined if uncertainty exists as to the validity of the grant. Specifically, the following questions have arisen:
>
> > a) If, for example, a shareholder-approved option plan only permits at-the-money grants, some have questioned whether the compensation committee may have lacked the authority under the entity's corporate governance procedures to authorize an in-the-money grant. If that were the case, under the plan, only the shareholders had the ability to approve such a grant and shareholder approval was not obtained. * * *
> >
> > b) Some have questioned whether the non-compliance of options with the company's option plan may create uncertainty as to whether the company will ultimately have the ability to settle the award in stock or instead may be required to settle the award in cash. Absent an ability to settle the award in stock, it is possible that the option would be accounted for as a cash-settled stock appreciation right pursuant to FASB Interpretation No. 28, "Accounting for Stock Appreciation Rights and Other Variable Stock Option or Award Plans."
>
> We understand that, in many of these cases, (a) the company has, as applicable, been honoring the awards and settling in stock, (b) the company intends to honor outstanding unexercised awards and has a reasonable basis to conclude that the most likely outcome is that the awards will be honored, and (c) the company intends to settle the outstanding unexercised awards in stock and has a reasonable basis to conclude that it will be able to do so (even if such settlement is not entirely within the company's control). In those circumstances, the staff believes that the substantive arrangement that is mutually understood by both the company and its employees represents the underlying economic substance of the past option grants, and should serve as the basis for the company's accounting. Accordingly, assuming all other conditions for the establishment of a measurement date have been satisfied, the staff believes it would be appropriate to account for the awards as fixed options with a measurement date on the date that the terms and recipients were determined with finality. While legal opinions regarding the validity of the option grant and the company's ability to honor the award would be helpful, the staff does not believe that a company would necessarily be required to obtain a legal opinion in order to reach these accounting conclusions.
>
> When a company either does not intend to or does not have a reasonable basis to conclude that it will be able to honor the award or settle it in stock, further analysis of the facts and circumstances would be necessary to determine the appropriate accounting for

> the options. The staff understands that significant uncertainty as to a company's ability to honor options arises more often for grants that were made to senior officers of the company (particularly officers who were involved in the option granting process), and less often for grants made to rank-and-file employees. Accordingly, the staff believes that the need for a legal analysis may be greater when questions exist as to the validity of grants made to senior officers who participated in the option granting process.

Similar flexibility was expressed in the SEC Options Guidance where there was uncertainty as to individual award recipients:

> We understand that some companies may have approved option awards before the number of options to be granted to each individual employee was finalized. For example, the compensation committee may have approved an award by authorizing an aggregate number of options to be granted prior to the preparation of a final list of individual employee recipients. In these cases, the allocation of options to individual employees was completed by management after the award approval date, or the unallocated options were reserved for grants to future employees. Pursuant to paragraph 10(b) of Opinion 25, no measurement date can occur until "the number of shares that an individual employee is entitled to receive" is known.
>
> In certain circumstances, the approved award may contain sufficient specificity to determine the number of options to be allocated to individual employees, notwithstanding the absence of a detailed employee list. If management's role was limited to ensuring that an allocation was made in accordance with definitive instructions (e.g., the approved award specified the number of options to be granted based on an individual's level within the organization), the measurement date could appropriately be the date the award was approved. However, if management was provided with discretion in determining the number of options to be allocated to each individual employee, a measurement date could not occur for such options prior to the date on which the allocation to the individual employees was finalized. If the allocation of a portion of the award is specified at the award approval date with the allocation of the remainder left to the discretion of management, the measurement date could appropriately be the date the award was approved only for those options whose allocation was specified.
>
> The staff also has become aware that some companies may have changed the list of recipients or the number of options allocated to each recipient subsequent to the preparation of the initial list at the award approval date. When changes to a list are made subsequent to the preparation of the list that was prepared on the award approval date, based on an evaluation of the facts and circumstances, the staff believes companies should conclude that either (a) the list that was prepared on the award approval date did not constitute a grant, in which case the measurement date for the entire award would be delayed until a final list has been determined or (b) the list that was prepared on the award approval date constituted a grant, in which case any subsequent changes to the list would be evaluated to determine whether a modification (such as a repricing) or cancellation has occurred. When a company determines that a repricing occurred, variable accounting should be applied to the option from the date of modification to the date the award is exercised, is forfeited, or expires unexercised.

The SEC Options Guidance provided some flexibility where (i) the legal documents evidencing past grants may not exist in the issuer's records, (ii) contemporaneous documentation of the date on which a telephonic or in-person meeting of the compensation committee was held may not have been prepared, (iii) written documentation includes only "as of" dates, and not the dates the documentation was actually prepared and approved, or (iv) the issuer may have reason to believe that the documentation in its records is not accurate:

> The appropriate accounting in circumstances where records cannot be located or may be inaccurate will depend on the particular facts and circumstances. We understand that, in some cases, the lack of documentation or existence of contradictory documentation may lead a company to conclude either that the terms of options cannot reasonably be

how the option exercise price is to be determined (typically at the closing price of the stock on the date of grant). Failure to comply with the plan or GAAP can result in a number of collateral consequences, including the following:

- Financial Statement Impact. A backdating that results in options being issued at a discount could result in the understatement of compensation expenses with the attendant consequences described in the Alert and could require the issuer to restate[19] its financial statements.[20]

> considered fixed, resulting in the application of variable accounting, or that awards do not substantively exist until the board of directors affirms which awards will be honored. However, the staff does not believe that the lack of complete documentation being available several years after the activities occurred should necessarily result in a "default" to variable accounting or to treating the awards as if they had never been granted. Rather, a company must use *all available relevant information* to form a reasonable conclusion as to the most likely option granting actions that occurred and the dates on which such actions occurred in determining what to account for. The existence of a pattern of past option grants with an exercise price equal to or near the lowest price of the entity's stock during the time period surrounding those grants could indicate that the terms of those grants were determined with hindsight. Further, in some cases, the absence of documentation, in combination with other relevant factors, may provide evidence of fraudulent conduct.

[19] *See* David Reilly, *No More 'Stealth Restating' – SEC Forces Companies to Highlight Earnings Changes, Not Just Tack Them on to Their Newest Filings*, WALL ST. J., Sept. 21, 2006 at C1:

> At issue is guidance from the regulator that companies shouldn't try to sweep under the carpet errors in their financial results. In recent years, scores of companies have changed previously reported figures via what critics call "stealth restatements," commonly including the new, different figures in subsequent securities filings. The SEC's stand: Such changes constitute information that is material to investors and thus needs to be formally disclosed in a restatement filing clearly labeled as such. As a result, some companies are announcing restatements to earnings reports they made months ago.
>
> In 2004, as part of changes brought about by the Sarbanes-Oxley corporate-overhaul legislation, the SEC said companies should file a special form announcing a restatement with the agency. But some companies mistakenly believed that they wouldn't have to do so if they were submitting a new earnings filing in the days after concluding that a restatement of old results was necessary. Instead, they would just include the restated results in the new filing.
>
> John White, director of the corporate-finance division, added that his staff has "focused" on restatement-related disclosures to make clear that companies can't avoid such announcements by simply including a restatement in a filing of current results. The loophole some companies may have tried to exploit didn't actually exist, he explained.
>
> Restatements are admissions by companies that a prior financial filing can't be relied upon, which explains why many executives prefer not to draw attention to them. "It's embarrassing," said Eric Keller, chief executive of Movaris Inc., a company that develops financial-reporting systems. "It's akin to a product recall."

