

WACHTELL, LIPTON, ROSEN & KATZ

COMPENSATION COMMITTEE GUIDE

MARCH 2026

About This Compensation Committee Guide

This Guide provides an overview of the key rules applicable to compensation committees of listed U.S. companies and practices that compensation committees should consider in the current environment. This Guide:

- *outlines a compensation committee member's responsibilities;*
- *reviews the composition and procedures of the compensation committee;*
- *considers important legal standards and regulations that govern compensation committees and their members; and*
- *recommends specific practices to promote compensation committee effectiveness in designing appropriate compensation programs that advance corporate goals.*

Although generally geared towards directors who are members of a public company compensation committee, this Guide also is relevant to members of a compensation committee of a private company, especially if the private company may at some point consider accessing the public capital markets.

This Guide also contains a sample compensation committee charter as an Exhibit. This Exhibit is intended to assist a compensation committee in performing its designated functions. However, it would be a mistake for any company to simply copy published models. The creation of charters requires experience and careful thought. It is not necessary that a company have every guideline and procedure that another company has to be “state of the art” in its governance practices. When taken too far, an overly broad or detailed committee charter can be counterproductive. For example, if a charter explicitly requires the compensation committee to review a particular type of compensation arrangement, meet a stated number of times each year or take other action, and the compensation committee has not taken that action, then the failure may be considered evidence of lack of due care. Therefore, we recommend that each company tailor its compensation committee charter and written procedures to those that are necessary and practical for the particular company.

To the extent this Guide expresses opinions on corporate governance matters, these do not necessarily reflect the views of Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz or its partners as to any particular situation.

We hope this Guide is helpful and are happy to discuss any aspects of it with committee members or others. If you have any questions about the matters covered by this Guide, please reach out to Jeannemarie O'Brien or Michael J. Schobel. Many thanks to our colleagues Alison E. Beskin and Amy Zeng for their contributions to this Guide.

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Compensation Committee Guide

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Introduction

Executive compensation remains top of mind in 2026 as the role of the public company compensation committee continues to evolve. All aspects of executive compensation remain a central focus of the compensation committee, whose responsibilities have steadily expanded beyond traditional pay-setting and benchmarking functions. This varied menu includes, among other things, designing and adopting incentive compensation programs that appropriately align pay with performance, implementing appropriate change in control and severance arrangements, overseeing executive compensation disclosure, and regularly engaging with shareholders on compensation programs. In addition to this continuing mandate, the purview of the compensation committee at many companies includes oversight of the company's policies and practices relating to broader human capital matters, such as company culture, gender pay equity and diversity and inclusion.

As we enter the 2026 proxy season, compensation committee members are participating more actively than ever in the process of disclosing executive compensation and soliciting shareholder feedback. Shareholders and proxy advisory firms have increasingly signaled that compensation committees should play a role in seeking input from shareholders on a company's executive pay philosophy, and committee members are expending increased time and energy to engage with shareholders on these issues. The preparation of the annual proxy statement, which is often a tool to highlight how executive pay has been tailored in response to shareholder feedback, has evolved into a purpose-driven, intensive collaboration among management, the compensation committee, the compensation consultant, and external legal counsel to produce a document that serves as an executive compensation mission statement, state-of-the-union update on the performance of the business, and catalogue of shareholder engagement efforts, while at the same time complying with technical disclosure rules, the scope and breadth of which are constantly expanding. Against this backdrop, the state of executive compensation disclosure regulation appears to be in flux, as U.S. Securities and Exchange ("SEC") Commissioner Paul S. Atkins shared his vision on February 17, 2026 for enacting "SEC disclosure reform" that would prescribe the "minimum effective dose of regulation,"¹ and it remains to be seen how potential changes in the disclosure requirements may impact the role of the compensation committee.

In addition to spearheading compensation disclosures, compensation committees also remain integral to executive transition planning and are called upon to address unexpected, high-priority compensation and governance matters that may arise. The ability to identify, motivate and retain highly qualified executives remains a core mandate of the compensation committee and is essential to the long-term success of a company. Given the increasing mobility of executive talent across

¹ See Paul S. Atkins, *Remarks at the Texas A&M School of Law Corporate Law Symposium*, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (Feb. 17, 2026), available [here](#).

companies and industries, companies need to act decisively to secure those with proven track records by entering into appropriate arrangements that protect stockholders' interests while motivating executives to drive performance. Succession planning is equally vital, and boards should periodically assess the leadership pipeline and prepare for unexpected succession events.

Compensation committees also play a critical and increasingly strategic role in corporate transactions, where directors are often tasked with approving appropriate retention awards and severance and other termination protections for their corporate leaders and other key employees (in addition to the succession planning considerations noted above, which are inherently intertwined with corporate transactions). These arrangements are often crucial to the success of a transaction as they enable employees to focus on advancing the interests of the corporation and its shareholders without concern over the personal uncertainties created by the potential transaction, promote retention of employees who are needed to continue to operate the business during the pendency of the transaction, and incentivize the additional efforts that are needed from employees to prepare for a successful transaction and integration.

As the role of the compensation committee expands and adapts, committee members can benefit now more than ever from having a working knowledge of the key legal considerations surrounding the compensation committee's mandate, as well as the various economic, political and governance considerations that impact the committee's directives. As in prior years, the primary objectives of this Guide are to review the responsibilities of public company compensation committee members and to provide information to enable these individuals to function most effectively. Because of the complexity surrounding executive compensation and other matters entrusted to the compensation committee, including with respect to tax, accounting, disclosure, human capital management and governance issues, it would not be practical to expect compensation committee members to possess the technical expertise to identify and solve them all. This Guide is a resource to help orient compensation committee members to the relevant considerations and provide directors with the information necessary to ask the right questions of management and advisors in fulfilling their duties.

Set forth below is a list of notable recent developments in the laws and rules governing executive compensation at U.S. public companies.

- The SEC has signaled the possibility of coming reform to the Item 402 disclosure framework, including changes to the number of executives covered by the disclosure rules (*see* Chapter IV.A), the Pay Versus Performance rules of Item 402(v) (*see* Chapter IV.H), and the disclosure requirements for perquisites (*see* Chapter V.E).
- Although the proposed ban on employment-based noncompetes by the Federal Trade Commission ("FTC") has been vacated, the FTC continues to conduct targeted enforcement of anticompetitive practices, and state laws (in the form

of both statutes and case law) governing the enforceability of noncompete covenants continue to evolve. *See* Chapter V.C.

- In a striking reversal of the Delaware Court of Chancery, the Delaware Supreme Court reinstated Elon Musk’s 2018 stock award (initially reported as having a \$55.8 billion maximum value) in December 2025, rejecting rescission as an extreme remedy that should only be granted where “clearly warranted,” rather than overturning the lower court on “entire fairness” grounds. *See* Chapter III.A.2.
- On January 7, 2026, President Trump issued an Executive Order² titled “Prioritizing the Warfighter in Defense Contracting,” reflecting the U.S. government’s policy of accelerating defense procurement and revitalizing the defense industrial base. The Executive Order could limit the ability of defense contractors to pay dividends or conduct stock buybacks, and could potentially impact the compensation of their executives. The Executive Order requires future contracts to eliminate executive compensation based on “short-term financial metrics” (such as free cash flow or earnings per share driven by stock buybacks) and to instead link compensation to metrics such as on-time delivery, increased production, and the expansion of U.S. stockpiles and capabilities. Moreover, the Executive Order permits the Secretary of War to freeze executive base salaries upon a finding of “underperformance,” among other reasons. This Executive Order is unique in its application and goals. Companies in the defense and other industries will need to carefully monitor how the Executive Order is ultimately administered and enforced.
- The SEC continues to focus on enforcing whistleblower protection rules under Rule 21F-17 under the Securities Exchange Act, putting pressure on companies to review employee releases and confidentiality agreements to ensure compliance. *See* Chapter V.C.
- The expanded definition of “covered employees” under Section 162(m) of the Internal Revenue Code will become effective for tax years beginning after December 31, 2026. As the date approaches, companies are advised to prepare in advance. *See* Chapter VI.A.
- The most recent compensation-related voting guidelines of ISS and Glass Lewis are generally consistent with prior years’ guidelines, with increased focus on disclosure of performance-vesting awards and clawback policies that go beyond Dodd-Frank requirements. However, ISS has signaled a more flexible approach toward time-based equity awards in its 2026 policy updates, provided that such awards are sufficiently long-term (e.g., vesting over five years). In the past year, ISS and Glass Lewis have also come under increased regulatory scrutiny and face growing competition from institutional investors who are building their

² Available [here](#).

own internal governance and voting capabilities. *See* Chapters VI.D and VIII.D.

