

3-5-2005

Executive Compensation: If There's a Problem, What's the Remedy? The Case for 'Compensation Disclosure and Analysis'

Jeffrey N. Gordon
Columbia, jgordon@law.columbia.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lsr.nellco.org/columbia_pllt



Part of the [Corporation and Enterprise Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gordon, Jeffrey N., "Executive Compensation: If There's a Problem, What's the Remedy? The Case for 'Compensation Disclosure and Analysis'" (2005). *Columbia Public Law & Legal Theory Working Papers*. Paper 0590.
http://lsr.nellco.org/columbia_pllt/0590

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Columbia Law School at NELCO Legal Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Columbia Public Law & Legal Theory Working Papers by an authorized administrator of NELCO Legal Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact tracy.thompson@nellco.org.

EUROPEAN CORPORATE GOVERNANCE
INSTITUTE (ECGI)

Law Working Paper No. 35/2005

and

COLUMBIA LAW SCHOOL

Law and Economics Research Paper No. 273

Executive Compensation: If There's a Problem,
What's the Remedy? The Case for 'Compensation
Disclosure and Analysis'

Jeffrey N. Gordon

Journal of Corporation Law, 2005

This paper can be downloaded free of charge from the
Social Science Research Network at:

<http://ssrn.com/abstract=686464>

Executive Compensation: If There's a Problem, What's the Remedy? The Case for "Compensation Disclosure and Analysis"

Jeffrey N. Gordon*

Draft of Feb. 25, 2005

Abstract

High levels of executive compensation have triggered an intense debate over whether compensation results primarily from competitive pressures in the market for managerial services or from managerial overreaching. Profs. Lucian Bebchuk and Jesse Fried have advanced the debate with their recent book, *Pay Without Performance: The Unfulfilled Promise of Executive Compensation*, which forcefully argues that the current compensation levels are best explained by managerial rent-seeking, not by arm's length bargaining designed to create the optimum pay and performance nexus. This paper expresses three sorts of reservations with their analysis and advances its own proposals. First, maximizing shareholder value is not, as a positive or normative matter, a sufficient framework for understanding the controversy or devising a remedy. Second, many of the compensation practices identified by Bebchuk and Fried as veritable "smoking guns" of managerial power may have benign explanations. Third, even accepting that the present corporate governance apparatus needs improvement in the executive compensation area, the better remedy is not a wholesale expansion of shareholder power, but a tailored series of measures designed to bolster the independence in fact of the compensation committee. Most important, the SEC should require proxy disclosure of a "Compensation Discussion and Analysis" statement ("CD&A") signed by the members of the compensation committee (or by the responsible independent directors for firms without a compensation committee). Such a CD&A ought to collect and summarize all compensation elements for each senior executive, providing bottom line analysis. This process "ownership," reputation-staking, and publicity will strengthen the committee's hand against managerial pressure and will elicit both shareholder and public responses that necessarily contribute to the compensation bargain. In addition to the CD&A, serious thought should be given to a shareholder approval vote on the CD&A, following the new UK practice.

* Alfred W. Bressler Professor of Law, Columbia Law School; research associate, European Corporate Governance Institute. Contact at: jgordon@law.columbia.edu. This paper benefited from presentations at the Columbia Symposium on Executive Compensation, a Columbia Law School Faculty Workshop, and from comments by Lucian Bebchuk, Brian Cheffins, Scott Hemphill, Bevis Longstreth, and Mark Roe.

Draft 2/25/05

Executive Compensation: Executive Compensation: If There's a Problem, What's the Remedy? The Case for "Compensation Disclosure and Analysis"

Jeffrey N. Gordon

Columbia Law School
European Corporate Governance Institute

There is a clear thesis in *Pay Without Performance: The Unfulfilled Promise of Executive Compensation* by Lucian Bebchuk and Jesse Fried. It is that the high levels of executive compensation are explained by managerial rent-seeking, not by arm's length bargaining designed to create the optimum pay and performance nexus. The authors support this conclusion with three sorts of evidentiary claims:

First, various compensation terms, in particular non-indexed stock options, seem poorly designed for the purpose of connecting pay and performance.

Second, "camouflage" – hiding the ball from shareholders through opaque or incomplete disclosure – characterizes certain important forms of compensation that are large in amount but not linked to performance, most particularly, pension benefits and deferred compensation.

Third, various governance arrangements make it unlikely that the board will act as a good faith bargaining agent for the shareholders in an arm's length process. There are four salient elements in the faulty governance story:

- the CEO's influence in the selection and retention of directors, which undercuts director independence in the bargaining process;
- by contrast, the lack of shareholder influence in the director selection process, which, if otherwise, could buttress director independence;
- interlocks among boards of directors that lead to back-scratching among members of self-interested business elites who share a mutual self-interest in escalating levels of executive compensation, and
- the use of compensation consultants with disabling conflicts of interest, in particular, provision to the firm of a wide-range of compensation consulting services.

In reflecting upon the Bebchuk and Fried analysis, sometimes critically, I want to be clear about the importance of book's contribution in comprehensively setting out the

different elements of the compensation package and in raising many serious questions about compensation practices and the corporate governance institutions that have countenanced them. As one of my colleagues said after reading the book, something certainly seems “fishy.” The question, of course, is how fishy and what to do about it.

My concerns about the book fall into three categories, first, the normative foundations of the project; second, the evidentiary case, and third, the remedy. In particular, Bebchuk and Fried have only partially captured the reason why the public is concerned about executive compensation. It is not only the alleged disconnect between pay and performance, but the absolute level, especially in relation to other social frames of value. The authors may also have overstated the evidentiary case for the pay-for-performance breakdown, since many of the practices they question may be explained, at least in part, by factors other than managerial rent-seeking. The nub of the problem is that the “right” level and mechanism of executive compensation is not self-revealing. Thus the remedy is key. I argue that for the large diffusely-owned public firm, we are likely to get a more satisfactory outcome through a process overseen by a compensation committee of independent directors that is required to justify compensation practices and levels as part of the firm’s annual disclosure. In addition to state law fiduciary duty monitoring of appropriate process in compensation setting, I argue that the SEC should require proxy disclosure of a “Compensation Discussion and Analysis” statement (“CD&A”) signed by the members of the compensation committee (or by the responsible independent directors for firms without a compensation committee). Such a CD&A ought to collect and summarize all compensation elements for each senior executive, providing bottom line analysis. This process “ownership,” reputation-staking, and publicity will strengthen the committee’s hand against managerial pressure and will elicit both shareholder and public responses that become part of the social construction of value that is necessarily part of the compensation bargain. In addition to the CD&A, serious thought should be given to a shareholder approval vote on the CD&A, following the new UK practice. Such a vote, an expression of shareholder views that would not formally affect any of the corporation’s legal obligations, could be required by SEC rule, by a change in state corporate law, by a court as a condition for obtaining business judgment review of compensation arrangements, or by a shareholder initiated bylaw amendment for particular firms. My tentative view is that the US practice of “just vote no” campaigns in director reelections could function as a substitute in cases where shareholders felt that compensation committees had not satisfactorily explained high compensation levels in a CD&A.

I. Normative Foundations

What is the basis for the setting of executive compensation? Bebchuk and Fried are true believers in the desirability of the pay-for-performance nexus. As they say, “We would accept compensation at current or even higher levels as long as such compensation, through its incentives effects, actually serves shareholders.” (8) They seem to suggest that the “outrage constraint” that limits managerial rent extraction would operate only where compensation practices disserve shareholders. (64-66) In their conservatism Bebchuk and Fried may be underplaying a significant source of the agita

over compensation levels, namely, the widespread unease over the high levels of executive compensation, high in an absolute sense, irrespective of a satisfactory pay and performance nexus.

A useful example to illustrate this is the controversy over Harvard University's compensation of the managers of its \$20-plus billion endowment and the University's palpable embarrassment in responding to the outrage of some alumni.¹ Two particular managers each received approximately \$35 million for 2003, which we know because they are the most highly paid employees of Harvard, as revealed in its tax filings. In all, the five top investment managers received approximately \$100 million. For 2004, the top two managers each received approximately \$25 million; the top six, approximately \$80 million.² These are handsome salaries indeed; by comparison, the president of Harvard receives approximately \$500,000. Yet there seems to be no reason to dispute the pay-for-performance nexus for these managers, to think that their high compensation results from their untoward influence over the worthies who sit on the Harvard Corporation. Among other things, Harvard's endowment performance has been superlative, at the very top of university endowment performance over a 10 year period, in good markets and difficult markets.³ The two highest paid managers delivered particularly stellar results for their respective portions of the endowment, and their compensation is rigorously performance based. Their fixed annual compensation is \$400,000; additional compensation is proportional to performance above their sectoral benchmarks, and the compensation formula includes a "claw back" of previously received compensation for subpar subsequent performance to discourage excessive risk-taking.

Alumni objected that these compensation levels were nevertheless excessive: "inappropriate, indefensible, and corrosive to the values of the University" and called for compensatory measures in financial aid and loan forgiveness. In responding to the alumni, Harvard observed that there is a robust market for successful investment managers and that the university is only meeting the market price. This claim seems validated by press accounts of Wall Street firms that lose highly compensated superstar

¹ The matter is summarized in "Extraordinary Bonuses," Harvard Magazine, March-April 2004, available at www.harvardmagazine.com/on-line/030422.html. See also <http://www.haa.harvard.edu/pgo/> (posting letter from Harvard Management Co. describing recent performance). For a discussion of the University's responses to the protesting alumni, see Zachary M. Seward, "HMC Salaries Fell Last Year," The Harvard Crimson, Nov. 23, 2004, available at www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=504718 (responses by University Treasurer, Vice President for Alumni Affairs and Development, and head of Harvard Management Corporation). Indeed, Harvard did revise its compensation formula downwards in response to the protests. For 2004 results, see Charles Stein, "Harvard Pays Top 2 Money Managers \$25M; Endowment Salaries Down from Last Year; Critics Call System Lavish," Boston Globe, Nov. 23, 2004, D1, 2004 WL 99991847; "Compensation Controversy, Continued," Harvard Magazine, March-April 2005, at 60 (specifying compensation payments and performance vs. benchmarks). The denouement was the 2005 departure of the Harvard investment management team for greener hedge fund pastures. See TAN --- infra,

² Some observers speculated that although the compensation of top managers declined, other managers received substantially more, since superior returns were allocated among several sectors. See Zachary M. Seward, note 1 supra.