See also Peter Grant, James Bandler and Charles Forelle, *Cablevision Gave Backdated Grant To Dead Official*, WALL ST. J., Sept. 22, 2006 at A1:

> Cablevision Systems Corp. awarded options to a vice chairman after his 1999 death but backdated them, making it appear the grant was awarded when he still was alive, according to a company filing and people familiar with the matter. The country's fifth-

- Misleading SEC Filings. The resulting financial statement misreporting could result in the issuer's periodic reports being in violation of the 1934 Act and any 1933 Act registration statement which incorporates them by reference being in violation of the 1933 Act and could require amendment of any SEC filings containing materially misstated financial statements.[21] Further, the compensation disclosures in proxy statements filed with the SEC could likewise be incorrect.

- SOX §§ 302 and 906 Certifications. The CEO and CFO of a public company are required to certify in each periodic report filed with the SEC that, to the best of their knowledge: (1) the financial statements and other information in the report fairly present, in all material respects, the financial condition and results of operation of the issuer, (2) the disclosure controls and procedures are designed to provide reasonable assurance regarding the reliability of the financial statements in accordance with GAAP, and (3) they have disclosed to the company's auditors and audit committee any internal control deficiencies.[22] Options backdating and other manipulations, if committed with the

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> largest cable operator in terms of subscribers also improperly awarded a compensation consultant options but accounted for them as if he were an employee, according to a Securities and Exchange Commission filing, citing the results of a six-week investigation by an outside law firm. The findings of the probe were released yesterday as the . . . company restated its financial results and said two of its directors had stepped down from posts on the board's audit and compensation committees as part of an escalating investigation into its improper granting of stock options.
>
> * * *
>
> John Coffee, a professor of law at Columbia University, noted that options are intended to create an incentive for executives to boost their company's stock price. "Trying to incentivize a corpse suggests they were not complying with the spirit of shareholder-approved stock-option plans," he said.

[20] The SEC Options Guidance suggests that an issuer may have to restate its financial statements where options backdating has occurred in prior periods:

> Companies that determine their prior accounting to be in error and that those errors are material should restate their financial statements to reflect the correction of those errors. Evaluation of materiality requires a consideration of all relevant facts and circumstances. Qualitative factors (for example, if the error is intentional) may cause misstatements of quantitatively small amounts to be material. When disclosures of these issues are made, it is important that the registrant discuss not only the accounting restatements, but also the circumstances that gave rise to the errors.

[21] The SEC Options Guidance suggests that an issuer may have to amend its prior SEC filings that contained financial statements that had to be restated due to options backdating:

> Generally, previously filed reports containing financial statements determined to be materially misstated require amendment. The staff understands that errors related to the issues addressed in this letter may affect several years of filings, and that companies may believe that amending all of the affected filings is unnecessary. Companies that propose to correct material errors without amending all previously filed reports should contact the staff of the Division of Corporation Finance. No amendment of previously filed reports is necessary to correct prior financial statements for immaterial errors. Such corrections, if necessary, may be made the next time the registrant files the prior financial statements.

[22] *See* Byron F. Egan, *Responsibilities of M&A Professionals After the Sarbanes-Oxley Act* (Oct. 4, 2007) - CEO/CFO Certifications, at 36-40, *available at* http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=838.

knowledge of the certifying officer, could subject the officer to SEC enforcement action or criminal prosecution for false certification.

- Federal Income Tax Consequences. Under the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended (the *"IRC"*), a finding that an option was backdated can cause the tax treatment of the option grant and exercise to be different for both the issuer and the employee, with the result that the issuer may be subject to tax liabilities and liabilities to the option grantee under federal securities laws and a variety of common law causes of action.

    - IRC § 162(m). In-the-money options may not be treated as "performance based" compensation within the meaning of IRC § 162(m). Thus, for the issuer, any deduction of compensation related to the backdated option would be subject to the $1 million IRC § 162(m) limitation and would be disallowed if paid to the chief executive officer or one of the four other highest paid executive officers.[23]

    - Incentive Stock Options. If an Incentive Stock Option (*"ISO"*) is backdated so that it was in-the-money on the real date of grant, the option would no longer qualify for preferential ISO treatment and would be reclassified as a nonqualified stock option.[24] The difference between the exercise price and the sales price would be additional wages to the executive and should be included on the employee's Form W-2 in the year of exercise. The executive would lose the deferral and rate benefits associates with ISO qualification, but the corporation may be eligible for an additional wage deduction if IRC § 162(m) limitations are not triggered.[25]

    - IRC § 409A. Under IRC § 409A, the grantee of a backdated option may now be responsible for the payment of tax on income previously deferred until the exercise of the options.[26] In addition, there can be substantial additional taxes under IRC § 409A. This provision applies to options granted after 2004 and options granted before 2005 that were not earned and vested as of December 31, 2004. During a transition period with the rules relating to IRC

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23 "Testimony on Backdating of Stock Options and Other Executive Compensation Issues" by Mark Everson, Commissioner of Internal Revenue, before the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance on September 6, 2006.

24 Under IRC § 421 an optionee does not recognize income upon the receipt or exercise of an ISO and, upon sale of stock acquired upon the exercise thereof, the entire spread between the exercise price and the sale price is taxed as a capital gain. This favorable tax treatment is available only if the option exercise price is at or above the fair market value of the underlying stock on the date of grant and the option and the plan under which it was granted meet the other requirements of IRC § 421 on the date of grant, including issuer shareholder approval of the plan pursuant to which the ISO was granted. If the option does not qualify as an ISO, under IRC § 83 the optionee would recognize income on the date of grant if it then has a readily ascertainable fair market value and, if not, ordinarily would recognize ordinary income when the option is exercised equal to the spread between the exercise price and the fair market value of the stock on the date of exercise.

25 "Testimony on Backdating of Stock Options and Other Executive Compensation Issues" by Mark Everson, Commissioner of Internal Revenue, before the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance on September 6, 2006.

26 *Id*.

§ 409A, options that were in the money on the grant date could be amended to avoid violating IRC § 409A either by (1) increasing the exercise price to equal the fair market value on the original grant date and eliminate any other deferral feature, or (2) amending the options to provide for a fixed exercise date after which the option will be worthless. Alternatively, the grant of backdated options could be rescinded if the options have not been exercised.[27]

- Internal Investigations. An early step in an issuer's investigating and determining how to deal with suggestions that it may have backdated stock option grants is an internal investigation conducted by the issuer's audit committee, or another committee of independent directors appointed by the issuer's board of directors, often with the assistance of independent counsel and forensic accountants.

- Stock Exchange Delisting. Issuer listing agreements with the stock exchanges generally require that listed companies (1) timely file their SEC periodic reports and (2) obtain shareholder approval of new or amended plans under which issuer stock may be issued. The delays in filing SEC reports because of backdated option related internal investigations or restatements would result in listing agreement violations. Likewise, the grant of backdated options could be deemed a defacto amendment of the option plan without shareholder approval in violation of listing agreement covenants.