CHAPTER I

COMPENSATION COMMITTEE

MEMBERSHIP

- A. NYSE and Nasdaq Independence Standards
 - 1. Independence Generally
 - 2. Independence for Compensation Committee Members
- B. Non-Employee Director under the Exchange Act
- C. Independence under State Law

In enlisting qualified directors to sit as members on a compensation committee, attention must be paid to the various membership requirements imposed by the securities exchange on which the company is listed, Rule 16b-3 under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, as amended (the “Exchange Act”) and state law.

A. NYSE and Nasdaq Independence Standards³

The New York Stock Exchange (the “NYSE”) and the Nasdaq Stock Market (“Nasdaq”) generally require that members of listed company compensation committees satisfy both general independence standards and those specific to compensation committee members.

1. Independence Generally

Both the NYSE and Nasdaq have adopted rules as to who can qualify as an independent director. As a general matter, these independence rules ask whether the director is a non-management director free of any material business relationships with the company and its management in the past three years (other than owning stock and serving as a director). Both exchanges require an affirmative determination and provide examples of disqualifying relationships:

- ***Affirmative Determination.*** The board of directors of a listed company is required to make an affirmative determination, which must be publicly disclosed, that each director designated as “independent” has no material relationship with the company that would impair the director’s independence.
- ***Disqualifying Relationships.*** Both NYSE and Nasdaq rules include a specific list of relationships that disqualify a director from being considered independent. These disqualifying relationships can include commercial, industrial, banking, consulting, legal, accounting, charitable and familial relationships, among others. Note that ownership of a significant amount of stock, or affiliation with a major shareholder, should not, in and of itself, preclude a board of directors from determining that a director is independent.

More specifically on disqualifying relationships, the following relationships generally will bar a director from satisfying the independence standards of the NYSE or Nasdaq, as applicable:

Relationships Based on Employment

- The director is, or has been within the last three years, an employee of the company or its parent or subsidiary,⁴ *except* that former employment as an

³ For additional discussion of the NYSE and Nasdaq independence requirements, *see* Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, *2025 Nominating and Corporate Governance Committee Guide*, available [here](#).

⁴ Both the NYSE and Nasdaq define “company” to include a parent or subsidiary in a consolidated group with the company.

interim executive officer (which under Nasdaq rules cannot last for more than one year)⁵ does not, in and of itself, disqualify a director from being considered independent following such employment.

- An immediate family member⁶ of the director is, or has been within the last three years, an executive officer of the company or its parent or subsidiary.

Relationships Relating to Auditors

- The director is a current partner (or employee, under the NYSE rules) of a firm that is the company's external auditor (or internal auditor, under the NYSE rules).
- An immediate family member of the director is a current partner of a firm that is the company's external auditor (or internal auditor, under the NYSE rules).
- Under the NYSE rules, an immediate family member of the director is a current employee of the company's internal or external auditor and personally works on the company's audit.
- The director or an immediate family member was, within the last three years, a partner or employee of a firm that is the company's external auditor (or internal auditor, under the NYSE rules) and personally worked on the company's audit at any time within that period.

Interlocking Relationships

- Under the NYSE rules, the director or an immediate family member is, or has been within the last three years, an executive officer of another company where any of the company's present executive officers at the same time serves or served on that other company's compensation committee.
- Under the Nasdaq rules, the director or an immediate family member is an executive officer of another entity where, at any time during the past three years, any of the executive officers of the company served on the compensation committee of such other entity.

⁵ The Nasdaq rules stress, however, that the board still must consider whether such former employment and any compensation received would interfere with a director's exercise of independent judgment in carrying out director responsibilities.

⁶ General Commentary to Rule 303A.02(b) of the NYSE Listed Company Manual defines "immediate family member" as a person's spouse, parents, children, siblings, mothers and fathers-in-law, sons and daughters-in-law, brothers and sisters-in-law, and anyone (other than domestic employees) who shares such person's home. Nasdaq Rule 5605(a)(2) defines "family member" in the same manner. In this Guide, we refer to "immediate family member" to encompass "immediate family member" under the NYSE rules and "family member" under the Nasdaq rules.

- Under the NYSE rules, the director is a current employee, or an immediate family member of the director is a current executive officer, of a company that has made payments to, or received payments from, the company for property or services in an amount that, in any of the last three fiscal years, exceeds the greater of \$1 million or 2% of such other company's consolidated gross revenues.⁷
- Under the Nasdaq rules, the director or an immediate family member is a partner, controlling shareholder or an executive officer of any organization to which the company made, or from which the company received, payments for property or services in the current or any of the past three fiscal years that exceed 5% of the recipient's consolidated gross revenues for that year or \$200,000, whichever is greater.⁸

Relationships Based on Compensation

- Under the NYSE rules, the director or an immediate family member has received during any 12-month period within the last three years more than \$120,000 in direct compensation (*i.e.*, not investment income)⁹ from the company, *except* for (1) director and committee fees and pension or other forms of deferred compensation for prior service (*provided* that such compensation is not contingent in any way on continued service), (2) compensation received by an immediate family member for service as a non-executive employee and (3) compensation received by a director for former service as an interim executive officer of the company.
- Under the Nasdaq rules, the director or an immediate family member received any compensation (*i.e.*, whether direct or indirect compensation)¹⁰ from the company in excess of \$120,000 during any consecutive 12-month period within the last three years, *except* for (1) director or committee fees, benefits under tax-qualified retirement plans or nondiscretionary compensation, (2) compensation paid to an immediate family member for service as a non-executive employee

⁷ The NYSE commentary specifies that both the payments and the consolidated gross revenues to be measured shall be those reported in the last completed fiscal year of such other company. The look-back provision for this test applies solely to the financial relationship between the listed company and the director or immediate family member's current employer; a listed company need not consider former employment of the director or immediate family member.

⁸ The Nasdaq rules exclude from the calculation payments arising solely from investments in the company's securities and payments under nondiscretionary charitable contribution matching programs.

⁹ In addition, the NYSE's focus on "direct" compensation means that *bona fide* and documented reimbursement of expenses also may be excluded. Note, however, that the NYSE considers payments to a director's solely owned business entity to be direct compensation.

¹⁰ For instance, Nasdaq provides that political contributions to the campaign of a director or an immediate family member would be considered indirect compensation, and, as such, must be included for purposes of the \$120,000 threshold.

and (3) compensation received by a director for former service as an interim executive officer of the company for not longer than one year.¹¹

Notwithstanding these specific guidelines, independence determinations must be based on all relevant facts and circumstances. Thus, even if a director meets all the bright-line criteria set out above, the board is still required to make an affirmative determination that the director has no material relationship with the company.