³ Indeed, Harvard uses the superior results to attract planned gifts. See, e.g., <http://www.haa.harvard.edu/pgo/> (visited Nov. 14, 2004) (comparing performance of Harvard-managed charitable remainder trust with market benchmark).

traders to hedge funds, which presumably are paying even more.⁴ And finally, Harvard noted that in-house management is cheaper than the alternative: outsourcing investment management to a firm that will itself pay the managers \$35 million or more. This will, of course, camouflage the high level of compensation.

The public objections to Harvard's \$35 million (or \$25 million) salaries are unfathomable on the Bebchuk and Fried account. Yet surely it is the absolute level, not the concern over the performance/pay nexus, that has agitated the Harvard alums. It is absolute level of the compensation that puts Stephen Jobs and Michael Eisner on the covers of magazines. Yes, we react if pay is outsized and the performance subpar, but the public's reaction is not necessarily proportionate to that shareholder concern.

Notice how this potentially confounds a significant part of the Bebchuk and Fried argument: what if the camouflage is designed to hide pay levels not from the board or the shareholders but from the public? If so, this undercuts their evidentiary case. Similarly, Bebchuk and Fried claim that conventional options – the ones without some sort of indexing – provided managers with “the best of high rents and low outrage.” (162) Yet the huge payoffs occasionally produced by this strategy have generated considerable popular outrage and are widely cited in the reformers case. It is not the Black-Scholes value of the options that is reported on the magazine covers but rather their realization upon exercise. Shifting to a system that tightens the pay and performance nexus could well produce more of the outrage-inspiring covers for CEOs who perform well. No matter how stellar the performance, how much is any manager worth?

The more general point is that executive compensation operates in at least two different worlds, one that focuses on maximizing shareholder value, the other that responds to concerns about the social implications of wealth and power. The strategies that may be desirable for one world may not suit the other. A system of simultaneous constraints may generate conflicting institutional results.

II. Evidence

An analysis of Bebchuk and Fried's marshalling of the evidence starts with this premise: even if we assume that the exclusive consideration in setting executive compensation is shareholder welfare, we do not know, in the abstract, what the right level

⁴ Many of Harvard Management Company's portfolio managers have left for the “greener pastures” of hedge funds, see “Endowment Gains: Last Hurrah?” Harvard Magazine 56-57 (Nov. 2004), and in January 2005, the entire team announced its plans to leave. See TAN – infra. One the other hand, Yale's Chief Investment Officer, who has overseen endowment returns that exceed even Harvard's over the past decade, earned less than \$1 million in fiscal year 2004. See Jeff Muskus, “Ivies pay different salaries: Investment managers at the University earn less than their Cambridge counterparts,” Yale Daily News (Oct. 22, 2004), available at <http://www.yaledailynews.com/article.asp?AID=26885> (visited Nov. 14, 2004). See also Jeff Muskus, “Harvard alums criticize money managers' salaries,” Yale Daily News, Dec. 8, available at www.yaledailynews.com/article.asp?AID=27656 (visited Dec. 10, 2004). (reporting on Yale vs. Harvard comparisons in money management and compensation; Harvard alumni and faculty objections to Harvard compensation system).

of executive compensation is. We have given up the medieval idea of a “just price” for market-traded goods and so too in the market for executive services. This injects a certain level of ambiguity in the interpretation of some of the evidence.

Here’s a concrete problem: what is the right level of *fixed* compensation, for example, in this market? Fried and Bebchuk start with a particular conception of the pay/performance link: performance (and thus compensation) should be evaluated exclusively in terms of how much the CEO’s current effort and decisionmaking adds to the value of the firm. This view assumes that the major point of compensation is to reward the current managers in accordance with their marginal revenue product. They therefore regard high levels of fixed compensation as suspect, noting as well that such payoffs are often camouflaged through arcane pension formulas and deferred compensation. But a respectable body of labor economics sees CEO compensation as part of the prize for winning a competition, a “tournament,” among other managers for the CEO’s job, and understands that prize, including its rewards for prior effort, as producing decades of striving among executives throughout the organization.⁵ Tournaments arise in situations where it is difficult (costly) to measure exactly individual performance among a cohort of employees; instead, the firm promises to promote the “best,” which is easier to determine. Employees exchange some part of their current implicit wage in exchange for the chance to compete in the next round for a better job with higher income. So it is easy to imagine that an optimal CEO pay package might well consist of a large fixed payout (for prior effort) as well as an incentive-based component (for current effort), not so different, at least in form, to present arrangements. In other words, the relevant measure of performance for executive compensation is not only what the CEO delivers here and now, but how the organization performs over time because of this prize. On this view, the retirement packages and other fixed compensation elements may not have the evidentiary weight that Bebchuk and Fried suggest in showing the breakdown of arm’s length bargaining.

The prime exhibit in their case, however, is the proliferation of the conventional stock option, which they say is insufficiently performance-based. If a pay/performance

⁵ On “tournament theory,” see, e.g., Edward P. Lazear & Sherwin Rosen, Rank-Order Tournaments as Optimum Labor Contracts, 89 J. Pol. Econ. 841 (1981); Ronald G. Ehrenberg & Michael L. Borganno, Do Tournaments Have Incentive Effects?, 98 J. Pol. Econ. 1307 (1990); Edward P. Lazear, Personnel Economics 25-37 (1995). For applications to law firms, see, e.g., Marc Galanter & Thomas Palay, Tournament of Lawyers: The Transformation of the Big Law Firm (1991); David B. Wilkins and G. Mitu Gulati, Reconceiving The Tournament Of Lawyers: Tracking, Seeding, And Information Control In The Internal Labor Markets Of Elite Law Firms, 84 Va. L. Rev. 1581 (1998). A popular account of tournament theory is Robert H. Frank & Phillip J. Cook, The Winner-Take-All Society (1995). The tournament literature is also invoked in Iman Anabtawi, Overlooked Alternatives in the Pay Without Performance Debate (Jan. 2005 draft on file with author).

Tournament theory is conventionally employed to explain the internal labor market for CEO’s, which might seem to make it an incomplete account of a market that looks to external candidates for approximately 25% of CEO hires. See Rakesh Khurana, Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs 46-47, 245 n.54 (2002). Yet if many CEOs are promoted from within and if most CEO candidates spend the substantial part of their careers at a single firm, then the tournament set up could influence the general structure of payoffs in the relevant market.

nexus were truly the goal, boards would design a much better instrument that did not reward managers for general market appreciation or other windfalls -- for example, an option that rewards performance net of general market returns or performance net of sector returns. They see the widespread use of incentive-defective options as evidence that boards are not bargaining at arm's length. There are problems with this view, both at the level of theory and counter-evidence.

A. Stock Options Critique -- Theory-based Concerns

First, the Bebchuk and Fried picture is insufficiently appreciative of performance-based possibilities using conventional stock options. Start with a simple non-stock option example, a fixed salary of \$2 million, irrespective of performance. Now add a simple term: that the contract is for a one year term, so that compensation in the following year could increase, decrease, or, most importantly, could end, upon the CEO's termination. The contingencies associated with this notionally non-performance based pay add a significant performance linkage, a powerful element of firm-specific option value. Now turn to conventional options, and think of the contingent elements: the number of options the board granted this year, the number that might be granted next year; the vesting schedule for this year's grant, and then for next year's; whether the vesting is performance-based. Add as well another important contingent element, the possibility of CEO termination -- meaning no more option grants and perhaps a forfeiture of granted but not vested options. Thus the conventional options contract begins to have a powerful firm specific performance nexus.

Second, there may be good reasons for the board to use conventional options, apart from the historically-favored accounting and tax treatment. Drafting non-conventional options is costly, not just in the scrivener's sense but also in their uncertain incentive effects. Indexing the option price to the S&P 500 may insufficiently reward a management team in a slow growing sector, yet identifying the appropriate sectoral index, or fashioning one from a group of comparable companies will be a source of negotiation, uncertainty, and potentially perverse effects, giving managers incentives to deploy assets in way that arbitrages between the index in their options and higher growth opportunities.⁶

Tailoring options to reward only firm-specific performance raises what might be called the Enron problem: the gains to managers from earnings manipulation are increasing in the degree of stock-based pay/performance sensitivity. With conventional options, managers have incentives to increase the firm's share price but also have downside risk as well: if they cheat and get caught, they lose their participation in general market appreciation. With an indexed option, 100 percent of the managerial upside comes from firm specific factors; "average" performance means no payoff. Managers receive the full benefit of aggressive accounting and have less to lose if they are caught. Moreover, if we assume that managers will receive more of the indexed options to

⁶ Some compensation consultants are skeptical about the sectoral approach, especially for smaller firms. To paraphrase one particular reaction: "For Fortune 100 firms, generating a peer group for a measure of comparative performance is feasible, though controversial. For S&P 1500 firms, it's much harder."

compensate them for the lost value of conventional options, then we have given managers very high powered incentives to increase the stock price by any means necessary.⁷ The mitigation of this problem will impose additional monitoring costs both internal and external to the firm and additional public enforcement costs.⁸

In short, a board bargaining at arm's length could couple conventional options with firm specific performance elements to create a synthetic indexed option functionally similar to Bebchuk and Fried's ideal and perhaps less subject to uncertainties of design and implementation. In other words, it may be cheaper and as effective to create an option from simple menu elements. Looking at the form of the option could mislead us as to the board's conduct. Moreover, the use of indexed options (or the synthetic substitute) is not a cost-free substitution because of the new moral hazard problems that the new form gives rise to. The efficient compensation package must be determined in light of the monitoring and enforcement opportunity set.