- Lenders. Loan agreements with banks and other institutional lenders require the timely filing of SEC reports. The failure to make such filings can result in covenant defaults which can justify accelerating the debt, which in turn would require the issuer to classify the debt as a current liability in its financial statements. Lenders are increasingly extracting payments or other consideration in exchange for waivers of covenant defaults.[28]

- Civil and Criminal Actions by SEC, Department of Justice and Others. Some SEC and criminal actions[29] have been initiated to date and, with over 140

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27 *Id.*

28 *See* Peter Lattman and Karen Richardson, *Hedge Funds Play Hardball With Firms Filing Late Financials*, WALL ST. J., Aug. 29, 2006, at A1.

29 *See, e.g.,* SEC v. Symbol Technologies, Inc., et al, Accounting and Auditing Release No. 2029 (June 3, 2004), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/litigation/litreleases/lr18734.htm (SEC complaint alleged defendants fraudulently used a variety of non-GAAP revenue recognition principles to create false impression that Symbol had met or exceeded its financial projections; Symbol's former general counsel and senior vice president, Leo Goldner consented to a final judgment referenced at Accounting and Auditing Release No. 2391 (March 2, 2006), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/litigation/litreleases/lr19585.htm, permanently enjoining him from violating the 1933 Act, the 1934 Act and rules thereunder, and civil forfeiture of $2 million in connection with his guilty plea in a parallel criminal case, based on allegations that Goldner chose "a more advantageous exercise date" from a 30-day look back period to calculate the cost of exercising the executive option plans instead of the stated terms of Symbol's option plans and without the approval of the board or public disclosure, and also used improper "look-back" practices to benefit himself and directly instructed his staff to backdate SEC forms, including Forms 4, registration

investigations pending as of March 23, 2007, more such actions are to be expected.[30] Anyone in the chain of action in granting a backdated option is subject to scrutiny,[31] including outside directors on compensation committees[32] and general counsel.[33] Plaintiffs' lawyers have filed numerous derivative and class action lawsuits.[34]

- Business Combinations. Most agreements for the sale of a business via merger, stock sale or asset sale require the seller to make representations regarding the financial statements[35] of the business, the absence of any material adverse change in the business or condition (financial or other) of the issuer (*"MAC"*),[36] and its compliance with applicable laws,[37] and

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statements and proxy statements); SEC v. Gregory L. Reyes, et al, Litigation Release No. 19768 (July 20, 2006), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/litigation/litreleases/2006/lr19768.htm (SEC and DOJ civil and criminal complaints alleged former chief executive officer, chief financial officer and vice president of human resources of Brocade Communications Systems, Inc. caused Brocade to issue in the money backdated stock options to both new and current employees between 2002 and 2004, thus concealing millions of compensation expenses from investors); SEC v. Jacob "Kobi" Alexander, et al, Accounting and Auditing Release No. 2472 (August 9, 2006), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/litigation/litreleases/2006/lr19796.htm, in which the former chief executive officer, chief financial officer and general counsel of Comverse Technology, Inc. were charged in civil and criminal actions with a decade long fraudulent scheme to grant options backdated to coincide with historically low closing prices of Comverse common stock and to use a slush fund of backdated options to be granted first to fictitious employees and later to new key hires.

30 *See* Options Scorecard, Wall Street Journal Online (March 23, 2007), available at http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-optionsscore06-full.html.

31 Eric Dash, *Who Signed Off on Those Options?*, N.Y. Times, August 27, 2006.

32 SEC Commissioner Roel C. Campos, How to be an Effective Board Member, speech at the HACR Program on Corporate Responsibility, Boston, MA (Aug. 15, 2006), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/news/speech/2006/spch081506rcc.htm, in which he said, "[I]f the facts permit – and I want to emphasize that all our Enforcement cases are very fact-specific – it wouldn't surprise me to see charges brought against outside directors."

33 Alan R. Bromberg and Lewis D. Lowenfels, *Backdating Stock Options—Effects Upon In-House Corporate Counsel*, 39 BNA Sec. Reg. & Law Rept. No. 11 at 436 (March 19, 2007); Petra Pasternak, In-House Counsel Vulnerable to Options Backdating Inquiries, The Recorder (August 14, 2006), 2006 Texas Lawyer Online, *available at* http://www.texaslawyer.com. *See* SEC Seen Likely to Look at Role Of Lawyers in Stock Option Investigations, 38 BNA Sec. Reg. & Law Rept. No. 26 at 1118 (June 26, 2006) ("SEC has greatly stepped up the number of enforcement actions its brings against lawyers, accountants, and other 'gatekeepers' since the implosion of Enron. * * * [T]he SEC expects attorneys to understand wrongdoing is when a company has used a side letter to conceal a specific term of a deal from its auditors . . . [I]n ongoing investigations regarding the backdating of stock options, . . . the SEC will be interested in knowing 'what lawyers knew and said about the fact that some companies were dating the options as of a date different from the grant date'").

34 Julie Creswell, *One Route Seems Closed, So Lawyers Try Different Lawsuit in Stock-Option Scandal*, The N.Y. Times, September 5, 2006 (author counts 57 derivative actions and 15 class actions to September 5, 2006 based on options backdating).

35 ABA Model Asset Purchase Agreement with Commentary (2001) § 3.4. *See*, Byron F. Egan and H. Lawrence Tafe, III, *Private Company Acquisitions* (October 16, 2007) – Financial Statements, at 81-86, available at http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=839.

36 *Id*. at § 3.15.

37 *Id*. at § 3.17.

condition the closing of the transaction on the correctness of the representations[38] and the absence of any MAC. The negotiation and documentation of such a transaction will require seller to make disclosures regarding its option backdating exposure,[39] which in turn might result in the

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[38] *Id*. at § 7.1.

[39] On July 25, 2006, Hewlett-Packard Company (*"HP"*) filed a Form 8-K Report with the SEC announcing that it had entered into an Agreement and Plan of Merger dated August 25, 2006 with Mercury Interactive Corporation (*"Mercury"*). Mercury had made various public statements regarding ongoing investigations into its option granting practices. To make exception for these investigations and a related restatement of its financial statements, the HP/Mercury merger agreement definition of the term "Company Material Adverse Effect" in § 1.1 contained a broad carve-out for Mercury's option situation, including accounting and tax aspects, which read as follows:

> "(ix) (A) actions, claims, audits, arbitrations, mediations, investigations, proceedings or other Legal Proceedings (in each case whether threatened, pending or otherwise), (B) penalties, sanctions, fines, injunctive relief, remediation or any other civil or criminal sanction (in each case whether threatened, pending, deferred or otherwise, and whether financial or otherwise), or (C) facts, circumstances, changes, effects, outcomes, results, occurrences and eventualities (whether or not known, contemplated or foreseeable, and whether financial or otherwise), in each case with respect to (A) through (C), resulting from, relating to or arising out of: (1) the Company's restatement of its historical consolidated financial statements for the fiscal years ended December 31, 2002, 2003 and 2004 (the *"Restatement"*), the matters referred to in Item 9A, Note 3 or Note 19, or the Company's pending restatement of the unaudited financial statements contained in its quarterly report on Form 10-Q for the quarter ended March 31, 2005; (2) the Company's failure to file in a timely manner its Annual Report on Form 10-K for the fiscal year ended December 31, 2005, the Quarter Reports on Form 10-Q for the quarters ended March 31, June 30, and September 30, 2006; or (3) the Company's historical stock-based compensation practices, including with respect to the grant of stock options and the purchase of Company stock by employees; the recording of, accounting for and disclosure relating to the stock option grants and the purchase of Company stock purchases by employees, remedies determined by the Company's Special Committee or Special Litigation Committee of the Company Board or the Company Board relating to the Company's investigation of such stock-based compensation or in connection with the Restatement, and the Company's tax practices with respect to such compensation practices, including the grant of stock options and the purchase of Company stock by employees."