In addition, under disclosure rules promulgated by the SEC, for each director who is identified as independent, the company must describe, by specific category or type, any transactions, relationships or arrangements (other than transactions already disclosed as related-party transactions) that were considered by its board of directors under applicable director independence standards (*e.g.*, the NYSE or Nasdaq independence rules).¹²

2. Independence for Compensation Committee Members

The stock exchanges require listed companies to have a compensation committee, which must be composed entirely of independent directors.¹³ When evaluating the independence of any director who will serve on the compensation committee, the NYSE rules require a board of directors to consider all relevant factors that could impair independent judgments about executive compensation, including, but not limited to: (1) the source of compensation of such director, including any consulting, advisory or other compensatory fee paid by the company; and (2) whether the director is affiliated with the company or one of its subsidiaries or affiliates. The Nasdaq rules contain a similar requirement.

In “exceptional and limited circumstances,” Nasdaq permits one director who does not meet its independence rules to serve on the compensation committee. Specifically, if a compensation committee is composed of at least three members, one non-independent director (who is not a current officer or employee or a family member of an officer or employee) may be appointed if the board of directors, under exceptional and limited circumstances, determines that such individual’s membership on the compensation committee is required by the best interests of the company and its shareholders.¹⁴ If the board of directors takes this approach, then it must disclose the nature of the relationship and the reasons for the determination either on the company’s website or in the proxy statement for the next annual meeting (or, if the company does not file a proxy, in the next annual report on Form 10-K or Form 20-F). A member appointed under this exception may serve a maximum of two years. Since certain equity compensation arrangements must be

¹¹ The Nasdaq rules stress, however, that the board must still consider whether such compensation would interfere with the director’s exercise of independent judgment in carrying out director responsibilities.

¹² See Item 407(a)(3) of Regulation S-K, 17 C.F.R. § 229.407(a)(3).

¹³ NYSE Listed Company Manual, Rule 303A.05; Nasdaq Listing Rule 5605(d)(2)(a).

¹⁴ Nasdaq Listing Rule 5605(d)(2)(B).

approved by an independent compensation committee or a majority of the company's independent directors in order to be exempt from shareholder approval requirements, a company with a non-independent compensation committee member would need to seek approval of a majority of its independent directors for this purpose.¹⁵ The NYSE does not provide a similar exemption.

Separately, newly listed companies on the NYSE or Nasdaq need only have one independent member of the compensation committee at the time of the initial public offering, a majority of independent members within 90 days of listing, and a fully independent committee within one year of listing. Regarding the requirement to have at least a two-member compensation committee, a Nasdaq-listed company must have a compensation committee comprised of at least one member by the listing date and at least two members within one year of the listing date.

B. Non-Employee Director under the Exchange Act

Short-Swing Profit and Rule 16b-3

Section 16(b) of the Exchange Act provides that a company insider, such as a director or officer, is liable to the company for any profits resulting from the insider's purchase and sale of the company's equity securities within any period of less than six months ("short-swing" profit). The statute and the rules promulgated thereunder are quite broad, such that, absent an exemption, the granting, exercise and settlement of equity compensation to an officer or director of the company may be subject to this prohibition and subject the officer or director to liability for short-swing profit if the officer or director has opposite-way transactions during a six-month period. In an effort to address this issue, the SEC adopted Rule 16b-3 under the Exchange Act, which exempts, among other things, grants and awards by the company of its securities to an officer or director if approved in advance and with specificity by a committee composed solely of two or more "non-employee directors."

"Non-Employee Director" Qualification

Under Rule 16b-3, to qualify as a non-employee director, the director cannot: (1) be an officer or employee of the company (or its parent or subsidiary); (2) receive in excess of \$120,000 in compensation, either directly or indirectly, from the company (or its parent or subsidiary) for services rendered as a consultant or in any capacity other than as a director; or (3) have an interest in any "related

¹⁵ Nasdaq Listing Rules 5635(c)(2) and (c)(4). Under these Nasdaq rules, shareholder approval is required before the issuance of securities when an equity compensation plan is to be established or materially amended, except for, among other things, tax-qualified nondiscriminatory employee benefits plans that are approved by the company's independent compensation committee and certain "sign-on" equity compensation awards that are approved by the company's independent compensation committee (or, in either such case, by a majority of the company's independent directors).

party” transaction for which disclosure in the proxy statement would be required pursuant to Item 404(a) of Regulation S-K.

Disclosure under Item 404(a) is required for any “transaction” since the beginning of the company’s last fiscal year or any currently proposed transaction in which the company is a participant, if the amount involved exceeds \$120,000 and any “related person” had or will have a direct or indirect material interest in the transaction.

- **Related Person** – any person who was at any time during the relevant period: (1) a director or executive officer of the company; (2) a nominee for director (but only for disclosure in a proxy or information statement relating to the election of such nominee); (3) an immediate family member of a director, executive officer or nominee for director (only for disclosure in the proxy or information statement relating to the election of such nominee) of the company; or (4) a beneficial owner of more than 5% of the company’s voting securities or an immediate family member of such owner.
- **Transaction** – includes any financial transaction, arrangement or relationship (including any indebtedness or guarantee of indebtedness) or any series of similar transactions, arrangements or relationships. Employment relationships and director compensation otherwise disclosed under Item 402 of Regulation S-K (*i.e.*, the executive compensation disclosure rules) need not be disclosed.

Note that, even if the company disclosed a relevant related-party transaction under Item 404(a) in its filings for the most recent fiscal year, such transaction will not disqualify the director under Rule 16b-3 if the transaction was terminated prior to the director’s proposed service as a non-employee director.

It is possible that a director on the compensation committee does not qualify as a non-employee director under Rule 16b-3 even if such director is independent under the NYSE or Nasdaq rules. If the compensation committee has such directors, full compliance with Rule 16b-3 is still possible. As long as a compensation committee has at least two non-employee directors, it can create a subcommittee consisting solely of two or more non-employee directors and delegate to the subcommittee responsibility with respect to matters falling within the ambit of Rule 16b-3.

C. Independence under State Law

Transactions between a company and its insiders (including compensation arrangements) are subjected to intense judicial scrutiny under state law because of the inherent conflict between the insiders’ personal financial interests and their fiduciary duties to the company and its shareholders. To avoid heightened judicial scrutiny, compensation arrangements should be approved by, and negotiated with, directors who are disinterested with respect to the compensation decision at issue wherever possible. When it comes to director compensation, it is often unavoidable that directors are asked to approve their own compensation—*see* Chapter XII of this Guide for a more detailed discussion of related considerations.

While Delaware courts have, in some instances, appeared receptive to arguments that economically independent directors were disqualified by alleged noneconomic conflicts of interest, the determination of independence under state law generally requires only economic independence based on a facts-and-circumstances analysis. In one opinion, the Delaware Supreme Court, addressing the independence of certain directors of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Inc.,¹⁶ specifically addressed claims that social connections and personal friendships can result in disqualification from a finding of independence. In deciding *Martha Stewart*, the court held that allegations of a mere personal friendship or a mere outside business relationship, standing alone, are insufficient to raise a reasonable doubt about a director's independence. The court also reiterated its rejection of the concept of "structural bias," the supposition that the professional and social relationships that naturally develop among members of a board of directors impede independent decision-making.¹⁷

No doubt, each case of alleged director conflict of interest is different. Nonetheless, the case law supports the presumption that non-management directors are independent, unless there is real evidence to the contrary.

¹⁶ *Beam v. Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Inc.*, 845 A.2d 1040 (Del. 2004).

¹⁷ *Id.* at 1050–52.