B. Counter-evidence

There are several pieces of evidence contrary to the Bebchuk and Fried view that managerial rent extraction plays a commanding role in executive compensation. This counter-evidence relates to the board/CEO relationship and to the heavy use of conventional stock options in compensating non-top executive employees.

⁷ Here's an example: Assume that (i) general market returns are 10% in the period, (ii) without earnings manipulation the company would report "average" earnings that would yield a 10% return, but (iii) with earnings manipulation the company would report "high" earnings that would yield a 15% return. With conventional options, management still gains substantially from honest reporting and only marginally from manipulation. With indexed options, management gains nothing from honest reporting but hugely from manipulation.

⁸ See Jeffrey N. Gordon, *Governance Failures of the Enron Board and the New Information Order of Sarbanes-Oxley*, 35 Conn. L. Rev. 1125 (2003) (strong complementarity between high powered monitoring and high powered incentives).

John E. Core et al defend conventional options as appropriate precisely because they deliver significant compensation not tied to the firm's performance. More generally, they argue that executive incentives in the US are principally structured through "portfolio incentives" based on effects of firm performance to CEO wealth (meaning to the CEO's stock-related portfolio) rather than "pay incentives," based on the effects of firm performance on annual compensation. So the "pay for performance" rhetoric may divert attention away from focusing on the sensitivity to CEO wealth to firm performance. As the CEO's ownership in the firm increases, meaning as wealth sensitivity increases, the CEO must receive an increasing amount of cash or other compensation to offset the increasing risk. This compensation may be readily delivered through conventional options. See John E. Core, Wayne R. Guay & Randall S. Thomas, *Is U.S. CEO Compensation Inefficient Pay Without Performance?*, available on SSRN. Their intriguing argument has a certain ponzi scheme element to it, however. The more firm-specific compensation that managers obtain in period one, the more non-firm specific compensation they can justify in period two. At no point is there a sense that since managers are playing with "house money," they may not need dramatic compensation for risk-bearing. I have elsewhere argued that setting the right level of stock-based compensation has an "impossibility theorem" quality about it. See Jeffrey N. Gordon, *supra*, 35 Conn. L. Rev. at ---. Adjusting the CEOs risk preferences to match that of the diversified public shareholders does not fit comfortably with the use of stock-based compensation to incent and reward for superior performance.

1. *Increasing board power.* Perhaps most serious contrary evidence is the inverse relationship between corporate governance improvement and higher managerial payouts over the 1990s. One of the important substitutes for the aggressive market in corporate control of the 1980s was the more focused, more attentive, more engaged board.⁹ Board behavior shifted in part because of legal prodding, as the Delaware courts required stronger indicia of board independence and diligence as the price of board power to veto a hostile bid, and because of a shifting consensus among business elites about the greater importance of board independence and engagement. Heightened board activism manifested itself in a number of high profile CEO firings by rebellious boards throughout the 1990s. There seems a widespread consensus that whatever the failings of boards circa 1995, say, they were much more effective governance mechanism and more effective in constraining managers than boards of previous decades. So if managerial power is the principal explanatory variable for escalating pay, the timing is odd.

2. *Increasing CEO turnover.* Moreover, the managerial power story fits uncomfortably with the increased rate of CEO turnover and the shortening of average CEO tenure in the period. A study by Booz Allen Hamilton of CEO turnover in the 1995-2001 period for the 2500 largest companies worldwide shows a near doubling of the rate of CEO turnover from 1995 to 2000 and a trebling of the rate of explicitly performance-related turnovers. The number of firings may not be large, 25 in 1995, or 1 percent, vs. 80 in 2000, or 3 percent, but the shockwaves of a CEO termination are powerful and the 3-fold increase over a short period of general prosperity illustrates the board's increasingly quick and harsh judgments. Moreover, there is ample evidence that the terminations were sensitive to poor performance, both in industry relative terms and absolute terms.¹⁰ In virtue of these higher turnover rates, average CEO tenure over the 1995-2000 period shortened from 9.5 years to 7.3 years and the average tenure of fired CEOs shrank from 7.0 years to 4.6 years. Using another methodology, Rakesh Khurana comes to a similar conclusion about the increasing fragility of CEO tenure, estimating that a CEO appointed between 1990 and 1996 is three times more likely to be fired than a CEO appointed before 1980 *for the same level of corporate performance*.¹¹

This evidence on the increased rate of CEO turnover and firings is direct evidence on the increase in the board's power vis-à-vis the CEO during the period. Moreover, the evidence makes it clear that the termination threat is indeed an implicit contract provision and thus adds a critical pay for performance element.¹²

⁹ This draws from Jeffrey N. Gordon, *Boards (and the Mechanisms of Director Independence)* (working paper on file with the author, Dec. 2004).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Rakesh Khurana, *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs* 60 (2002).

¹² The shorter tenure and quicker firings may independently explain why CEO compensation has increased. If the "prize" necessary to promote the tournament remains constant but the time period over which it can be paid out becomes shorter, then compensation will increase. If termination severely diminishes a CEO's human capital (few fired CEOs ever subsequently become CEOs at other firms), then even large severance payments can be seen as compensatory. A large severance payment can make it easier for a board that wants to treat the CEO "fairly" (if only to make it easier to recruit a capable successor) to terminate the CEO.

It is also the case that board's have increasingly turned to outsiders as replacement CEOs and pay them more than inside candidates, which may suggest greater board vigilance and the functioning of a market in

3. *Belief in the value of a superstar CEO.* There is, of course, an alternative explanation for extraordinarily high CEO pay – that boards drank the 1990s kool-aid of believing that a superstar CEOs could deliver outsize performance improvements. Rakesh Khurana has a good book title that sums up the phenomenon, *Searching for A Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs*. If the board starts from that mindset – that a particular CEO candidate can make the best decisions and create an especially innovative and productive environment within the firm -- then high pay levels ought not be a surprise.

4. *Alternative explanations for use of conventional stock options.* An important evidentiary fact on conventional stock options is their widespread use outside of the top management context. This phenomenon is inconsistent with the view that managerial rent extraction explains their proliferation. A recent Jensen and Murphy paper reports that for the typical S&P 500 firm, throughout the 1992-2002 period the overwhelming share of employee stock options, both by value and number, were granted to employees other than the top 5 senior executives.¹³ In 2002, for example, a typical year, 91% of the grants by Black-Scholes option value (81% by number of options), were granted to this lower tier of employees. This skew in favor of non-senior management employees increased throughout the 1990s. There are two explanations that may fit this pattern better than the managerial rent extraction hypothesis. First, it may be that boards believe conventional options are valuable in motivating employees on a shareholder wealth rationale.¹⁴ To be sure, the effort and decisions of lower level managers and other employees will ordinarily have minimal effect on the stock price. Nevertheless, in making the share price a focal point, conventional options may help coordinate employee effort around a common goal.¹⁵ This is because “raw” stock prices are a credible and common referent for the business prospects of the firm. Publicly reported financial information is often hard to interpret, in part, because as even a casual reader of financial statements can see, the adjustments, assumptions, and footnotes are a barrier to straightforward interpretation. The stock price distills information, reduces management's capacity to spin the facts, and communicates whether the firm is doing relatively well or poorly. It may be that an “indexed” or “filtered” stock price would make the signal less

CEO services.. See Mark Huson, Mark, Robert Parrino and Laura Starks, Internal Monitoring Mechanisms and CEO Turnover: A Long Term Perspective, 56 *Journal of Finance* 2265 (2001); Benjamin E. Hermalin, *Trends in Corporate Governance* (U.C. Berkeley W.P. 2003), available on SSRN.

¹³ Michael C. Jensen & Kevin J. Murphy (with Eric G. Wruck), *Remuneration: Where we've been, how we got to here, what are the problems, and how to fix them*, Harvard Business School NOM Research Paper 37-38 (Tables 6 and 7) No. 04-28, July 2004, available on SSRN.

¹⁴ An alternative regulatory arbitrage hypothesis is more in keeping with Bebchuk and Fried: until 2003, the stock exchanges exempted “broad-based” stock option plans from shareholder approval requirement, so top managers who wanted to minimize shareholder oversight of executive stock options simply expanded the size of the option pie. Still, the ethos of employee stock ownership is likely to have exerted independent force, since it runs through the contribution of employer stock to 401(k)'s and was prominently featured as part of the Silicon Valley success story.

¹⁵ See Jeffrey N. Gordon, *Employee Stock Ownership in Economic Transitions: The Case of United Air Lines*, in *Corporate Governance: The State of the Art and Emerging Research* (Klaus Hopt, Mark Roe & Eddy Wymeersch, eds.) (Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).

observable and verifiable; this could be particularly important for employees with less financial sophistication.

A second explanation is that boards may believe that the role of stock options is to help “share” enterprise gains with the firm’s principal stakeholders, the employees. This turns Bebchuk and Fried’s argument on its head: conventional options are better than indexed options just because most of the value consists in market appreciation, a “bonus” deriving from general economic factors rather than firm specific performance. Earnings growth was higher in the 1980s than the 1990s, but prices exploded in the 1990s because of a marketwide decline in the equity premium: stock options were the vehicle through which employees (including managers in disproportionate ways) shared in the bonanza. This view also fits Kevin Murphy’s observation that boards generally “perceived” that the cost to shareholders of conventional stock options was small, given favorable accounting treatment.¹⁶ If so, and if stakeholders collect on a conventional option if and only if the shareholders also benefit (unlike an indexed option), why not share the bounty with employees?¹⁷

The belief in the value (or virtue) of stock options and conventional options in particular may explain widespread business support for legislative proposals that would limit the proposed mandatory expensing of options to those granted to the top managers, not to the rank and file. Putting aside the merits of such legislation more generally, it does suggest sincere belief in the value of conventional options that transcends narrow managerial interests.¹⁸

5. *Egregious cases and typical cases.* Part of what fuels the sense that the executive compensation setting process is seriously flawed are the high profile cases of exceptionally large payouts or mega-stock option grants, particularly where the firm’s subsequent performance is subpar if not disastrous. The generic egregious case is option repricing, in which the firm’s declining stock price has pushed the option grant so far out of the money that the only way to give the options significant value is to reset the

¹⁶ Kevin J. Murphy, Explaining Executive Compensation: Managerial Power vs. the Perceived Cost of Stock Options, 69 U. Chi. L. Rev. 847 (2002)

¹⁷ See Margaret M. Blair & Lynn A. Stout, A Team Production Theory of Corporate Law, 85 Va. L. Rev. 247, 275, 278 (1999).