The HP/Mercury merger agreement representations and warranties were typical and did not make any other special provision. Mercury's disclosure schedule, which is not publicly available, likely listed exceptions to Mercury's representations and warranties to deal with its options issues.

On July 31, 2006, Sandisk Corp. (*"SDC"*) filed a Form 8-K Report with the SEC announcing that it had entered into an Agreement and Plan of Merger dated as of July 31, 2006 pursuant to which it would acquire msystems Ltd. (*"msystems"*). On July 13, 2006, msystems had announced that its board of directors had determined that the actual measurement dates of certain past stock option grants differed from the previously recorded measurement dates. The SDC/msystems merger agreement included in the definition of "Material Adverse Change" in § 8.7 the following reference to an options issue: "with respect to the Company, the matters described in Section 8.7(f) of the Company Disclosure Letter (the 'Options Matters')." The representations and warranties of msystems were typical and were all qualified by reference to matters disclosed in the Company Disclosure Letter, which would have contained any qualifications relating to the "Options Matters."

waiver of any attorney-client privilege that might otherwise protect the confidentiality of the information.[40]

- D&O Insurance. Options backdating investigations and litigation are causing affected issuers, officers and directors to hire counsel (often separate counsel because of differing exposures and defenses), and to focus on indemnification and advancement of expenses of defense from the issuer pursuant to applicable indemnification contracts and provisions in the issuer certificate of incorporation and bylaws and applicable state laws.[41] They will also be reviewing the issuer's director and officer insurance policies (*"D&O Policies"*).[42] D&O Policies are typically written on a "claims made" basis which requires prompt notice within the policy period of any claim which the insurer will be asked to pay or defend. The applicable definitions of covered "claims," "wrongful acts"[43] and "losses" will vary. D&O Policies typically contain representations regarding the correctness of the issuer's financial statements and SEC filings, which could be breached by the very options backdating that results in the claim for which insurance protection is sought.[44] Many D&O Policies also contain a personal-profit exclusion which precludes coverage when "an insured has in fact gained any personal profit, remuneration or advantage to which the insured was not legally entitled," and which could be applicable to claims related to options backdating.[45] Some more recent D&O Policies are including specific exclusions for claims arising out of the issuance or use of stock options, which would preclude

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40 § 12.6 of the ABA Model Asset Purchase Agreement with Commentary (2001) is a provision for an asset purchase agreement to the effect the parties do not intend to waive any attorney-client or work product privilege and the related Comment discusses the effect of such a provision in different circumstances. *See*, Byron F. Egan and H. Lawrence Tafe, III, *Private Company Acquisitions* (October 16, 2007) – Attorney-Client Privilege, at 199-203, available at http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=839.

41 *See*, e.g. Texas Business Corporation Act art. 2.02-1, Texas Business Organizations Code §§ 8.001 et seq., and Delaware General Corporation Law § 145.

42 Liam Pleven, *Options Timing Raises Concerns Among Insurers – Probes Could Shake Up Coverage For Company Officials' Liability; Bracing for a Slew of Claims*, WALL ST. J., June 20, 2006, at C1.

43 Latham & Watkins Litigation Department Client Alert, No. 519 (June 27, 2006), *available at* http://www.lw.com/resource/Publications/ClientAlerts/clientAlert.asp?pid=1592:

> [T]he term "Wrongful Act" is frequently defined to include any actual or alleged error, misstatement or action or failure to act in connection with the company's regular activities.
>
> In recent years, however, some insurers have been changing their policy definition of "Wrongful Act" to include only *negligent* acts or omissions. If the policy is so limited, the carrier may deny coverage on the ground that the option dating was an intentional act and therefore any claim against the director or officer based on it falls outside the policy's coverage. *See, e.g., Oak Park Calabasas Condominium Assn. v. State Farm Fire and Cas. Co.*, 137 Cal. App. 4th 557 (Cal. App. 2 Dist. 2006) (holding that language of D&O liability insurance coverage grant applied only to negligent acts and omissions).

44 Daniel K. Winters, *Obtaining Insurance Coverage for Stock-Option Backdating Investigations and Suits*, 22 No. 5 Andrews Corp. Off. & Directors Liab. Litig. Rep. 3 (September 7, 2006).

45 *Id*.

claims related to options backdating.[46] Whether any of the possible D&O Policy coverage defenses or exclusions would be applicable is a very policy provision and fact specific analysis whose result will vary from issuer to issuer.

Spring-Loading. Some issuers have granted options immediately before the release of information that the issuer believed would be favorable to its share price, which may create legal or reputational risks and raise concerns about the issuer's control environment. There is a debate about the propriety of spring-loading,[47] with SEC Commissioner Paul S. Atkins arguing that a board of directors can exercise informed business judgment to grant options ahead of what is expected to be favorably received and noting that a board is almost always in possession of some material non-public information.[48] Former SEC Chief Accountant Lynn E. Turner has argued that spring-loading inevitably results in financial statements not conforming to GAAP because the options were issued at less than fair market value because the market price at grant did not reflect the undisclosed information, which would make the issuer's representations to its auditors false and its SEC disclosures misleading.[49] The SEC staff, however, suggested that neither bullet-dodging nor spring-loading would require any adjustment in the "market price of a share of the same class that trades freely in an established market" for the purposes of measuring compensation costs.[50]

Matters for Auditor Consideration Under the Alert. The Alert cautioned that auditors planning or performing an audit should be alert to the risk that the issuer may not have properly accounted for stock option grants and, as a result, may have materially misstated its financial statements or may have deficiencies in its internal controls. For audits currently underway or to be performed in the future, the auditor should acquire sufficient information to allow the auditor to assess the nature and potential magnitude of these risks, and use professional judgment in making these assessments and in determining whether to apply additional procedures in response. In making these judgments, the PCAOB Alert said that auditors should be mindful of the following:

Applicable Financial Accounting Standards. If an auditor determines that it is necessary to consider the accounting for option grants and related disclosures in financial statements of a prior period, the Alert states that the auditor should determine the GAAP in effect in those periods and to consider the specific risks associated with these principles.

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46 Latham & Watkins Litigation Department Client Alert, No. 519 (June 27, 2006), *available at* http://www.lw.com/resource/Publications/ClientAlerts/clientAlert.asp?pid=1592.

47 Kara Scannell, Charles Forelle and James Bandler, *Can Companies Issue Options, Then Good News? – SEC Is Divided on Practice Known as 'Spring Loading;' Critics See 'Insider Trading'*, Wall St. J., July 8-9, 2006, at A1.