CHAPTER II

KEY RESPONSIBILITIES OF COMPENSATION COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- A. Responsibilities Imposed by the NYSE and Nasdaq
 - 1. New York Stock Exchange Requirements
 - 2. Nasdaq Requirements
- B. CEO and Executive Officer Compensation
- C. Non-Executive Officer Compensation and Broad-Based ERISA Plans
- D. Equity Compensation Grant Policy
- E. Management Succession
- F. Risk Oversight of Incentive Compensation
- G. Considerations for Financial Institution Compensation Committees
 - 1. Safety and Soundness Guidance
 - 2. FDIC Golden Parachute Regulations
 - 3. Section 956 of the Dodd-Frank Act
- H. Other Key Responsibilities
 - 1. Development of Compensation Philosophy
 - 2. Compensation-Related Disclosure Responsibilities
 - 3. Internal Controls

The SEC, the NYSE and Nasdaq require a listed company to have a compensation committee that assumes a number of compensation-related responsibilities. It also is advisable for compensation committees to assume certain additional responsibilities. It is important, therefore, that a compensation committee understand what is expected of it, and that it be diligent in ensuring that it appropriately and faithfully fulfills its mandate.

A. Responsibilities Imposed by the NYSE and Nasdaq

1. New York Stock Exchange Requirements

The NYSE requires that all listed companies subject to its corporate governance listing standards have a compensation committee composed entirely of independent directors with a written committee charter that addresses all of the duties described below and that is published and printable on the company's website. The NYSE further requires that the compensation committee carry out a number of minimum responsibilities. While the responsibilities of a compensation committee may be delegated to subcommittees, for most listed companies, each subcommittee still must be composed entirely of independent directors and have a published and printable charter.¹⁸ For a discussion of compensation committee charters, *see* Chapter XI of this Guide.

CEO Compensation

Under NYSE rules, a compensation committee must, at a minimum, (1) review and approve goals and objectives relevant to the chief executive officer's ("CEO") compensation, (2) evaluate the CEO's performance in light of such goals and objectives, and (3) either as a committee or together with the other independent directors (as may be specified in the compensation committee charter), determine and approve the CEO's compensation based upon such evaluation. In determining the CEO's long-term incentive compensation, the NYSE suggests that a compensation committee consider (a) the company's performance and relative shareholder return, (b) the value of similar incentive awards to CEOs at comparable companies and (c) the awards given to the CEO in past years.¹⁹ Compensation committee responsibilities regarding CEO compensation do not preclude discussion of CEO compensation with the board of directors generally.

Non-CEO Executive Officer and Incentive Compensation

In addition, under NYSE rules, a compensation committee must have direct responsibility either to approve non-CEO executive officer compensation or to

¹⁸ A listed company of which more than 50% of the voting power for the election of directors is held by an individual, a group or another company (known as a "controlled company") is exempt from these requirements. *See* Section 303A.00 of the NYSE Listed Company Manual.

¹⁹ The NYSE clarifies that a compensation committee is not precluded from approving awards so as to comply with applicable tax laws, with or without ratification by the full board.

recommend such compensation to the board of directors for approval.²⁰ This requirement means that, per the definition of “executive officer” under Rule 3b-7 of the Exchange Act, a listed company’s compensation committee must recommend or approve the compensation of the president, any vice president of a principal business unit, division or function (such as sales, administration or finance), any other officer who performs a policy-making function, or any other person who performs a similar policy-making function.²¹

A compensation committee also is charged with recommending to the board of directors the approval of incentive and equity-based compensation plans that are subject to board approval.²²

Preparation of Disclosure

A compensation committee is charged with preparing the disclosure required by Item 407(e)(5) of Regulation S-K, which is the Compensation Committee Report stating whether the compensation committee has reviewed the company’s Compensation Discussion and Analysis, discussed it with management and recommended to the board of directors that it be included in the company’s proxy statement and Form 10-K.²³ See Chapter IV.B of this Guide for a more detailed discussion of related considerations.

Use of Advisors

Under NYSE listing standards adopted in response to the Dodd-Frank Act, the compensation committee may, in its sole discretion, retain or obtain the advice of a compensation consultant, independent legal counsel or other advisor, and is directly responsible for the appointment, compensation and oversight of that advisor’s work. The company must provide for appropriate funding, as determined by the compensation committee, for payment of reasonable compensation to the advisor. Prior to retaining an advisor (other than in-house legal counsel or an advisor that consults on broad-based plans that do not discriminate in favor of executive officers or directors or provides non-customized information), the compensation committee must take into consideration all factors relevant to that advisor’s independence from management, including (1) whether the advisor’s firm provides other services to

²⁰ Section 303A.05(b)(i)(B) of the NYSE Listed Company Manual states that the written charter of the compensation committee must address the committee’s direct responsibility to “make recommendations to the board with respect to non-CEO executive officer compensation, and incentive-compensation and equity-based plans that are subject to board approval.” This requirement is further clarified in the commentary to the rule, which states, “[n]ote also that nothing in Section 303A.05(b)(i)(B) is intended to preclude the board from delegating its authority over such matters to the compensation committee.” We read this rule, together with the commentary, to mean that the compensation committee may be given either approval authority or recommendation authority over the matters covered by Section 303A.05(b)(i)(B).

²¹ See Rule 3b-7 under the Exchange Act.

²² See Section 303A.05(b)(i)(B) of the NYSE Listed Company Manual.

²³ See Section 303A.05(b)(i)(C) of the NYSE Listed Company Manual.

the company, (2) the amount of fees from the company received by the advisor's firm relative to the total revenue of the advisor's firm, (3) conflict-of-interest policies of the advisor's firm, (4) any business or personal relationships between the advisor and members of the compensation committee, (5) any stock of the company owned by the advisor and (6) any relationships between the advisor or the advisor's firm and an executive officer of the company. These rules do not require the compensation committee to retain only independent advisors; rather, they mandate that the compensation committee consider the above six factors (and any other factors, if relevant) before selecting an advisor.

Self-Evaluation

Lastly, a compensation committee must conduct an annual self-evaluation of its performance. A compensation committee must decide how to conduct its evaluation. In making the decision, it is not required that the directors receive outside assistance, and no specific method of evaluation is prescribed. That said, many consulting firms offer advisory services to assist with the evaluation process or published their recommended forms and procedures for conducting these evaluations, which can be helpful resources to the committee. A compensation committee may elect to do the evaluation by discussions at meetings. Documents and minutes created as part of the evaluation process are not privileged, and care should be taken not to create ambiguous records that may be used in litigation against the company and its directors.²⁴

2. Nasdaq Requirements

Under Nasdaq listing standards adopted in response to the Dodd-Frank Act, Nasdaq-listed companies are required to have a compensation committee consisting of at least two independent directors. In certain circumstances, the compensation committee may include one non-independent member, as described above in Chapter I.A.2 of this Guide. Nasdaq also requires the compensation committee to have a formal charter, as described in greater detail in Chapter XI of this Guide.

CEO and Other Executive Officer Compensation

Under the Nasdaq rules, the compensation committee is responsible for determining, or recommending to the board of directors for determination, the compensation of the CEO and all other executive officers of the company.²⁵ The CEO is prohibited from attending meetings while the compensation committee members are deliberating or voting on the CEO's compensation. Nasdaq places no such restriction on the attendance of other executive officers and does not prohibit

²⁴ For a brief discussion of the factors a compensation committee should consider in its annual self-evaluation, see Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, *Nominating and Corporate Governance Committee Guide*.

²⁵ See Nasdaq Listed Company Manual Section 5605(d)(1)(B).

the CEO from being present at compensation committee discussions concerning the compensation of other executive officers.