¹⁸ The case for expensing all options is theoretically compelling, yet I can see opportunistic, even redistributivist, reasons for favoring the line-drawing in the proposed legislation. Managers certainly believe that markets will evaluate expensed options differently from non-expensed but fully-disclosed options; the income statement has manna that a footnoted balance sheet does not. The consequence of expensing options is likely to be a cutback for many employees of real compensation – many fewer options (or a substitution of many fewer shares of restricted stock), but no offsetting increase in cash compensation. A relevant example is the widespread cutbacks in post-retirement health benefits in anticipation of the 1993 effective date of SFAS 106, which shifted accounting treatment of such benefits from a cash flow basis, “pay as you go,” to a charge that reflected the discounted present value of expected future costs. See Jensen & Murphy (With Wruck), note – supra, at 40-41. Shareholders may have had a more accurate picture of the firm’s financial position because of SFAS 106 (though cash payouts would not have changed had benefits remained constant), but employees and retirees lost benefits. For some evidence of the cutback in stock option grants to rank-and-file employees, see Eric Dash, “Time Warner Stops Granting Stock Options to Most of Staff,” N.Y. Times, Feb. 19, 2005, at C1 (discussing other firms as well).

exercise price. Thus Bebchuk and Fried seem to regard repricings as the poster child of “pay for non-performance.” (164-68). Indeed, this view has been so widely shared that the accounting rules were changed in 1998 to require the expensing of repriced options.¹⁹

Failing managers grasping for more is surely the dark side of option repricing. But at least in theory, this practice may also have a bright side, in which option repricing is a tool to retain key managers and valued employees in tough times. A recent paper by financial economists Chidambaran and Prabhala looks systematically at the repricing phenomena and suggests there is more to the bright side than Bebchuk and Fried’s account would suggest.²⁰ They find that the typical repricer is a young, rapidly growing firm facing a sudden shock to growth and profitability. Repricing firms are also very likely to experience high CEO turnover, more so than control firm with similar shortfalls in performance. Very commonly the repricing is limited to non-CEO managers; indeed, in the median case, two-thirds of the repriced options are held by non-executive employees. In other words, this potentially abusive compensation practice is not driven in most cases by managerial rent extraction.

6. *A counter-history.* The run-up in executive stock options has a history in tension with the managerial power hypothesis. One important historical strand relates to hostile takeovers; another, to the dot.com boom/bubble.

First, on the relevance of hostile takeovers: the large stock option grants of the 1990s are at least in part an accommodative mechanism to state law changes that gave managers and boards increasing power to resist hostile bids. In forthcoming work, I summarize the story in this way: .

In the 1990s the independent board came to be heralded as the solution to a three way paradox. First, shareholder wealth maximization gained increased acceptance as the ultimate corporate objective and also the ultimate measure of managerial performance. Second, business elites were increasingly successful in persuading the courts to permit far-reaching defensive measures against a hostile bid. Third, (and perhaps paradoxically) hostile bids came to be seen as a too costly a way to solve the managerial agency problem. The independent board could resolve this tri-lemma by maneuvers in the markets for managerial services that benchmarked managerial performance in terms of stock market prices. This was expressed both in executive compensation contracts that heavily used stock-based compensation and in greater reliance on stock market returns in CEO termination decisions. These moves, in turn, produced two immediately visible developments: first, the highest level of CEO compensation in US business history and second, the shortest average CEO tenure.²¹

Particularly important to this account is the way that stock options were folded into severance arrangements, or “golden parachutes.” A “change in control” triggered the

¹⁹ Kevin J. Murphy, Stock-Based Pay in New Economy Firms, 34 J. Acct’g & Econ. 129 (2003).

²⁰ N.K. Chidambaran and N.R. Prabhala, Executive Stock Option Repricing: Creating a Mountain Out Of A Molehill? EFA 2003 Annual Conference Paper No. 797. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=423463>

²¹ Jeffrey N. Gordon, Boards (and the Mechanisms of Director Independence), working paper, Nov. 2004.

immediate vesting of options that had been granted but whose vesting was scheduled to occur over a multi-year period subject to various contingencies. This would radically shift managerial incentives in the face of an uninvited bid. In general, many believed that significant stock option grants would align shareholder and managerial interests and thereby provide a substitute for the market in corporate control in controlling managerial agency problems and thus in improving shareholder welfare. That their beliefs proved to have been at best partially correct does not negate their sincerity. Alternatively, such stock option grants, especially in the golden parachute context, can be understood as a shareholder repurchase of the takeover resistance endowment that state legislatures and courts gave to managers in the 1980s, a rational holdup payment. If boards were not acting solely in shareholder interests, then the desire to preserve board power, not just managerial power, was a significant part of the story.

A second strand of counter- history is the influence on executive compensation of the 1990s high tech/dot.com booms. Using large stock option grants in lieu of cash, so-called “new economy” firms, especially high tech and dot.com startups, became increasingly successful at recruiting top managers from “bricks and mortar” companies. During the boom, these option grants were extremely valuable. The compensation practices of new economy firms had a strong influence on all other firms in the 1990s, as stock options became an increasingly large part of compensation packages.²² Because of the accounting treatment, stock options grants seemed a cheaper way of enhancing compensation, and the competitive recruitment pressures pushed the size of stock option grants. The compensation-increasing influence of new economy firms in the 1990s is consistent with the fall in executive compensation after the collapse of the dot.com bubble in 2000. For CEOs in the S&P 500 firms, average compensation fell, and by 2002, the percentage of stock-related compensation fell as well.²³ Perhaps managerial pay should have fallen further, particularly as it became clear there were fewer lucrative new economy options, but this element of the history still reduces the role of managerial power in the story.

III. A Remedy

The determination of executive compensation will necessarily be problematic. The market for executives, especially CEOs, is “thin” (not many buyers and sellers at a given moment), “lumpy”(CEO services are not divisible; they come attached to a long career built by substantial human capital investments), and relational (consisting of an extended course of performance whose objectives and measures will vary over time). Thus there will be no spot market prices, discernable, say, by looking up the daily stock

²² Murphy shows that new economy firms led the way with stock-related compensation in the 1990s with the old economy firms following. In a 1992-2001 time series of the stock-related percentage of compensation, he shows that for both new economy and old economy firms the percentage of stock-related compensation was steadily increasing but for any given year, the new economy stock-related percentage was higher. See Kevin J. Murphy, Stock-Based Pay in New Economy Firms, 34 J. Acct'g & Econ. 129, 132 (2003) (Table 1).

²³ Michael C. Jensen & Kevin Murphy (with Eric G. Wruck), Remuneration, *supra* note 13, at 31 (Figure 3).

tables. In setting compensation levels, boards will inevitably look to comparable firm benchmarks and will rarely believe that a CEO they wish to hire or retain is less than average, or even just average. It is a “positional” market as well, in that senior managers evaluate compensation in relative terms as well as absolute levels; pay is a positional good subject to envy. Moreover, pay levels derive in part from the social construction of value, meaning that the parties’ sense of appropriate compensation derives from positive and negative social responses. A simple demonstration of social signaling in the pay-setting process is the well known example of the 1994 tax law change that denied the deductibility of non-performance related compensation above \$1 million. The consequence of what was meant to be a tightening of “runaway” executive compensation was a general increase in straight salary, as the \$1 million cap became a floor for many firms, and an explosion in conventional stock options, which qualified as “performance related.” (72-73)²⁴ The legal “reform” gave salience and legitimacy to particular compensation levels and practices in a way that affected both managers and boards.

Bebchuk and Fried have generated a prima facie case that managerial power plays a significant role in the setting of executive compensation, especially CEO compensation, but I doubt they would reject the importance of market influences as well. Their point is that there is “too much” managerial power and thus significant rent extraction. Some of my earlier discussion is to the effect that “maybe not as much as they think,” though I would not deny the underlying concern. Undoubtedly there are egregious cases of compensation excess in which managers have gotten the better of boards and shareholders. Is it necessarily the case that managerial rent extraction runs rampant across the broad range of public companies? Upon inspection, some potentially abusive practices may also have benign, even attractive, explanations. Thus, in addition to uncertainty about the “right” level for executive compensation, there may also be uncertainty about the level of managerial overreaching and board complaisance. This is where the question of remedy becomes critical.

In one sense, Bebchuk and Fried are conservative, in that they call for improved corporate governance to address the executive compensation issue, a remedy internal to the firm, one that empowers shareholders, not a remedy that looks to substantive government regulation over the level of executive pay.²⁵ On the other hand, their solutions are far-reaching, even radical, because the proposed empowerment of shareholders would change the governance of the firm quite significantly in areas unrelated to executive compensation. In addition to supporting shareholder approval for specific problematic elements, such as equity based plans or “suspect” compensation terms (196-98), Bebchuk and Fried favor general expansion of shareholder power so as to make directors directly “dependent” on shareholders; in particular, they favor a much broader shareholder role in the selection of directors (206-16). These governance

²⁴ Accord, Jensen & Murphy, *supra* note --, at 30. Similarly, the proliferation of golden parachutes in the 1980s followed a tax law change that imposed an excise tax on parachute payouts above three times yearly salary and bonus. *Id.* at 28-29.