48 SEC Commissioner Paul S. Atkins, Remarks Before the International Corporate Governance Network 11th Annual Conference (July 6, 2006), *available at* http://www.sec.gov/news/speech/2006/spch070606psa.htm, at 5-7.

49 Prepared Statement of Lynn E. Turner, then SEC Chief Accountant, before U.S. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Afairs Hearing on: Stock Options Backdating on September 6, 2002.

50 SEC Options Guidance at p. 9.

- *Accounting for Discounted Options*. For periods in which an issuer used the provisions of APB 25 to determine compensation cost related to stock options, the issuer may have been required to record additional compensation cost equal to the difference in the exercise price and the market price at the measurement date (as defined in APB 25). In periods in which the issuer has recorded option compensation cost using the fair value method under FAS No. 123 R, the impact on the calculated fair value of options of using an incorrect date as the grant date would depend on the nature and magnitude of changes in conditions that affect option valuation between the incorrect date used and the actual grant date. In all cases, the compensation cost of options should be recognized over the period benefited by the services of the option holder.

- *Accounting for Variable Plans*. For periods in which an issuer used the provisions of APB 25 to determine compensation cost related to stock options, an option with terms allowing a modification of the exercise price, or whose exercise price was modified subsequent to the grant date, may require variable plan accounting. Variable option accounting requires that compensation cost be recorded from period to period based on the variation in current market prices. In periods in which the issuer records option compensation cost under FAS No. 123 R, the right to a lower exercise price may constitute an additional component of value of the option that should be considered at the grant date. In all cases, the cost of options should be recognized over the period benefited by the services of the option holder.

- *Accounting for Contingencies*. If the consequences of the issuer's practices for stock option grants or its accounting for, and disclosure of, option grants result in legal or other contingencies, the application of SFAS No. 5, *Accounting for Contingencies*, may require that the issuer record additional cost or make additional disclosures in financial statements.

- *Accounting for Tax Effects*. The grant of discounted stock options may affect the issuer's ability to deduct expenses related to these options for income tax purposes, thereby affecting the issuer's cash flows and the accuracy of the related accounting for the tax effects of options.

Consideration of Materiality. In evaluating materiality, the Alert cautioned auditors to remember that both quantitative and qualitative considerations must be assessed.[51] The Alert cautioned that quantitatively small misstatements may be material when they relate to unlawful acts or to actions by an issuer that could lead to a material contingent liability and that, in all cases, auditors should evaluate the adequacy of related issuer disclosures.

[51] See paragraph .11 of AU § 312, *Audit Risk and Materiality in Conducting an Audit*, and SEC Staff Accounting Bulletin: No. 99 – *Materiality*.

Possible Illegal Acts. Auditors who become aware that an illegal act may have occurred must comply with the applicable auditing requirements[52] and § 10A of the 1934 Act, which requires a registered public accounting firm to take certain actions if it "detects or otherwise becomes aware of information indicating that an illegal act (whether or not perceived to have a material effect on the financial statements of the issuer) has or may have occurred…."[53] If it is likely that an illegal act has occurred, the registered public accounting firm must "determine and consider the possible effect of the illegal act on the financial statements of the issuer, including any contingent monetary effects, such as fines, penalties, and damages." The registered public accounting firm must also inform the appropriate level of management and assure that the audit committee is adequately informed "unless the illegal act is clearly inconsequential." The auditor may, depending on the circumstances, also need to take additional steps required under Section 10A if the issuer does not take timely and appropriate remedial actions with respect to the illegal act.

Effects of Options-related Matters on Planned or Ongoing Audits. In planning and performing an audit of financial statements and internal controls, the Alert cautioned the auditor to assess the nature and potential magnitude of risks associated with the granting of stock options and perform procedures to appropriately address those risks. The following factors are relevant to accomplishing these objectives --

- Assessment of the potential magnitude of risks of misstatement of financial statements and deficiencies in internal controls related to option granting practices. This assessment should include consideration of possible indicators of risk related to option grants, including, where appropriate:
    - The status and results of any investigations relating to the timing of options grants conducted by the issuer or by regulatory or legal authorities.
    - The results of direct inquiries of members of the issuer's management and its board of directors that should have knowledge of matters related to the granting and accounting for stock options.
    - Public information related to the timing of options grants by the issuer.
    - The terms and conditions of plans or policies under which options are granted; in particular, terms that allow exercise prices that are not equal to the market price on the date of grant or that delegate authority for option grants to management. In these situations, auditors should also consider whether issuers have other policies that adequately control the related risks.

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52 *See* AU § 317, *Illegal Acts*.

53 *See* "I. Pressure on Auditors to Detect Corporate Fraud – Accountant Duties Under 1934 Act Section 10A" in Byron F. Egan, "*Communications with Accountants After the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (including Attorney Letters to Auditors re Loss Contingencies, Attorney Duties under SOX §§ 303 and 307, and Options Backdating)*," at 7, available at http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=624.

- Patterns of transactions or conditions that may indicate higher levels of inherent risk in the period under audit. Such patterns or conditions may include levels of option grants that are very high in relation to shares outstanding, situations in which option-based compensation is a large component of executive compensation, highly variable grant dates, patterns of significant increases in stock prices following option grants, or high levels of stock-price volatility.

- In planning and performing audits, auditors should appropriately address the assessed level of risk, if any, related to option granting practices. Specifically:

  - In addition to the general planning considerations for financial statement audits, the auditor was advised to consider:

    - The implications of any identified or indicated fraudulent or illegal acts related to option grants to assessed risks of fraud; the potential for illegal acts; or the assessment of an issuer's internal controls.

    - The scope of procedures applied to assess the potential for fraud and illegal acts.

  - The nature, timing, and extent of audit procedures applied to elements of the financial statements affected by the issuance of options, including:

    - The need for specific management representations related to these matters[54] and **the nature of matters included in inquiries of lawyers**.[55]

    - Where applicable, the result of tests of internal controls over the granting, recording, and reporting of option grants.

    - The need, based on the auditor's risk assessment, for additional specific auditing procedures related to the granting of stock options.

For integrated audits[56] the Alert advised the auditor to consider the implications of identified or potential accounting and legal risks related to options in planning, performing and reporting on audits of internal controls. In addition, the results of the audit of internal controls should be considered in connection with the related financial statement audit.

Auditor Involvement in Registration Statements. In cases where an auditor is requested to consent to the inclusion of a report (including a report on internal controls) in a

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54 *See* AU § 333, *Management Representations*.

55 *See* AU § 337, *Inquiry of a Client's Lawyer*.