Use of Advisors

As with NYSE rules, Nasdaq rules provide that the compensation committee may, in its sole discretion, retain or obtain the advice of a compensation consultant, independent legal counsel or other advisor, and is directly responsible for the appointment, compensation and oversight of that advisor's work. The company must provide for appropriate funding, as determined by the compensation committee, and for payment of reasonable compensation to the advisor. Nasdaq rules require the compensation committee to consider the six factors under the NYSE rules described above.

B. CEO and Executive Officer Compensation

While both the NYSE and Nasdaq only require that a compensation committee recommend to the full board of directors non-CEO executive officer compensation, vesting complete authority in the compensation committee to determine the compensation for such individuals is advisable, given the requirements of the insider trading short-swing profit exemption of Rule 16b-3 under Section 16(b) of the Exchange Act and state law fiduciary duty jurisprudence, both of which provide substantial incentives for the compensation of executive officers to be determined by a committee of independent directors. A more detailed discussion of the requirements of Rule 16b-3 under the Exchange Act is set forth in Chapter I of this Guide.

Performance Criteria

In evaluating and setting executive officer compensation, a compensation committee should be deliberative and guided by its established compensation policy. If compensation levels are linked to the satisfaction of predetermined performance criteria, then a compensation committee should discuss whether, and to what degree, the criteria have been satisfied. That said, in response to unforeseen circumstances, including a rapidly shifting macroeconomic landscape, a compensation committee may find it necessary to evaluate whether preset financial goals still provide a meaningful measure of company performance. If not, the compensation committee may need to exercise discretion and rely on subjective judgments regarding individual and company performance.

Costs and Benefits

Furthermore, to help ensure that compensation and severance packages are justifiable, members of a compensation committee should fully understand the costs and benefits of the compensation arrangements that they are considering. Particular attention should be paid to severance arrangements and to all benefits provided to senior management in connection with termination of employment, as well as the impact of a change in control of the company on equity incentives and

other compensation arrangements. It may be useful for a compensation committee to utilize a tally sheet, which provides a concise breakdown of the various components of a given executive officer's compensation package in scenarios that include continued employment, termination of employment and change in control of the company. And, as discussed below, given the pressure for compensation committees to consider non-executive officer compensation when setting compensation for senior executives, it would be prudent for compensation committees to be better educated as to how executive compensation arrangements fit within the broader compensation structures of the company.

C. Non-Executive Officer Compensation and Broad-Based ERISA Plans

Non-Executive Officer Compensation

There is no particular allocation of responsibilities for determining the compensation and benefits of employees that is appropriate for every company. Companies should consider whether the compensation committee will have responsibility for employee compensation beyond that of executive officers. In addition, companies should consider whether the compensation committee will have responsibility for risk oversight in incentive compensation plans for all employees, as discussed below in this Chapter II.

Limiting a compensation committee's responsibility to executive officer compensation may make sense for many companies so that directors can concentrate their limited time and resources on establishing proper incentives for those employees who are most likely to influence company performance. However, companies should be mindful that due to increased focus on pay ratios and shareholder litigation surrounding compensation issues generally, it may be useful for compensation committees to increase their oversight of total compensation expenditures (*e.g.*, bonus compensation in financial institutions).

Ultimately, the full board of directors is charged with allocating compensation responsibilities, but the compensation committee may be best equipped to make recommendations to the full board of directors concerning the compensation committee's scope of responsibility.

Broad-Based ERISA Plans

As noted in Chapter III of this Guide, a compensation committee also may have fiduciary responsibilities under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974, as amended ("ERISA"), for certain broad-based employee benefit plans, either as a result of language in plan documents or the compensation committee's own charter, or by virtue of actually exercising such responsibilities. It is possible for a plan to state that the full board of directors or the compensation committee is responsible for administering ERISA plans or for managing the investment of their assets, either of which will implicate ERISA's fiduciary duty rules, which in most

instances require that the fiduciary act exclusively for the benefit of the plan participants.

It may or may not be appropriate for a compensation committee to assume such responsibilities—as with shareholder litigation surrounding compensation issues generally, it may be more useful to limit the responsibility of boards of directors and their committees with respect to employee benefit plans—but, in any event, companies should ensure that the documentation and actual exercise of fiduciary responsibilities are consistent, and that all who are ERISA fiduciaries are aware of that fact and understand the legal responsibilities it entails.

D. Equity Compensation Grant Policy

Companies should review the manner in which equity compensation awards are granted to employees and directors, particularly in light of new SEC disclosure requirements described below. While any given company’s equity grant practices will be tailored to the company’s particular business and administrative needs, each company should consider establishing a written equity award grant policy that complies with, and specifies that grants will be made in accordance with, applicable equity compensation plan provisions, the compensation committee charter and any applicable law. A comprehensive equity award grant policy will safeguard against the risk of ill-timed grants and preserve the flexibility to grant off-cycle awards under exceptional circumstances.

New Disclosure Requirements for Option Grants

There has long been a general requirement to disclose in the Compensation Discussion & Analysis section of annual proxy statements “how the determination is made as to when awards are granted, including awards of equity-based compensation such as options.”²⁶ Much more specific disclosures regarding the timing of option grants are now prescribed under the new Item 402(x) of Regulation S-K, which was required for the first time in annual proxy statements or Forms 10-K filed in respect of the registrant’s first full fiscal period that began on or after April 1, 2023 (or for smaller reporting companies, that began on or after October 1, 2023).²⁷

Item 402(x) requires a registrant to discuss its policies and practices on the timing of option awards in relation to the disclosure of material nonpublic information (“MNPI”), including how the board determines when to grant such awards; whether (and, if so, how) the board takes material nonpublic information into account when determining the timing and terms of such an award; and whether the registrant has

²⁶ Regulation S-K Item 402(b)(2)(iv).

²⁷ See Insider Trading Arrangements and Related Disclosures, 87 Fed. Reg. 80362 (Dec. 29, 2022), available [here](#).

timed the disclosure of material nonpublic information for the purpose of affecting the value of executive compensation.

If, during the last completed fiscal year, a registrant awarded options to a named executive officer in the period *beginning four business days before* the filing of a periodic report on Form 10-Q or Form 10-K, or the filing of a current report on Form 8-K that discloses MNPI, and ending one business day after the filing of such report, then Item 402(x) requires the registrant to disclose the grant date, number of shares covered, per share exercise price, and grant date fair value of the award, as well as the percentage change in the closing price of the shares covered by the award between the trading day ending immediately prior to disclosure of the MNPI and the trading day beginning immediately following disclosure of the MNPI.

“Spring-Loaded” Equity Awards

In general, companies should be mindful of granting any equity awards while in possession of MNPI as there may be legal and accounting consequences for such grants beyond the disclosure requirements of Item 402(x). Such awards are often referred to as “spring-loaded” awards when the material nonpublic information is positive.

Under Delaware case law,²⁸ the practice of granting “spring-loaded” options (or option-like awards) may constitute a breach of fiduciary duty on the part of the approving directors. The elements of a claim of breach of fiduciary duty on the basis of option spring-loading are generally: (1) possession by the director of MNPI soon to be released that would impact the company’s share price, and (2) one or both of the following: (a) issuance by the director of options with intent to circumvent otherwise valid shareholder-approved restrictions upon the exercise price of the options, and/or (b) failure to adequately disclose the nature of the spring-loading scheme when the option grants are revealed. While Item 402(x) disclosure does not necessarily mean that an option has been improperly “spring-loaded,” companies should be aware of the risk that such disclosure has the potential to result in actual or threatened shareholder litigation. Consequently, if a company is required to provide such disclosure, it would be prudent for the company to be prepared to rebut any assertions of improper conduct and ensure that the record demonstrates that the elements of option “spring-loading” were not present.