²⁵ In this regard I wonder what their view would be about recent tax law changes that tightened the rules on deferred compensation.

changes would affect shareholder welfare in a far-more reaching way that just buttressing the board's capacity to bargain at arm's length over executive compensation.

Before we embark on such a significant change, it is worth evaluating and perhaps strengthening the existing governance resources. The setting of executive compensation is part of a family of problems in corporate law, instances in which corporate fiduciaries -- managers and directors -- enter into contracts and transactions in which their interests diverge from the corporation's. Indeed, presumably the CEO's compensation contract is already subject to the standard corporate law provisions, such as Delaware §144, that govern contracts between a director and the firm. Such statutes typically contain three process-based building blocks: board approval, disclosure, and shareholder ratification. "Fairness" is a backstop when the procedural mechanisms have failed. In my view, giving greater definition to each of these process elements, with relatively modest adjustments to existing rules of state and federal law, would significantly enhance accountability in the setting of executive compensation. In particular, board process would be strengthened by greater vigilance from state courts, particularly Delaware, in the working out of appropriate fiduciary practices. Disclosure should be buttressed by amendment to current SEC rules to better report the "bottom line" amounts of various sources of compensation, particularly retirement benefits and deferred compensation, and to update disclosure in light of the anticipated effects of the expensing of options. In particular the SEC should require inclusion in the proxy materials of a "Compensation Disclosure and Analysis" ("CD&A"), signed by members of the compensation committee, that presents bottom line compensation summaries for the senior managers and that provides explanation and justification.²⁶

i. *Board approval.* The board approval process has been fashioned in largely ad hoc way within firms. Beginning with the corporate governance renaissance of the 1970s, boards increasingly have devolved the responsibility for executive compensation to a specific compensation committee; over time the compensation committee has become the province of independent directors.²⁷ Indeed, post-Enron reform has pushed in the direction of requiring a compensation committee consisting entirely of independent directors.²⁸ What counts as good compensation committee practice has been much less developed, however. In significant measure this is because of the failure of the Delaware courts to take seriously the policing of executive compensation process. By contrast for example, in the sale of the company to a group that includes management or

²⁶ The analogy is to "Management's Discussion and Analysis" required in an issuer's annual Form 10-K and quarterly Form 10-Q. See Regulation S-K, item 303 (requiring management's discussion of the issuer's "financial condition, changes in financial condition, and results of operations.")

²⁷ See generally, Jeffrey N. Gordon, Boards (and the Mechanisms of Director Independence), working paper, Nov. 2004.

²⁸ Such a committee is mandated for firms listed on the NYSE, see NYSE Listed Co. Manual, § 303A.05. NASDAQ does not require a compensation committee, but does require that compensation decisions be approved by a majority of the independent directors. NASD Manual R. 4350(c)(3). IRC Section 162(m) (adopted in 1992) also has pushed public firms toward an independent compensation committee, since the deductibility of compensation greater \$1 million-plus compensation depends upon prior approval of "performance-based" compensation by a committee that consists solely of two or more "outside" directors.

to a controlling shareholder, the Delaware courts developed over the 1980s and 1990s a set of best practices and legal obligations that inform board and special committee behavior.²⁹ Similarly, in assessing target defensive measures, Delaware courts imposed an enhanced business judgment standard that scrutinizes particularly the role of independent directors. In both instances the courts recognized that an inherent conflict required special judicial vigilance. In elaborating on “fiduciary duty,” the courts devised the process protections of decisionmaking by independent directors or by “special committees” or special shareholder voting rules (“majority of disinterested minority”) and often imposed substantive standards (“entire fairness”) as a backstop to failed process.

Yet despite the increasing size and controversy over compensation packages, which in some cases included stock option “mega-grants” that would materially dilute the public shareholders, the courts did not undertake comparable vigilance despite the inherent conflicts in this area.³⁰ This policing failure was the result of three interacting choices. First, in 1979 the Delaware Supreme Court actually relaxed the standard of review in executive compensation, shifting from “reasonableness” to “waste” in the vetting of stock option plans that had been ratified by shareholders.³¹ Thus the substantive test became whether a board could have made a good faith judgment that compensation was justified, even if upon examination the arrangement was one-sided and excessive.³² This change undoubtedly reflected the increasingly common use of stock option plans as an important feature of executive compensation and concerns about valuation methodology. Second, the courts did not take seriously the potential conflicts in the compensation-setting process, instead, granting a presumption of regularity, even for very large compensation packages.³³ In the eagerness to avoid the thicket of judicially-determined compensation levels, the courts missed the separate question of the

²⁹ Compare *In re Emerging Communications, Inc. Shareholders Litigation*, 2004 WL 1305745 (Del.Ch. 2004) with *In re Cysive, Inc. Shareholders Litigation*, 836 A.2d 531 (Del.Ch. 2003). See generally, William T. Allen, *Independent Directors in MBO Transactions: Are They Fact or Fantasy?*, 45 *Bus. Law.* 2055 (1990). The Delaware courts might well have been stimulated and guided by the SEC’s going private regulation, rule 13e-3, and Schedule 13E-3, which requires considerable disclosure and an option on “fairness” for such transactions.

³⁰ See generally Randall S. Thomas & Kenneth J. Martin, *Litigation Challenges to Executive Pay: An Exercise in Futility?* 79 *Wash. L. Q.* 569 (2001). In fairness to the Delaware courts, the American Law Institute had similar myopia. See *id.* at 593-95.

³¹ Compare *Michelson v. Duncan*, 407 A.2d 211 (Del.Supr 1979) with *Beard v. Elster*, 160 A.2d at 737 (Del. Supr., 1960) and *Kerbs et al. v. California Eastern Airways, Inc.*, 90 A.2d 652 (Del.Supr.1952). See *Lewis v. Vogelstein*, 699 A.2d 327 (Del. Ch. 1997) (tracing the history).

³² See *Lewis v. Vogelstein*, *id.*, 699 A.2d at 335-36. The sense of judicial hands-tying was extraordinary. See, e.g., *In re 3COM Corp.*, 1999 WL 1009210, *3 (Del.Ch. Oct. 1999): “to find the plaintiff’s claim sufficient I must be satisfied that the alleged facts establish a complete *failure* of consideration, and not merely the insufficiency of the consideration received. A complete failure of consideration is difficult to show since the acts alleged have to be so blatant that *no* ordinary business person would ever consider the transaction to be fair to the corporation. The company would literally have to get nothing whatsoever for what it gave. Under this standard I am *not* to examine the allegations to see whether consideration, once received, was excessive or lopsided, was proportional or not, or even whether it was a ‘bad deal’ from a business standpoint. If I were to do so I would not be deferring to the board’s business judgment, as I am required to do here.”

³³ See, e.g., *Grimes v. Donald*, 673 A.2d 1207 (Del. Supr. 1996)

adequacy of board process in light of management's self-interest and influence in compensation-setting.

Third, and perhaps most crucially, the Delaware courts erected significant procedural barriers to their becoming aware of process and substantive concerns in compensation-setting practices. This came through enforcement of the "demand" requirement to the maintenance of shareholder derivative litigation. Suits challenging executive compensation were deemed to be derivative, not direct, because the injury of putatively excessive compensation was to the corporation itself or to all shareholders as a group.³⁴ The shareholder plaintiff was thus obliged to "demand" that the corporation undertake the lawsuit, unless demand was "excused" as "futile." This required a credible allegation that the board was not disinterested or independent or that the underlying transaction could not survive business judgment scrutiny, that is, in the context of executive compensation, constituted waste.³⁵ In light of the presumption of director independence in this area and the protective "waste" standard, few if any cases involving large public firms were heard on the merits.³⁶ Indeed, in so potentially troubling a case as the Ovitz/Disney saga, the Delaware Supreme Court initially (in February 2000) affirmed the dismissal of a derivative suit, on familiar procedural grounds.³⁷ The procedural barriers meant that the courts blinded themselves to the developing problems in the area, in particular the de facto constraints on board independence in compensation setting.

The contrast to judicial monitoring of board behavior in hostile takeovers or in going private transactions was striking. There the Delaware courts demonstrated that standard setting does not necessarily require the finding of liability, only judicial suggestion about best practices and the possible implications for the next case in the failure to adopt them. What was crucial was the courts' deep familiarity with the relevant management/board/shareholder problems that came by way of the educative process through discovery and hearings. That courts lacked business expertise to evaluate any particular transaction was not offered as a reason against developing process expertise about how a board faced with conflicts in these areas could manage the situation: what procedures would enhance and protect the board's decisionmaking capability. By contrast, in the executive compensation area the courts too quickly moved from the lack of obvious substantive standards for evaluating executive compensation to the assumption that the process by which boards addressed the problem could not benefit from judicial oversight.³⁸

³⁴ See *Kramer v. Western Pac. Ind., Inc.*, 546 A.2d 348 (Del. Supr. 1988).

³⁵ See *Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A. 805 (Del Supr. 1984).

³⁶ For cases excluded on procedural grounds, see *Kovacs v. NVF Co.*, 1987 WL 17042 (Del.Ch. Sept. 1997); *Kaufman v. Beal*, 1983 WL 20295 (Del.Ch Feb. 1983); *Stotland v. GAF Corp.*, 469 A.2d 421 (Del. Supr. 1983).

³⁷ *Brehm v. Eisner*, 746 A.2d 244 (Del. Supr. 2000).