56 See PCAOB Auditing Standard No. 2, *An Audit of Internal Control Over Financial Reporting Performed in Conjunction with An Audit of Financial Statements* (*"AS No. 2"*).

registration statement under the 1933 Act, the Alert reminds the auditor to perform certain procedures prior to issuing such a consent with respect to events subsequent to the date of the audit opinion up to the effective date of the registration statement (or as close thereto as is reasonable and practical under the circumstances), including inquiry of responsible officials and employees of the issuer and obtaining written representations from them about whether events have occurred subsequent to the date of the auditor's report that have a material effect on the financial statements or that should be disclosed in order to keep the financial statements from being misleading with particular consideration to inquiries and representations specifically related to the granting and recording of option grants.[57] In the case of a predecessor auditor that has been requested to consent to the inclusion of a report on prior-period financial statements in a registration statement, the predecessor auditor should obtain written representations from the successor auditor regarding whether the successor auditor's audit and procedures with respect to subsequent events revealed any matters that might have a material effect on the financial statements reported on by the predecessor auditor or that would require disclosure in the notes to those financial statements. If the successor auditor becomes aware of information that leads him or her to believe that financial statements reported on by the predecessor auditor may require revision, the successor auditor was instructed to follow specified procedures.[58] If either the successor or predecessor auditor discovers subsequent events that require adjustment or disclosure in the financial statements or becomes aware of facts that may have existed at the date of his or her report and might have affected the report had he or she been aware of them, the auditor is admonished to refer to existing guidance.[59]

Effects of Option-related Matters on Previously Issued Opinions. If an auditor becomes aware of information that relates to financial statements previously reported on by the auditor, but which was not known to him or her at the date of the report, and which is of such a nature and from such a source that he or she would have investigated it had it come to his or her attention during the course of the audit, the auditor may be required to take specified actions.[60]

New Executive Compensation Rules. The 2006 Executive Compensation Rules require that proxy statements filed with the SEC after December 15, 2006 contain a new narrative disclosure section called "Compensation, Discussion and Analysis" (*"CD&A"*), which is intended to address a number of key compensation question, including information about the time and pricing of option grants. The 2006 Executive Compensation Rules require disclosure of company programs, plans and practices relating to the granting of options, including in particular the timing of option grants in coordination with the release of material non-public information and the selection of exercise prices that differ from the underlying stock's price on the grant date, including:

- Tabular presentations of option grants including:

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57 *See* AU § 711, *Filings Under Federal Securities Statutes*.

58 *See* ¶s .21 and .22 of AU § 315.

59 *See* AU § 711.

60 *See* AU § 561, *Subsequent Discovery of Facts Existing at the Date of the Auditor's Report*.

- The grant date fair value;

- The FAS 123R grant date;

- The closing market price on the grant date if it is greater than the exercise price of the award; and

- The date the compensation committee or full board of directors took action to grant the award if that date is different than the grant date.

  Further, if the exercise price of an option grant is not the grant date closing market price per share, the rules will require a description of the methodology for determining the exercise price.

- The CD&A must contain narrative disclosure about option grants to executives. Companies are required to analyze and discuss, as appropriate, material information such as the reasons a company selects particular grant dates for awards or the methods a company uses to select the terms of awards, such as the exercise prices of stock options.

- With regard to the timing of stock options in particular, companies are called upon to answer questions such as:

  - Does a company have any program, plan or practice to time option grants to its executives in coordination with the release of material non-public information?

  - How does any program, plan or practice to time option grants to executives fit in the context of the company's program, plan or practice, if any, with regard to option grants to employees more generally?

  - What was the role of the compensation committee in approving and administering such a program, plan or practice? How did the board or compensation committee take such information into account when determining whether and in what amount to make those grants? Did the compensation committee delegate any aspect of the actual administration of a program, plan or practice to any other persons?

  - What was the role of executive officers in the company's program, plan or practice of option timing?

  - Does the company set the grant date of its stock option grants to new executives in coordination with the release of material non-public information?

  - Does a company plan to time, or has it timed, its release of material non-public information for the purpose of affecting the value of executive compensation?

Disclosure is also be required where a company has not previously disclosed a program, plan or practice of timing option grants to executives, but has adopted such a program, plan or practice or has made one or more decisions since the beginning of the past fiscal year to time option grants.

- Similar disclosure standards apply if a company has a program, plan or practice of awarding options and setting the exercise price based on the stock's price on a date other than the actual grant date or if the company determines the exercise price of option grants by using formulas based on average prices (or lowest prices) of the company's stock in a period preceding, surrounding or following the grant date.

JACKSON WALKER L.L.P.

EGAN ON ENTITIES

Byron Egan is a partner in the Dallas office of Jackson Walker L.L.P. specializing in corporate, financing, mergers and acquisitions, and securities related matters. He is also a prolific speaker and writer, having penned more than 240 papers relating to business entities. Mr. Egan writes about the issues that he deals with every day as a seasoned corporate lawyer: corporation, partnership and limited liability company formation, entity governance, financing transactions, mergers and acquisitions, and securities laws.

This bulletin, called Egan on Entities, contains introductions to Mr. Egan's recent significant writings in four areas of the law relating to business entities, including how they are formed, governed and combined with other entities.[1] These writings contain practical insights regarding these subjects developed from his law firm practice and his interaction with others, as well as a thorough analysis of statutory and case law from which these practical insights have been developed.

Full versions of the writings referenced below can be found in the links identified below.

For further information or to provide your suggestions for additional bulletins, feel free to contact Mr. Egan directly at 214 953-5727, or by email at *began@jw.com*. Additionally, a listing of Mr. Egan's writings available online may be accessed at: *http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/attyinfo.jsp?id=77*.

More about Byron Egan: In addition to practicing corporate, financing, mergers and acquisitions, and securities law at Jackson Walker L.L.P. and making himself available as a resource to other lawyers, Mr. Egan currently serves as Senior Vice Chair and Chair of Executive Council of the ABA Business Law Section's Mergers & Acquisitions Committee and was Co-Chair of its Asset Acquisition Agreement Task Force, which published the ABA Model Asset Purchase Agreement with Commentary. A former Chair of both the Texas Business Law Foundation and the Business Law Section of the State Bar of Texas, as well as that Section's Corporation Law Committee, Mr. Egan has been involved in the drafting and enactment of many Texas business entity statutes, and that experience continues to enrich his current law practice. Four of Mr. Egan's law journal articles have received the Burton Award for excellence in legal writing presented at the Library of Congress. In 2009, his paper entitled "Director Duties: Process and Proof" was awarded the Franklin Jones Outstanding CLE Article Award and an earlier version of that article was honored by the State Bar Corporate Counsel Section's Award for the Most Requested Article in the Last Five Years. A profile of Mr. Egan published in The M&A Journal is available at: http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=540.

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1.

CHOICE OF ENTITY AND FORMATION

EXCERPTED FROM: "Choice of Entity Alternatives" – prepared for a May 28, 2010 program in Houston at the TexasBarCLE and Business Law Section of State Bar of Texas' program on Choice and Acquisitions of Entities in Texas. Published on the JW website and full text available at: http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1396

Key Issues Covered:

- Key factors in entity selection
- Summaries of key provisions of Texas and Delaware laws relating to
  - Corporations
  - General Partnerships
  - Limited Partnerships
  - Limited Liability Partnerships
  - Limited Liability Companies
- Summaries of U.S. and Texas tax treatment of entities

In selecting a form of business entity in which to engage in business in the United States, the organizer or initial owners should consider the following five business entity forms:

- Corporation
- General Partnership
- Limited Partnership
- Limited Liability Partnership ("LLP")
- Limited Liability Company ("LLC")

The form of business entity most advantageous in a particular situation depends on the objectives of the business for which the entity is being organized. In most situations, the focus will be on how the entity and its owners will be taxed and the extent to which the entity will shield the owners of the business from liabilities arising out of its activities.