In addition, there may be accounting consequences for a company granting any equity award while in possession of MNPI. In November 2021, the SEC issued Staff Accounting Bulletin No. 120 (SAB 120), which applies not just to options but all equity awards (including full value awards such as restricted stock and restricted stock units). Under SAB 120, a company that grants an equity award while in possession of MNPI is advised to consider whether, for purposes of estimating the fair value cost of the award, it would be appropriate to adjust the current share price

²⁸ See *In re Tyson Foods, Inc. Consolidated Shareholder Litigation* (Del. Ch. Feb. 6, 2006); *In re Tyson Foods, Inc. Consolidated Shareholder Litigation* (Del. Ch. Aug. 15, 2007).

and its expected volatility for the expected term of the award. Careful consideration is especially warranted when equity awards are granted in contemplation of or shortly before a planned release of MNPI that is expected to result in a material increase in share price. The staff notes that *non-routine* spring-loaded grants merit particular scrutiny, highlighting the importance of having a consistent equity award grant practice.

Delegation of Authority to Grant Awards

Besides timing considerations, companies should also consider the appropriateness of, and parameters regarding, the delegation of authority to grant equity awards by the board of directors or the compensation committee. As discussed in Chapter I of this Guide, equity grants to directors and Section 16 officers should generally be approved by the compensation committee or the board in order to fit within the exemption from short-swing profit liability under Rule 16b-3.

When it comes to the broader employee population, however, it may not always be the best use of directors' time to consider and approve every award, especially if the company frequently makes off-cycle grants for new hires, promotions and other special situations. Therefore, at many companies the board or compensation committee delegates the authority to grant equity awards to the CEO or other officers. Delaware-incorporated companies should note the various requirements for such delegation under the Delaware General Corporation Law ("DGCL").

Under Section 157(c) of the DGCL, the board of directors may delegate to a person or body the authority to enter into transactions to issue rights or options (other than to such person or body). The rights or options may be issued in such numbers, at such times, for such consideration and upon such terms as determined by the delegate. The authorizing resolutions must fix the following:

- ***Maximum Shares*** – The maximum number of shares issuable upon exercise of the rights or options.
- ***Time Period*** – A time period during which such rights or options, and a time period during which the shares issuable upon exercise thereof, may be issued.
- ***Minimum Consideration*** – The minimum consideration (if any) for which such rights or options may be issued and the minimum consideration for the shares issuable upon exercise thereof.

E. Management Succession

Planning for succession of the CEO and other senior executives is critical for the long-term success and stability of any public corporation. The board should evaluate annually the status of future generations of company leadership. To the extent that a company has not given responsibility for executive succession to its nominating and governance committee, it should consider charging the

compensation committee with responsibility for management development and succession strategy.

The smoothest successions involve planned transitions where there is time for a comprehensive board process and to prepare the communications rollout to key stakeholders. No two successions are exactly alike, but most involve similar work streams for a company and its advisors:

- negotiating exit terms with the outgoing executive and employment terms with the successor;
- preparing communications and SEC filings; and
- executing an effective communications rollout.

Managing a smooth board process is paramount. The board must understand the compensation costs, including any accounting impact, for both the outgoing and the incoming executive. A company that is unprepared for succession is vulnerable, as an uncertain situation can result in a leadership vacuum, negative publicity, lack of focus, internal dysfunction, activist attack/criticism and unsolicited takeover offers.

Any succession strategy should include an emergency action plan, including:

- prior identification of an interim (or permanent) successor;
- having a protocol for calling emergency board meetings and preserving the record of such meetings;
- maintaining a list of key internal and external advisors, including public relations experts who can be relied upon to act quickly;
- identifying and keeping track of key stakeholders—whether inside or outside of the organization—to whom prompt outreach may be important upon announcement of the leadership change;
- understanding disclosure obligations—both as to timing and substance of the departure of the officer and replacement thereof; and
- establishing a detailed timeline and clear chain of command.

It is not unusual for a board to learn on a Friday afternoon that it needs to announce a new CEO by Monday morning. Having an emergency plan in place will make things proceed as smoothly as possible.

In addition to leadership transitions that may occur in the ordinary course of business, corporate transactions inherently involve one or more executive transitions, which have become more complex in recent years as transaction structures, and the design of post-closing leadership, continue to evolve. In

particular, the compensation committee must be prepared to give careful thought to the design and implementation of executive transition strategies, which may include the chief executive officer of one of the merger parties assuming the role of executive chair, serving as non-executive chair or as non-employee director, or serving in an advisory role following the closing. Within the context of a transaction, the compensation committee must be prepared to work quickly and efficiently with the board and with the company's advisors to ensure a smooth transition.

F. Risk Oversight of Incentive Compensation

As discussed in more detail in Chapter IV of this Guide, the SEC has adopted disclosure rules that require discussion in proxy statements of the board of directors' role in overseeing risk and the relationship between a company's overall employee compensation policies and risk management. In addition, the regulatory framework applicable to financial institutions, as described in more detail in Chapter II.G below, requires all financial institutions to evaluate incentive compensation and related risk management, controls and governance processes, and to address deficiencies or processes inconsistent with safety and soundness.

While the compensation committee cannot and should not be involved in actual day-to-day risk *management*, directors should, through their risk *oversight* role, satisfy themselves that management has designed and implemented risk-management processes that (1) evaluate the nature of the risks inherent in compensation programs, (2) are consistent with the company's corporate strategy, and (3) foster a culture of risk-aware and risk-adjusted decision-making throughout the organization.

In overseeing risk in incentive compensation programs, the compensation committee should take into account the company's overall risk-management system and tolerance for risk throughout the organization and should discuss with members of the committee charged with risk oversight the most material risks facing the business. The ability of the compensation committee to perform its oversight role effectively is, to a large extent, dependent upon the flow of information among the directors, senior management and the risk managers in the company. Compensation committee members need to receive sufficient information with respect to the material risk exposures affecting the company and the risk-management strategies, procedures and infrastructure designed to address them.

For instance, a non-exhaustive list of some of the features that may impact the risk profile of an incentive compensation program includes: (1) the number of participants; (2) whether any performance metrics are risk-adjusted (*e.g.*, based on economic profit), and/or revenue- or transaction-based metrics; (3) whether there are multiple metrics and whether those metrics are based on broader company or business unit performance or based on the individual's performance; (4) whether the compensation committee has discretion to adjust compensation up or down; (5)

the time horizon for awards (*e.g.*, whether awards incentivize short-term results over long-term sustainability); and (6) the dilutive effect of outstanding awards.

The measurement, determination and adjustment of payouts can also have an impact on the risk profile of an incentive compensation program—*e.g.*, the size of aggregate and individual payouts, whether goals and award levels are within narrower or broader ranges, and whether the awards are all-or-nothing versus tiered payouts. The maximum amount of potential revenue and potential losses or liabilities that could result from the businesses covered by the program and/or the plan also can have an impact.

If it is determined that a program has the potential to incentivize employees to assume excessive risks, then risk-mitigation techniques should be implemented to calibrate those programs to the risk profile of the organization. Potential mitigation tactics include lengthening performance periods, implementing clawbacks, deferring payment of earned performance awards, limiting the transferability of stock received in respect of equity awards, deleveraging payouts and applying downward adjustments for adverse outcomes.