³⁸ Some might argue that the courts were right in focusing their limited resources on transactions in control, which entail "final period" problems, rather than compensation-setting, which ought to be subject to the firm's on-going accountability mechanisms. This misses the difficulties of shareholder monitoring of compensation arrangements, and thus the way that shareholders were unusually dependent on the board. Even if some elements of compensation are put to shareholder vote – certain stock option plans because of the dilution concerns – executive-specific packages are not voted on. Nor do shareholders approve even in concept the many other compensation mechanisms, ranging from loans to life insurance to retirement

I believe this judicial blindness significantly contributed to the CEO-dominated compensation-setting process that Bebchuk and Fried complain of. But courts are now in the process of catching up. Delaware courts have become much aware of the centrality of compensation concerns, if only because of the fear of further federal encroachment on traditional state domains.³⁹ The Disney litigation, revived in the post-Enron environment,⁴⁰ has become, regardless of outcome, an extended morality tale in the board's responsibility to monitor executive compensation. Boards of large public corporations are likely to be much more careful on the process end. Perhaps it will mean no more than more "papering" by an essentially passive compensation committee, but Disney-shock is likely to produce substantive changes as well. Drawing from new practices of audit committees influenced by Sarbanes-Oxley⁴¹ as well as the learning from going-private cases,⁴² compensation committees may well insist on independent compensation consultants and perhaps independent counsel.⁴³ In short, board process is likely to improve considerably, and the courts are likely to provide more vigilance in ways that will sustain process improvements.⁴⁴ This could make a significant difference in compensation practices.

ii. *Disclosure.* Disclosure of existing compensation arrangements has been a mixed bag. On the one hand, obviously a great deal has been disclosed pursuant to the applicable SEC proxy regulations. Our knowledge of executive compensation,

provisions. Moreover, the limited disclosure of the entire compensation package adds to the monitoring burden. Thus this has been an area of severe information asymmetry between shareholders and boards and thus an area where the integrity of board process is particularly important.

³⁹ See, e.g., 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*, 152 U. Pa. L. Rev. 953, 971-72 (2003) (prohibiting of officer and director loans by Sarbanes-Oxley); Charles Elson, mod., *What's Wrong with Executive Compensation?*, 18 Harv. Bus. Rev. 68, 76-77 (Jan 2003) (comments of Veasey, Ch. J., Del. Supr. Ct)

⁴⁰ *In re the Walt Disney Co. Deriv. Litig.*, 825 A.2d 275 (Del. Ch. 2003) (sustaining second amended complaint, which alleged that directors had failed to exercise any business judgment in decisions regarding compensation and severance of Disney president Ovitz). See also *Integrated Health Services, Inc. v. Elkins*, Civ. No. 20228-NC (Del. Ch. Aug. 24, 2004) (sustaining fiduciary breach allegations regarding executive compensation and loans; since the action was brought by a creditors' committee of a bankrupt company, there were no procedural impediments).

⁴¹ See Sarbanes Oxley § 301 (amending 15 USC 78f).

⁴² See Ronald J. Gilson & Jeffrey N. Gordon, *Controlling Controlling Shareholders*, 152 U. Pa. L. Rev 785, 836-837(2004) (describing ways for board committees to strengthen independence).

⁴³ For a useful guide for compensation committees, see James F. Reda et al, *Compensation Committee Handbook* (2d ed. 2005).

⁴⁴ In my view compensation contracts with the CEO should receive business judgment deference (ie, the "waste" standard of review) only where the board can adequately demonstrate independence and ratiocination. As I describe below, the basis for the board's decisionmaking should be set forth in a "compensation disclosure and analysis" statement included in a public issuer's proxy statement.

Heightened judicial vigilance would probably not mean a rash of new litigation nor the imposition of personal liability on outside directors. The standards of good board practice will quickly evolve and entrench themselves. Moreover, the stakes will rarely justify costly litigation; the magnitude of the Disney contract is an outlier. The remedy may well be equitable adjustment of the contract in question rather than damages, and except for egregious cases, safe harbor statutes like Del. § 102(b)(7) will shield outside directors from personal liability, even apart from D&O liability insurance.

particularly salary, bonus, and stock and stock option grants comes from the disclosures mandated by SEC regulations as part of a public issuer's proxy statement.⁴⁵ With the possible exception of the United Kingdom, the US disclosure system provides a more complete account of executive compensation than any other jurisdiction.⁴⁶ On the other hand, disclosure has obviously been incomplete. It is very hard, if not impossible, to figure out the total compensation package of a senior officer, especially the CEO, taking into account the present value of all forms of stock-based compensation, the present value of all forms of deferred compensation and retirement benefits, and the present value of concessionary loan terms.⁴⁷ There are similar difficulties with determining pay/performance or wealth/performance sensitivities.⁴⁸ To some extent this is because particular information has not been disclosed, for example, actuarial assumptions in retirement benefits, or interest rate assumptions. In other respects important information is scattered throughout a company's proxy statement or the footnotes to the Form 10-K annual report. Cash and stock-related compensation is in one table; retirement plan information is in another table; loans are discussed in another section; Black-Scholes option values are sometimes determinable only from the Form 10-K. The disclosure of "perks" is also incomplete, as demonstrated in the recent SEC enforcement action against General Electric following revelation (in divorce proceedings) of exceptional retirement benefits for former CEO Jack Welch. Even sophisticated analysts, let alone more typical investors, have trouble producing compensation package totals.

Some compensation experts estimate that with the newly mandated expensing of stock options⁴⁹ and the end of variable accounting of performance-based stock, a large fraction of stock-based compensation will move away from options toward performance-stock.⁵⁰ Yet the proxy rules will provide inadequate disclosure, since disclosure is

⁴⁵ The particulars of disclosure are set forth in provisions of Regulation S-K, specifically, item 402 (executive compensation), item 403 (security ownership), and item 404 (related party transactions).

⁴⁶ See Guido Ferrarini, Niamh Moloney, Christana Vespro, "Governance Matters": Convergence in Law and Practice Across the EU Executive Pay Faultline," 2 J. Corp. L. Stud. (forthcoming 2004) (available on SSRN). Indeed, in a majority of EU countries, the compensation of the top management group is reported as an aggregate, rather than individualized. These disclosure differences appear to be correlated with two variables, ownership concentration, and the strength of social democracy, inversely related to each. Where ownership concentration is high, individualized disclosure provides fewer benefits because large blockholders can control managerial rent extraction. Where social democracy is strong, more disclosure may increase resentment against high compensation packages and lead to suboptimal (from the shareholder point of view) arrangements. The examples of UK (high disclosure) vs. Germany (low disclosure) are instructive.

The European Commission has begun a campaign to push for detailed disclosure of executive compensation throughout the EU. See Hannah Karp & Andrew Wallmeyer, "EU Wants Pay on the Table: Higher CEO Compensation Prompts Call for Countries to Tighten Disclosure Rules," *Wall St. J. (Eur.)*, Oct. 6, 2004, at M1, available at 2004 WL-WSJE 88760591.

⁴⁷ The SEC apparently agrees. See Jesse Eisinger, "Follow the CEO's Money," *Wall St. J.*, Feb. 16, 2005, C1 (quoting SEC Chairman William Donaldson and other SEC officials).

⁴⁸ Some argue that wealth/performance measures are the crucial measure and, indeed, this sensitivity is the most common form of incentive compensation in the US. See John E. Core et al, note – supra.

⁴⁹ On Dec. 16, 2004, the Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB) promulgated the final version of FASB Statement 123(R), which requires the expensing of stock options.

⁵⁰ Performance-based shares will be valued (and expensed) as of the day of their initial grant, not, as under variable accounting, as of their vesting, i.e., actually earned by the employee, when, presumably, their value would have increased. See FASB No. 123(R), ¶ 21.

required only of the number of *vested* shares, not the number that might potentially vest nor the criteria for vesting. This will add to the difficulty in determining compensation arrangements.

The SEC should revisit compensation disclosure in two respects. First, the disclosure itself should be made clearer and more complete. This is a technical task that requires awareness of current compensation practices that have grown up in part to evade disclosure and awareness of the impact of new accounting rules on the expensing of options and other stock-related compensation. It also requires awareness of the need to provide information that bears on managerial incentives, including the sensitivity of pay to performance and the sensitivity of managerial wealth to performance.

Second, and equally important, the compensation committee (or the independent directors that have taken on this role for companies without a compensation committee) should prepare and make proxy statement disclosure of a “compensation discussion and analysis” that (i) explains the firm’s philosophy of executive compensation, (ii) particularizes the value of the full compensation packages received by the five most highly compensated officers, (iii) provides a justification of the compensation paid, and (iv) signed by the members of the committee (or the independent directors, as the case may be. In other words, the “CD&A” should provide a bottom line assessment of the different compensation elements that are scattered throughout the proxy statement and annual report and then a justification in light of the demands of the job, the particular market, the actual performance, and the like; in short, an explanation as to why the board thinks the compensation is warranted. The report should be signed to as part of the mechanisms by which the compensation committee takes ownership of the compensation-setting process.

This sort of disclosure is important for two reasons. First, it provides accountability to the shareholders in a domain of general board prerogative. The board, in the exercise of its business judgment, ought to be the final arbiter of particular executive compensation packages.⁵¹ The board, not the shareholders, is responsible for the management of the corporation, and the determination of executive compensation is a critical part of that oversight role. Court interventions where the board has made executive compensation decisions in good faith should be rare. But the board needs to be accountable for its decisions, particularly in light of the potential conflicts of interest. Even if the directors are disinterested and independent in the full sense of the word, they will almost always feel part of the CEO’s “team.” Ironically the greater the directors’ involvement with the firm, the more is their complicity in and identification with the firm’s business decisions.⁵² Up until the painful moment when the board must fire the CEO, he/she is their guy. This is why what, at first blush, may seem like high stakes disclosure, is an appropriate accountability mechanism.

⁵¹ This means to distinguish between general forms of compensation, like stock option plans that require shareholder approval, and specific compensation decisions, such as the number of options granted to a particular executive.

⁵² Prof. Brudney noticed this tension in the role of independent directors sometime ago. See Victor Brudney, *The Independent Director – Heavenly City or Potemkin Village?*, 95 Harv. L. Rev. 597 (1981).