The Texas Legislature has enacted the Texas Business Organizations Code (the "TBOC") to codify the Texas statutes relating to business entities referenced above, together with the Texas statutes governing the formation and operation of other for-profit and non-profit private sector entities. The TBOC is applicable for entities formed or converting under Texas law after January 1, 2006. Entities in existence on January 1, 2006 must conform to TBOC by January 1, 2010, but may continue to be governed by the Texas source statutes until then.

Federal and state taxation of an entity and its owners for entity income is a major factor in the selection of the form of entity for a particular situation. Under the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 and the "Check-the-Box" regulations promulgated by the Internal Revenue Service, an unincorporated business entity may be classified as an "association" taxable as a corporation subject to income taxes at the corporate level ranging from 15% to 35% of taxable net income, absent a valid S-corporation status election, which is in addition to any taxation which may be imposed on the owner as a result of distributions from the business entity. Alternatively, the entity may be classified as a partnership, a non-taxable "flow-through" entity in which taxation is imposed only at the ownership level. Although generally a corporation may be classified only as a corporation for federal income tax purposes, an LLC or partnership may elect whether to be classified as a partnership. A single-owner LLC is disregarded as a separate entity for federal income tax purposes unless it elects otherwise.

Texas does not have a state personal income tax. The Texas Legislature has replaced the Texas franchise tax on corporations and LLCs with a novel business entity tax called the "Margin Tax," which is imposed on all business entities other than general partnerships wholly owned by individuals and certain "passive entities." Essentially, the calculation of the Margin Tax is based on a taxable entity's, or unitary group's, gross receipts after deductions for either (x) compensation or (y) cost of goods sold, provided that the "tax base" for the Margin Tax may not exceed 70% of the entity's total revenues. This "tax base" is apportioned to Texas by multiplying the tax base by a fraction of which the numerator is Texas gross receipts and the denominator is aggregate gross receipts. The tax rate applied to the Texas portion of the tax base is 1% for all taxpayers, except a narrowly defined group of retail and wholesale businesses that will pay a ½ of 1% rate.

The enactment of the Margin Tax changes the calculus for entity selections, but not necessarily the result. The LLC has become more attractive as it can elect to be taxed as a corporation or partnership for federal income tax purposes and has the same Margin Tax treatment as most limited partnerships, but the uncertainties as to an LLC's treatment for self-employment purposes continue to restrict its desirability in some situations.

For the full version, please go to the Jackson Walker L.L.P. website, www.jw.com, where the full text is available at: http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1396.

2.
CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

EXCERPTED FROM: "Fiduciary Duties of Corporate Directors and Officers in Texas" – 43 Texas Journal of Business Law 45 (Spring 2009). Published on the JW website and full text available at: http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1230

Key Issues Covered:

- Fiduciary duties of directors and officers generally in both Texas and Delaware
- Fiduciary duties in insolvency situations
- Fiduciary duties regarding compensation
- Fiduciary duties regarding mergers and acquisitions
- Fiduciary duties regarding alternative entities

See also *"Recent Fiduciary Duty Cases Affecting Advice to Directors and Officers of Delaware and Texas Corporations"* – prepared for a February 12, 2010 program in Dallas at the UT School of Law 32nd Annual Conference on Securities Regulation and Business Law. Published on the JW website and full text available at: http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1344

The conduct of corporate directors and officers is subject to particular scrutiny in the context of executive compensation and other affiliated party transactions, business combinations (whether friendly or hostile), when the corporation is charged with illegal conduct, and when the corporation is insolvent or in the zone of insolvency. The high profile stories of how much corporations are paying their executive officers, corporate scandals, bankruptcies and related developments have further focused attention on how directors and officers discharge their duties, and have caused much reexamination of how corporations are governed and how they relate to their shareholders and creditors. Where the government intervenes (by investment or otherwise) or threatens to do so, the scrutiny intensifies, but the courts appear to resolve

the controversies by application of traditional principles while recognizing the 800-pound gorilla in the room.

The individuals who serve in leadership roles for corporations are fiduciaries in relation to the corporation and its owners. These troubled times make it appropriate to focus upon the fiduciary and other duties of directors and officers, including their duties of care and loyalty. Increasingly the courts are applying principals articulated in cases involving mergers and acquisitions ("*M&A*") to cases involving executive compensation, perhaps because both areas often involve conflicts of interest and self-dealing or because in Delaware, where many of the cases are tried, the same judges are writing significant opinions in both areas. Director and officer fiduciary duties are generally owed to the corporation and its shareholders, but when the corporation is insolvent, the constituencies claiming to be beneficiaries of those duties may expand to include the entity's creditors.

While federal securities laws and stock exchange listing requirements have mandated changes in corporate governance practices, our focus will be on state corporate statutes and common law. Our focus is in the context of entities organized under the applicable Delaware and Texas statutes.

For the full version, please go to the Jackson Walker L.L.P. website, www.jw.com, where the full text is available at: http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1230.

3.
MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

EXCERPTED FROM: "Acquisition Agreement Issues" – prepared for an October 8, 2010 program in New York at the Penn State Law and City Bar Center for CLE, New York City Bar, 7th Annual Institute on Corporate, Securities, and Related Aspects of Mergers and Acquisitions. Published on the JW website and full text available at:
http://images.jw.com/com/publications/1475.pdf

Key Issues Covered:

- Alternative structures for sales of businesses
- Successor liability
- Form of asset purchase agreement with commentary

See also *"Contractual Limitations on Seller Liability in M&A Transactions"* – prepared for an April 22, 2010 program in Denver at the ABA Section of Business Law Spring Meeting. Published on the JW website and full text available at:
http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1362

See also *"Challenges in Joint Venture Formation"* – prepared for the UT School of Law 32nd Annual Corporate Counsel Institute in Dallas on April 16 and in Houston on April 30, 2010. Published on the JW website and full text available at:
http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1376

Buying or selling a business in uncertain times, including the purchase of a division or a subsidiary, revolves around a purchase agreement between the buyer and the selling entity and sometimes its owners. Purchases of assets are characterized by the acquisition by the buyer of specified assets from an entity, which may or may not represent all or substantially all of its assets, and the assumption by the buyer of specified liabilities of the seller, which typically do not represent all of the liabilities of the seller. When

the parties choose to structure an acquisition as an asset purchase, there are unique drafting and negotiating issues regarding the specification of which assets and liabilities are transferred to the buyer, as well as the representations, closing conditions, indemnification and other provisions essential to memorializing the bargain reached by the parties. There are also statutory (e.g., bulk sales and fraudulent transfer statutes) and common law issues (e.g., de facto merger and other successor liability theories) unique to asset purchase transactions that could result in an asset purchaser being held liable for liabilities of the seller which it did not agree to assume.

A number of things can happen during the period between the signing of an asset purchase agreement and the closing of the transaction that can cause a buyer to have second thoughts about the transaction. For example, the buyer might discover material misstatements or omissions in the seller's representations and warranties, or events might occur, such as the filing of litigation or an assessment of taxes, that could result in a material liability or, at the very least, additional costs that had not been anticipated. There may also be developments that could seriously affect the future prospects of the business to be purchased, such as a significant downturn in its revenues or earnings or the adoption of governmental regulations that could adversely impact the entire industry in which the target operates.