G. Considerations for Financial Institution Compensation Committees

In addition to the responsibilities of compensation committee members described above, members of compensation committees of financial institutions have expanded supervisory duties and must comply with additional regulatory overlays. Executive compensation and broad-based incentive compensation matters at financial institutions continue to be sensitive subjects that are scrutinized by the media and shareholders, and the regulatory requirements and standards relating to the design and administration of compensation arrangements at financial institutions are complex. While much of the public attention has been focused on executive compensation that is deemed excessive in amount, there has also been a critical assessment of the interplay among compensation and governance policies, corporate risk-taking and short-termism. Financial institutions have succeeded in balancing regulatory expectations with the “pay-for-performance” demands of shareholders and the need to attract, retain, and incentivize executives and key employees.

Set forth below is a brief summary of (1) the final guidance on the safety and soundness of incentive compensation policies, (2) the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation’s (the “FDIC”) golden parachute limitations, and (3) the re-proposed final rule under Section 956 of the Dodd-Frank Act. This summary generally identifies where the compensation committee has a specific responsibility or obligation and notes the complexity of the regulatory framework surrounding the compensation arrangements of financial professionals, which has resulted in increased responsibilities and challenges for compensation committee members at financial institutions.

1. Safety and Soundness Guidance

In June 2010, the bank regulatory agencies jointly issued final guidance for financial institutions on incentive compensation.²⁹ All banking organizations are expected to evaluate incentive compensation and related risk management, control and governance processes, and to address deficiencies or processes inconsistent with safety and soundness. This evaluation is to be done with a view to the three core principles described in the guidance—that incentive compensation should:

- provide employees incentives that appropriately balance risk and reward;
- be compatible with effective controls and risk management; and
- be supported by strong corporate governance, including active and effective oversight by the board of directors (or an appropriate committee thereof).

The third principle is of primary importance to compensation committee members of banking organizations. The guidelines emphasize governance and board-level oversight and provide that the board of directors of an organization is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the organization’s incentive compensation arrangements (“ICAs”) for all covered employees—not just senior executives—are appropriately balanced and do not jeopardize the safety and soundness of the organization. As part of its ICA oversight duties, among other matters, the compensation committee is required to directly approve ICAs for senior executives, as well as monitor performance and regularly review ICA design and function. The guidelines expressly call for the involvement of various management functions, such as compliance, internal audit and risk management, in the incentive compensation process.

In addition, regulators expect companies to have a framework for the exercise of discretion in compensation matters so that discretionary decisions may be audited, and to have recoupment and clawback provisions in place for all forms of incentive compensation. The consequences of failing to meet the standards of the compensation guidelines are not insignificant, as the guidelines provide that supervisory findings on incentive compensation will be included in exam reports and incorporated into supervisory ratings. In addition, supervisory or enforcement action may be taken if incentive compensation or related controls, risk management or governance pose a risk to safety and soundness, and acceptable curative measures are not underway.

2. FDIC Golden Parachute Regulations

Payments to executives of “troubled” financial institutions may be limited under the “golden parachute” rules of the FDIC. Subject to certain exceptions, the FDIC

²⁹ Guidance on Sound Incentive Compensation Policies, 75 Fed. Reg. 36395 (June 25, 2010), available [here](#).

rules prohibit troubled insured depository institutions (or their holding companies) from making golden parachute payments to any “institution-affiliated party” (“IAP”), which includes the institution’s directors, officers and employees, among others. The FDIC rules generally define “golden parachute payments” as compensatory payments (or agreements to make compensatory payments) to an IAP by a troubled insured depository institution that are contingent on, or payable after, the termination of the IAP’s primary employment or affiliation with the institution, with exceptions for certain *bona fide* deferred compensation payments, qualified retirement plan payments, limited payments under nondiscriminatory severance pay arrangements and payments under certain employee welfare benefit plans.

An institution subject to the FDIC’s golden parachute rules may, subject to obtaining the written consent of the appropriate federal banking agency, make parachute payments to IAPs under an agreement that provides for payment of a reasonable severance payment, not exceeding 12 months of salary, in the event of a change in control of the institution (other than an FDIC-assisted transaction or in connection with FDIC receivership or conservatorship). Accordingly, the compensation committees of institutions subject to the FDIC’s golden parachute rules should be aware of the additional limitations on severance payments, whether or not in connection with a change in control, since severance payments that would have otherwise been due to executives may be subject to reduction — or altogether prohibited — depending on the circumstances.

3. Section 956 of the Dodd-Frank Act

In 2011, federal regulators (including the Federal Reserve, the FDIC and the SEC) issued a proposed rule to implement Section 956 of the Dodd-Frank Act, which prohibits incentive-based compensation arrangements at a broad range of financial institutions that provide excessive compensation or could expose the institution to inappropriate risks that could lead to a material financial loss. Section 956 of the Dodd-Frank Act requires such institutions to report their incentive-based compensation arrangements. The 2011 proposed rule was never finalized, and, in 2016, the regulators re-proposed a rule that incorporated additional, more stringent requirements on incentive compensation at certain financial institutions covered by Section 956 of the Dodd-Frank Act. The same 2016 proposed rule was re-proposed in May 2024 by several of the regulators, including the FDIC. Although the FDIC withdrew its Notice of Proposed Rulemaking with respect to Section 956 of the Dodd-Frank Act in 2025, the three remaining federal agencies who had re-proposed the rule in May 2024 (*i.e.*, the Department of the Treasury, the Federal Housing Finance Agency and the National Credit Union Administration) may still promulgate final rules. However, given the apparent lack of consensus among the agencies and the SEC’s removal of Section 956 rulemaking from its short-term agenda in September 2025, it remains unclear when and in what form the proposed rules will ultimately be adopted.

H. Other Key Responsibilities

1. Development of Compensation Philosophy

A compensation committee must develop a compensation policy tailored to the company's specific business objectives in order to evaluate, determine and meet executive compensation goals. Not only does a compensation policy make good business sense, the SEC requirements for the Compensation Discussion & Analysis section of the annual proxy statement also require discussion of such a policy. *See* Chapter IV of this Guide for a more detailed discussion of compensation-related disclosure requirements.

2. Compensation-Related Disclosure Responsibilities

A compensation committee should oversee compliance with all compensation-related disclosure requirements. Such compliance presents a significant challenge in light of the comprehensive SEC rules regarding disclosure of executive officer and director compensation. Compensation committee members should request that management review with them (1) potential disclosures that may be required in connection with compensation-related actions, including the timing requirements for any such disclosure, and (2) the nature of the information to be disclosed in upcoming public filings, including information relating to the compensation committee members themselves. Importantly, under current SEC guidance, a company that receives an SEC comment letter due to noncompliance with executive compensation disclosure rules will have to amend any materially noncompliant filings. *See* Chapter IV of this Guide for a discussion of compensation-related disclosure requirements.

3. Internal Controls

As part of the compensation committee's responsibility to oversee compliance with legal rules affecting compensation, it should oversee the company's compensation-related disclosure procedures and internal controls. Companies should track and gather the information required under the compensation disclosure rules. For example, individuals to be included in the Summary Compensation Table of annual proxy statements must generally be determined by reference to total compensation (with certain exclusions), which information should be tracked systematically to facilitate annual disclosure.

In addition, these individuals also constitute "covered employees" within the meaning of Section 162(m) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended (the "Code"). As such, companies should make sure that they track all components of compensation for their executive officers, including the value of perquisites, tax gross-ups and amounts paid/accrued in connection with a termination of employment or a change in control. The expansion of Section 162(m) in 2017 to make "covered employee" status permanent—once a "covered employee," always a "covered employee"—compounds the importance of maintaining accurate

records of this status, and a further expansion under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 that is slated to take effect in 2027 will increase the scope of the necessary tracking. For tax years beginning after December 31, 2026, the definition of “covered employee” has been expanded to include a company’s next five highest-compensated employees, who are in addition to the existing covered individuals. Such next five highest-compensated employees must be separately determined each taxable year and do not carry over to later years.