Bebchuk and Fried want director accountability to shareholders as well, and thus favor opening up possibilities for shareholder nomination of directors. A CD&A would achieve accountability in a different way, one more precisely targeted to the problem at hand. It would oblige specific named individuals, the members of the compensation committee, to say publicly: this is what we are paying these executives, it is justified, and this is why.⁵³ The liability risk ought to be nil, since the CD&A itself is evidence of a business judgment having been made. But the reputational risk may be substantial; that's where the potency lies. Reputation is at stake in at least two respects. First, the directors bear the risk that the informed audience for their report will think they were "taken" by the CEO and the other executives.⁵⁴ This may undermine their reputation for acumen and possibly probity. Second, directors who approve what some shareholders regard as an "excessive" or "unjustified" compensation may be targeted by a "just vote no" campaign aimed against their reelection. The fact of being singled out in this way, much less a substantial negative vote, would be significantly embarrassing.

As to the value of this sort of disclosure in addressing the compensation problem, a thought experiment regarding Richard Grasso's compensation by the NYSE is instructive. After disclosure of Grasso's compensation, only one member of the board seemed to be willing to defend the arrangement publicly. Under the CD&A proposal, a compensation committee that endorses a pay package that shareholders regard as excessive will see various forms of shareholder pushback. This in turn will influence future decisions not only by a particular committee but at other firms as well.⁵⁵ More generally, in a corporate governance system that depends on independent directors to address principal/agent problems in preference to direct shareholder initiative, it is important to strengthen the mechanisms of director independence.⁵⁶ The CD&A proposal is one such mechanism.

The second reason this CD&A disclosure is important relates to the social construction of the appropriate level of executive compensation for the high paid

⁵³ Compare Section 906 of Sarbanes-Oxley, codified at 18 USC § 1350, which requires the CEO and the CFO to certify in writing that a particular 1934 Act filing "fairly presents, in all material respects, the financial condition and results of operations of the issuer," to the party's knowledge. Although most observers believe that the signed certificate requirement does not add to a CEO's or CFO's actual risk, since the conduct addressed by section 906 would already create criminal liability under other antifraud provisions of the federal securities law and general criminal law, the signing requirement makes the liability risk more salient and thus may affect primary behavior. Under existing law, the compensation committee's role is spelled out in the proxy statement and a compensation committee report "over the name of each member of the ... compensation committee" is included as well. See Regulation S-K, item 402(k). A CD&A would collect and disclose more "bottom line" information, provide a more detailed justification, and would be signed and presented as signed. Yes, much of the "analysis" might well be lawyer's boilerplate, but not necessarily, since the directors are taking responsibility for the compensation paid.

⁵⁴ Conceivably some of the audience will think, with a smirk, that the directors were doing their job of fleecing the shareholders for management's benefit.

⁵⁵ For example, in the 2004 proxy season CalPERS ran a targeted "just vote no" campaign against audit committee members who approved non-audit work by the issuer's auditors.

⁵⁶ See generally, Jeffrey N. Gordon, *Boards (and the Mechanisms of Director Independence)* (working paper on file with the author, Dec. 2004).

individuals in a public firm. As I argued previously, there is no spot market in executive services. The “market” is influenced by many factors, including a sense of value-added and social desert. Although most want “more,” few want to appear greedy or gouging to their relevant communities. To be sure, additional disclosure – here, bottom line amounts -- has a potential downside: it can contribute to escalation of executive compensation precisely because it adds transparency to a domain figured by one-upmanship or it may heighten social resentments in ways that constrain optimal compensation arrangements. (The “outrage constraint” (64-67) is not necessarily set at efficient levels.) Yet disclosure through a CD&A brings another dimension to the process, the idea of explanation and justification. In the same way that the CD&A provides accountability to shareholders, it provides accountability to the relevant public, which is another audience for its report, and which may be eager to know why a particular compensation level is deemed warranted. This justification, if persuasive, informs the idea of social desert and helps create the sense of “appropriate” compensation.

Two recent examples illustrate this social construction/public accountability point. In the NYSE/Grasso compensation controversy, as the particulars of Grasso’s compensation were disclosed, the Wall Street community turned against the NYSE compensation committee (and against Grasso) because it felt that the payout could not be justified.⁵⁷ Senior Wall Street executives reportedly were outraged that the compensation was entirely cash-based and accumulated via a high guaranteed rate of return. The New York Times reported one such reaction: “Dick is an all-star; he is a strong, solid guy, ... ‘But he was never at risk.’”⁵⁸

The Harvard endowment management compensation controversy is a more complicated case for disclosure. To quell the controversy after the revelations in the IRS filings, University officials provided relatively detailed explanations of the compensation arrangements of the highest paid portfolio managers and a justification in terms of the outside options for both Harvard and the managers in question.⁵⁹ Not everyone was satisfied by this justification, but the accounting made a broader public aware of the enormous rents earned by hedge fund managers, for good or ill, and the issue seemed to simmer down. The controversy might have been somewhat muted by better preemptive disclosure regarding the compensation formula, including the “claw back” provisions. Yet key Harvard endowment managers decamped in January 2005 to set up a hedge fund, influenced in part, it seems, by Harvard’s embarrassment from the public objections to their compensation. In the words of the senior manager, “It would be disingenuous to say that I wouldn’t mind dropping a little bit out of the public spotlight ... Things at Harvard do get a lot of attention, and the annual compensation story is not one I will miss.”⁶⁰ On

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Landon Thomas Jr., “A Pay Package that Fat Cats Call Excessive,” NY Times, Aug. 29, 2003, at C3.

⁵⁸ Id.

⁵⁹ See sources cited in notes 1 – 4 supra.

⁶⁰ See Stephanie Strom, Investment Managers to Exit Endowment at Harvard,” NY Times, Jan 12, 2005, C1. See also “Money Manager Transition,” Harvard Magazine, March-April 2005, at 59-61.

the other hand, it could also be that Harvard's salaries were simply not competitive, since the best hedge fund managers make over \$100 million annually.⁶¹

Some may argue that disclosure of executive compensation is double-edged, that the potential benefits of transparency and greater accountability are offset by an odd pairing of costs. First, given the peculiarly positional features of compensation, better disclosure may lead to "me-too" demands that will ratchet compensation levels even higher. Obversely, better disclosure may stoke nascent populism and "outrage" in a way that constrains compensation to levels that are too low. Harvard is the loser if it sacrifices superior investment returns or ends up paying higher fees to private managers. But perhaps the culture of a not-for-profit is the exception that proves the rule that superior performance properly disclosed and explained will not trigger an uproar.⁶² However one sorts out the conflicting vectors, the fact is we have already chosen a disclosure-based regime for public companies.⁶³ We need to make it work well and to eliminate the potential distortions from partial disclosure.

iii. *Shareholder ratification.* A classic means to resolve conflict problems that implicate both managers and the board is shareholder approval after full disclosure. In the executive compensation area such "ratification" could fall into at least three different categories: one, shareholder approval of specific compensation agreements in whole or in part, before they become effective; two, shareholder approval of general compensation plans (such as stock option plans) before they become effective; three, shareholder endorsement of specific compensation agreements after they become effective. Under current arrangements, shareholder voting on executive compensation is ordinarily limited to category two, approval of stock option and other stock-based plans before they become effective. Although category three approval has considerable appeal – in effect a shareholder "confidence" vote, a system recently adopted in the UK -- I think adoption of a CD&A requirement should have reform priority.

In assessing the current system of shareholder voting on stock option and other stock-based plans, it is important to note that approval ordinarily is addressed to the plan as a whole, not to the award of options or stock to particular employees. Plans typically give boards and compensation committees wide discretion in making such awards. Firms put plans to shareholder vote for various regulatory and corporate law reasons. For example, Section 162(m) of the Internal Revenue Code requires shareholder approval of a stock option plan that would be regarded as "performance-based" and so outside the \$1 million deductibility cap on executive compensation. Section 303A.08 of the NYSE

⁶¹ "The New Money Men," *Economist*, Feb. 17, 2005 (quoting Institutional Investor survey); Charles Stein, "Harvard's High Paid Star Investor Leaving," *Boston Globe*, Jan. 12, 2005, A1 (more than \$200 million, quoting Alpha magazine survey).

⁶² Rachel Zimmerman, "Harvard Dropouts: Endowment Chief to Leave with Others," *Wall St. J.*, Jan. 12, 2005 (quoting other endowment managers questioning whether "the culture" of a university or other not-for-profit would support such large payouts).

⁶³ It may be separately troubling that an increasingly large amount of economic activity is moving to private companies subject to minimal disclosure (permitted because the investors are "sophisticated") and where fees (and thus executive compensation) may be much higher. Private equity funds are creating new-style conglomerates; hedge funds are creating new style mutual funds.

listing standards (and the parallel NASDAQ rule) requires a shareholder vote on all “equity-compensation plans and material revisions thereto.”⁶⁴ From a corporate law perspective, some states require shareholder approval of stock option plans.⁶⁵ Plans that require additional authorized shares ordinarily need shareholder approval of a charter amendment. Boards may also voluntarily submit plans for shareholder approval to obtain the benefits of the protective “waste” standard in a subsequent challenge.⁶⁶ Although institutional investors have become increasingly vigilant in monitoring stock option plans and occasionally have organized opposition, plans (or amendments) will be defeated only rarely.

Shareholder voting on stock option plans is a far cry from category one approval -- review and approval of specific compensation packages before they become effective. Such detailed shareholder involvement would not be workable for public corporations. Imagine that the firm is seeking to recruit a senior executive from another firm. The inability to offer a definitive contract would significantly impair the recruitment efforts, both because of the uncertainty and the possible embarrassment of a negative shareholder vote. For an existing senior executive, shareholder rejection of a proposed compensation package would probably trigger the executive’s departure, particularly for those whose reputation (and thus outside employability) was best.