The buyer initially will need to assess the potential impact of any such misstatement, omission or event. If a potential problem can be quantified, the analysis will be somewhat easier. However, the impact in many situations will not be susceptible to quantification, making it difficult to determine materiality and to assess the extent of the buyer's exposure. Whatever the source of the matter, the buyer may want to terminate the acquisition agreement or, alternatively, to close the transaction and seek recovery from the seller. If the buyer wants to terminate the agreement, how strong is its legal position and how great is the risk that the seller will dispute termination and commence a proceeding to seek damages or compel the buyer to proceed with the acquisition? If the buyer wants to close, could it be held responsible for the problem and, if so, what is the likelihood of recovering any resulting damage or loss against the seller? Will closing the transaction with knowledge of the misstatement, omission or event have any bearing on the likelihood of recovering? The dilemma facing a buyer under these circumstances seems to be occurring more often in recent years.

The issues to be dealt with by the parties to an acquisition transaction will depend somewhat on the structure of the transaction and the wording of the acquisition agreement. Regardless of the wording of the agreement, however, there are some situations in which a buyer can become responsible for a seller's liabilities under successor liability doctrines. The analysis of these issues is somewhat more complicated in the acquisition of assets, whether it be the acquisition of a division or the purchase of all the assets of a seller. The paper has the following topics:

This paper includes:

- An overview of the three basic forms of business acquisitions:
    - Statutory business combinations (e.g., mergers, consolidations and share exchanges);
    - Stock purchases; and
    - Asset purchases.
- Introductory matters concerning the reasons for structuring the transaction as an asset purchase.
- A discussion of the various successor liability doctrines and some suggested means of minimizing the risk.

- An initial draft of certain key provisions of an Asset Purchase Agreement which focuses on the definition and solution of the basic issues in any asset purchase: (1) what assets are being acquired and what liabilities are being assumed, (2) what assets and liabilities are being left behind, (3) what are the conditions of the obligations of the parties to consummate the transaction and (4) what are the indemnification obligations of the parties. While these matters are always deal specific, some generalizations can be made and common problems identified.

For the full version, please go to the Jackson Walker L.L.P. website, www.jw.com, where the full text is available at: http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1244.

4.
SECURITIES LAWS

EXCERPTED FROM: "Major Themes of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act" – 42 Texas Journal of Business Law 339 (Winter 2008). Published on the JW website and full text available at: http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1186

Key Issues Covered:

- Effects of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 ("SOX") on issuers, directors and professionals generally
- SOX audit committee provisions
- SOX auditor independence provisions
- SOX prohibitions on misleading statements to auditors
- SOX internal controls provisions
- Attorney responsibilities under SOX
- Letters to auditors regarding loss contingencies
- Attorney-client and work product privilege considerations

See also *"Perils of In-House Counsel"* – prepared for a July 22, 2010 program in San Antonio at the TexasBarCLE and Business Law and Corporate Counsel Sections of State Bar of Texas' Advanced In-House Counsel Course. Published on the JW website and full text available at: http://www.jw.com/site/jsp/publicationinfo.jsp?id=1430

The Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 ("SOX") was trumpeted by the politicians and in the media as a "tough new corporate fraud bill" in response to the corporate scandals that preceded it and as a means to protect investors by improving the accuracy and reliability of corporate disclosures. Among other things, SOX amended the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (the "1934 Act") and the Securities Act of 1933. Although SOX does have some specific provisions, and generally establishes some important public policy changes, it has been implemented in large part through rules adopted and to be adopted by the Securities and Exchange Commission ("SEC") and the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board ("PCAOB"), which have impacted auditing standards and have increased scrutiny on auditors' independence and procedures to verify company financial statement positions and representations. Further, while SOX is by its terms generally applicable only to public companies, its principles are being applied by the marketplace to privately held companies and nonprofit entities.

Following the enactment of SOX and the adoption of rules thereunder, the role of independent auditors in detecting financial statement fraud within public companies has received enhanced scrutiny. In turn, companies are expected both to implement controls for dealing with alleged fraud internally and to

provide their auditors with detailed information on a wide range of corporate issues. Companies involve legal counsel, both inside and outside, for a wide variety of tasks, from conducting investigations of alleged fraud to dealing with employee issues (including whistleblower complaints) and advising directors on their duties in connection with corporate transactions. Auditors are increasingly asking for information regarding these often privileged communications to supplement their reliance on management representations. Making such privileged information available to auditors, however, subjects companies to the risk of loss of attorney client and work product privileges, which can provide a road-map to success for adversaries in civil litigation.

Further, in providing such information to auditors, the provider must comply with the requirements of Section 303 of SOX and expanded Rule 13b2-2 under the 1934 Act adopted pursuant to SOX §303. The SOX §303 requirements specifically prohibit officers and directors, and "persons acting under [their] direction," from coercing, manipulating, misleading or fraudulently influencing an auditor "engaged in the performance of an audit" of the issuer's financial statements when the officer, director or other person "knew or should have known" that the action, if successful, could result in rendering the issuer's financial statements filed with the SEC materially misleading. Since attorneys and other mergers and acquisitions professionals representing a corporation are usually engaged by, and are acting at the direction of, its directors or officers, they are subject to the SOX §303 Requirements. The SEC has demonstrated its willingness to bring sanction proceedings against lawyers when they have been perceived to have failed in their responsibilities.

The SOX §303 requirements should influence an attorney in communicating with accountants, and reinforce the importance of providing meaningful information to auditors and clients. The SOX §303 requirements, however, should not be viewed as repudiating or supplanting the ABA Statement of Policy regarding Lawyers' Responses to Auditors' Requests for Information regarding client loss contingencies. Resulting from a compromise reached in 1976 between the lawyers and the accountants, this ABA Statement of Policy provides a framework under which lawyers can provide information to auditors regarding client loss contingencies in connection with their examination of client financial statements, while minimizing the risk of loss of attorney-client privilege in the process.

In addition, the requirements of SOX §307 are specifically applicable to attorneys. The SEC rules under SOX §307 generally provide that, in the event that an attorney has "credible evidence based upon which it would be unreasonable, under the circumstances, for a prudent and competent attorney not to conclude that it is reasonably likely that a material violation [of any U.S. law or fiduciary duty] has occurred, is ongoing, or is about to occur," the attorney has a duty to seek to remedy the problem by "reporting up the ladder" within the issuer to the issuer's chief legal officer, or to both the chief legal officer and the chief executive officer, or if those executives do not respond appropriately, to the issuer's board of directors or an appropriate committee thereof. SEC rulemaking and enforcement actions post-SOX attempt to place lawyers in the role of "gatekeepers" or "sentries of the marketplace" whose responsibilities include "ensuring that our markets are clean." These SEC actions will directly affect the role of the lawyer in dealing with clients, auditors, M&A professionals and others.

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Byron F. Egan is a partner of Jackson Walker L.L.P. in Dallas, Texas, where he practices corporate, financing, mergers and acquisitions, and securities law.

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