In 2002 the UK adopted a category three approval, a shareholder vote on the “Directors’ Report on Remuneration,” a vehicle of mandatory disclosure analogous to a CD&A.⁶⁷ The shareholder vote, which is “advisory,” amounts to a confidence vote on

⁶⁴ This standard is considerably tighter than prior iterations. Until 1998, shareholder approval was not needed for plans that were “broadly-based.” In 1998 the NYSE liberalized the definition of “broadly-based” to include plans that granted options to 20% of the employees, no more than half of whom could be officers or directors. Institutional investors raised a clamor that, in the era of heightened corporate governance sensitivity, led to adoption of the present standard in 2003. See Randall S. Thomas & Kenneth J. Martin, *The Determinants of Shareholder Voting on Stock Options Plans*, 35 *Wake Forest L.Rev.* 31, 46-51 (2000).; Chandler & Strine, note – supra, at --. Interpretive questions under the standard present rule have already spawned a 15 page FAQ posted on the NYSE website.

The parallel NASDAQ requirement is found in NASD Manual R. 4350(i).

⁶⁵ Richard H. Wagner & Catherine G. Wagner, *Recent Developments in Executive, Director, and Employee Stock Compensation Plans: New Concerns for Directors*, 3 *Stan. J. L. Bus. & Fin.* 5, 13 (1997). The trend is against such independent state law shareholder voting requirements. New York, for example, recently eliminated such a requirement. N.Y. Bus. Corp. L. § 505(d) (McKinney 2003).

⁶⁶ See, e.g., *Lewis v. Vogelstein*, 699 A.2d 327 (Del. Ch. 1997).

⁶⁷ The UK legislation did two things. First it expanded disclosure of executive compensation beyond summary footnote disclosure to an extensive Directors Remuneration Report. See Schedule 7A of the Companies Act of 1985, eff. Aug. 1, 2002. Second, it required an advisory shareholder vote on the Report. Id., § 241A. The Report must provide particularized disclosure for senior executive of the various sources of compensation as well as an explanatory statement by the company’s compensation policy (including the company’s comparative performance). The Report must be signed by Remuneration Committee members and its quantitative elements must be audited. Although a shareholder vote is mandatory for every public company, “No entitlement of a person to remuneration is made conditional on the resolution [required by this section] being passed...” Id., § 241A.(8). See *Directors’ Remuneration Report Reg. 2002/1986 Explnt Para 1* [UK Stat. Inst. 2002/1986]; Palmer’s *Company Law* from Sweet & Maxwell, ¶ 8.207.3; Jaclyn Braunstein, *Pound Foolish: Challenging Executive Compensation in the U.S. and U.K.*, 29 *Brook. J. Int’l L.* 747, 787-88 (2004). The UK legislation came after a persistent unwillingness by the

the work of the compensation committee, focusing in particular on the appropriateness of compensation levels in light of performance and other factors. Although a negative vote does not void any contracts or other compensation arrangements, the public force of such a negative expression may lead to a “voluntary” re-negotiation and a shake-up in the firm’s compensation-setting process. Moreover, in the effort to avoid a public flap, companies may be more willing to consult large shareholders in the shaping of executive compensation and to avoid compensation proposals that would appear “excessive.”

The UK provides some famous examples of how such an advisory shareholder vote might function. A large golden parachute (estimated by shareholders at \$35 million) for the CEO of GlaxoSmithKline triggered a shareholder revolt that led to a rejection of the remuneration committee’s report.⁶⁸ The consequence was “an overhaul” of GSK’s remuneration committee, a shrinking by two-thirds of the CEO’s golden parachute, and a toughening of terms on which options would vest.⁶⁹ In other several other cases, the shareholder vote on the report has amounted to a referendum not just on compensation levels but on the CEO’s performance generally. In some cases pay packages have been renegotiated; two cases led to CEO turnover.⁷⁰ At least some UK firms have begun to discuss executive compensation with large shareholders as part of the compensation-setting process.⁷¹ It appears that the vote on the remuneration committee report may serve to mobilize UK institutional shareholders in a way similar to the “just vote no” campaigns against director re-election at underperforming firms in the US. Targeting “excessive” compensation may draw a stronger institutional response, “in part because it is what the press and the public understand.”⁷²

Should US reformers press for a shareholder advisory vote on the CD&A as part of the effort to enhance accountability in executive compensation and perhaps performance more generally? The European Commission has recently adopted such a recommendation for EU countries⁷³ and some US commentators have previously made

largest UK firms to voluntarily add such a shareholder vote, as had been recommended by the UK best practice code. *Id.* at 775-77.

⁶⁸ Gautum Naik, “Glaxo Holders Reject CEO’s Compensation Package,” *Wall. St. J.*, May 20, 2003, at D8, available at 2003 WL-WSJ 3968195; . Heather Timmons, “Glaxo Shareholders Revolt Against Pay Plan for Chief,” *N.Y. Times*, May 20, 2003, at W1. The vote was narrow, 50.72% to 49.28%. Two large institutional investors voting against the report were Isis Asset Management, a UK money manager with nearly \$100 billion in assets, and CalPERS, a US public pension fund with more than \$150 billion in assets that is a notable proponent of corporate governance reform worldwide.

⁶⁹ See Julia Flynn & Naum Naik, “Glaxo Sets Plan to Better Link Pay to Performance,” *Wall St. J.*, Dec. 16, 2003, D5, available at 2003 WL-WSJ 68131125. It appears that the original golden parachute was set to the US standard of three times annual salary and expected bonus.

⁷⁰ See Ferrarini at al, *supra* note --, TAN & nn. 64-66; Heather Timmons, “Chairman Leaves Amid Pay Dispute at Sainsbury,” *NY Times*, July 2, 2004, at W1, available at 2004 WLNR 5553430.

⁷¹ Siliva Ascarelli, “UK Firms Turn on the Charm,” *Wall St. J (Eur.)*, March 23, 2004, at M1, available at WL-WSJE 56864907.

⁷² See Heather Timmons, *supra* note 68 (quoting Anita Skipper, head of corporate governance at Morley Fund Management). On the other hand, there have been only three actual “no” votes in two years. Private communication with Brian Cheffins, Jan. 14, 2005.

⁷³ Commission Recommendation on Fostering an Appropriate Regime for the Remuneration of Directors of Listed Companies, Oct. 6, 2004, IP/04/1183, available at

similar proposals.⁷⁴ Such a measure could be adopted by the SEC as a condition for the circulation of a proxy statement, by a state legislature as a matter of substantive corporate law, by a state court as a condition for “business judgment” review of compensation, or by shareholder initiative as a bylaw amendment. One question is how much additional accountability such a shareholder advisory vote would provide. That question needs to be answered against at least two important differences between the US and the UK. First, shareholdings are more concentrated in the UK than the US; a relatively small number of UK institutional investors hold 60 percent of the publicly traded equity, and the UK regulations on collaboration by such shareholders are much less burdensome than in the US.⁷⁵ As a result, UK institutions have greater capacity to act collectively informal and formal ways and have more experience at it. The second difference is that US institutions have already developed a practice to “just vote no” against director reelection where the goal is to object publicly to specific corporate behavior. For example, as noted above, a “just vote no” campaign has been aimed against the practice of audit committee approval of non-audit work by the auditors. It would be easy to run such a campaign against the members of a compensation committee for an unsatisfactory CD&A. In other words, if the goal of the shareholder advisory vote is strictly enhancement of shareholder voice, the institutional diffusion in the US may undercut its effectiveness. If the goal is to provide a vehicle for broader mobilization of popular and elite opinion, the targeted “just vote no” option may be almost as effective. In other words, given the existing disclosure regime, the US already has a shareholder vehicle that bears significant functional equivalence to the UK advisory vote. Add a CD&A and the functional equivalence is even stronger.

With these caveats, and in light of the recent EU Commission action, the shareholder advisory vote on a CD&A may still seem superior because it entails annual shareholder scrutiny of the executive compensation issue. It requires no entrepreneurship by a concerned shareholder, which could be in short supply in a given year for a given firm. It gives greater shareholder legitimacy to inquiries about compensation and possible objections. If a CD&A requirement and other process reforms seem ineffective after a five year trial period, it is an appealing next step. Its appeal is greater than a general expansion of shareholder power to nominate directors.

Conclusion

Bebchuk and Fried have given us a very valuable book that acutely focuses attention on the executive compensation problem. They masterfully marshal the evidence and the arguments. The issue is important for two distinct reasons. Poorly-drawn compensation arrangements may induce managerial behavior that impedes the efficient operation of large public firms. This will reduce shareholder wealth and social wealth.

http://europa.eu.int/comm/internal_market/company/docs/directors-remun/2004-recommendation_en.pdf
(visited Jan. 5. 2005).

⁷⁴ Mark J. Loewenstein, *The Conundrum Of Executive Compensation*, 35 Wake Forest L. Rev. 1, 28 (2004); Randall S. Thomas & Kenneth J. Martin, *The Effect of Shareholder Proposals on Executive Compensation*, 67 U. Cin. L. Rev. 1021, 1046-48 (1999)..

⁷⁵ See Bernard S. Black & John C. Coffee, Jr., *Hail Britannia?: Institutional Investor Behavior Under Limited Regulation*, 92 Mich. L. Rev. 1997, 2008-09, 2024- (1994).

Excessive compensation – compensation that seems out of line with an executive’s contribution to a firm’s success – may have social demoralization costs even if it is merely “distributional.” Yet the “right” level and form of executive compensation in light of either concern is not easily determined. On the remedial side I favor mechanisms to strengthen director independence targeted to the compensation problem rather than general expansion of shareholder power and favor as well mechanisms that will give the directors input from shareholder and public constituencies. This leads me to a proposal for “Compensation Discussion and Analysis” included in the issuer’s proxy rather than necessarily increasing shareholder access to the director ballot.