Likewise, public companies must have clear rules and records regarding “specified employees,” within the meaning of Section 409A of the Code, in order to ensure compliance with the required six-month delay of deferred compensation payments triggered by a separation from service. *See* Chapter VI of this Guide for a more detailed discussion of Section 162(m) and Section 409A of the Code.

CHAPTER III

**FIDUCIARY DUTIES OF
COMPENSATION COMMITTEE
MEMBERS**

- A. Fiduciary Duties Generally
 - 1. Business Judgment Rule
 - 2. Adopting or Amending Compensation Arrangements in the Context of Corporate Transactions; Conflicts of Interest Transactions
- B. Fiduciary Duties under ERISA

A. Fiduciary Duties Generally

Decisions by members of compensation committees with respect to executive compensation are generally subject to the business judgment rule.³⁰ In addition, states such as Delaware have enacted laws to permit a company incorporated in the applicable state to, in its certificate of incorporation, either limit or eliminate the personal liability of a director to the company or its shareholders for monetary damages for breach of fiduciary duty, but such laws do not allow a company to limit or eliminate the liability of a director for, among other things, (1) breach of the director's duty of loyalty to the company and its shareholders, or (2) acts or omissions not in good faith or that involve intentional misconduct or a knowing violation of law.³¹ In order to ensure directors are protected from personal liability for exercising discretion on matters that come before them, many Delaware and other corporations have acted to limit or eliminate personal liability of directors to the extent permitted by such laws.

1. Business Judgment Rule

Under the business judgment rule, directors' decisions are presumed to have been made on an informed basis, in good faith and in the honest belief that the action taken was in the best interests of the company. Under this presumption, directors' decisions will not be disturbed unless a plaintiff is able to carry its burden of proof in showing that a board of directors has not met its duty of care or loyalty.

Duty of Care

The core of the duty of care is characterized as a director's obligation to act on an informed basis after due consideration of the relevant materials and appropriate deliberation, including the input of experts.³² To show that a board of directors has not met its duty of care, a plaintiff must prove that director conduct has risen to the level of "gross negligence."³³ In addition, Delaware statutory law permits directors

³⁰ See, e.g., *In re Goldman Sachs Group, Inc. Shareholder Litigation*, C.A. 5215-VCG, 2011 Del. Ch. LEXIS 151, *45 (Del. Ch. Oct. 12, 2011); *Campbell v. Potash Corp. of Saskatchewan, Inc.*, 238 F.3d 792, 800 (6th Cir. 2001) ("evaluating the costs and benefits of golden parachutes is quintessentially a job for corporate boards, and not for federal courts").

³¹ See, e.g., *Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A.2d 805, 812 (Del. 1984). The Delaware Supreme Court has ruled that the typical Delaware corporation charter provision exculpating directors from monetary damages in certain cases applies to claims relating to disclosure issues in general and protects directors from monetary liability for good-faith omissions. *Arnold v. Society for Sav. Bancorp, Inc.*, 650 A.2d 1270, 1286–87 (Del. 1994). Similar provisions have been adopted in most states. The limitation on personal liability does not affect the availability of injunctive relief.

³² *Smith v. Van Gorkom*, 488 A.2d 858, 874 (Del. 1985) (holding that, in the context of a proposed merger, directors must avail themselves of all "information . . . reasonably available to [them] and relevant to their decision" to recommend the merger).

³³ See *Aronson*, 473 A.2d at 812 ("under the business judgment rule, director liability is predicated upon concepts of gross negligence").

in exercising their duty of care to rely on certain materials and information.³⁴ Accordingly, directors charged with approving compensation arrangements should be familiar with the purpose of the arrangements and the nature of the benefits and should reasonably understand the costs; in so doing, directors may reasonably rely on the reports of their committees and advisors.

Duty of Loyalty

The duty of loyalty requires directors to act in the best interests of the company. Subsumed within this duty of loyalty is the directors' duty to act in good faith. In the landmark *Disney* case,³⁵ shareholders filed suit alleging that the board of directors did not act in good faith in approving the roughly \$140 million employment and termination package of former Disney President, Michael Ovitz. The Delaware Court of Chancery ruled that an appropriate measure for determining that a director has not acted in good faith is whether there is an "intentional dereliction of duty, a conscious disregard for one's responsibilities." Negligence—that is, a failure to use due care—should not result in personal liability unless the director failed to act in "good faith." The Court further ruled that a director fails to act in good faith when the director (1) "intentionally acts with a purpose other than that of advancing the best interests of the corporation," (2) "acts with the intent to violate applicable positive law," or (3) "intentionally fails to act in the face of a known duty to act, demonstrating a conscious disregard for his duties."³⁶

The *Disney* decision also made clear that, although directors are encouraged to employ evolving best practices of corporate governance, directors will not be held liable for failure to comply with "the aspirational ideal of best practices." In other words, directors will have the benefit of the business judgment rule if they act on an informed basis, in good faith and not in their personal self-interest, and, in so doing, will not be subject to "*post hoc* penalties from a reviewing court using perfect hindsight."³⁷ As the Court noted, shareholder redress for failures that arise from faithful management "must come from the markets, through the action of shareholders and the free flow of capital, and not from this Court."³⁸

In the *Disney* case, the Delaware Court of Chancery also rejected a claim that the Ovitz pay package amounted to corporate waste because the contract providing for his severance pay had a rational business purpose—that of attracting Mr. Ovitz to join Disney. The "rational business purpose" test is a high hurdle for claims based on waste. Nevertheless, the Court refused to dismiss a corporate waste claim against the Citigroup board arising from the payment of \$68 million to its retiring

³⁴ 8 Del. Code Ann. § 141(e).

³⁵ *In re Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litig.*, 907 A.2d 693 (Del. Ch. 2005), *aff'd*, 906 A.2d 27 (Del. 2006).

³⁶ *Id.* at 755.

³⁷ *Id.* at 698.

³⁸ *Id.*

CEO, Charles Prince.³⁹ In return for the \$68 million payment, Prince agreed to sign noncompete, non-disparagement, and nonsolicitation agreements and a release of claims against Citigroup. The Chancellor’s refusal to dismiss the waste claim was based on his desire to review information regarding the value of the various promises made by Prince relative to the payments he received.⁴⁰

Notable Delaware Cases Relating to Compensation

Goldman Sachs

In October 2011, the Delaware Court of Chancery reaffirmed the traditional principles of the common law of executive compensation in dismissing a wide-ranging shareholder challenge to compensation practices at Goldman Sachs, which included claims based on waste and the board’s failure to act in good faith, to be adequately informed and to monitor the company.⁴¹ In particular, the Court noted that “[t]he decision as to how much compensation is appropriate to retain and incentivize employees, both individually and in the aggregate, is a core function of a board of directors exercising its business judgment,”⁴² and, if the shareholders disagree with the board’s judgment, their remedy is to then replace board members through directorial elections.⁴³

Yahoo!

In 2016, the Delaware Court of Chancery ordered Yahoo! Inc.⁴⁴ to produce certain books and records under Section 220 of the Delaware General Corporation Law to Amalgamated Bank, as trustee for certain stockholders, regarding the hiring and subsequent firing of Yahoo!’s Chief Operating Officer, Henrique de Castro. In its opinion, the Court found similarities to the *Disney* case: a CEO hiring a number-two executive, poor performance by the number-two executive and a no-fault termination that resulted in a large payment to the terminated executive (*i.e.*, approximately \$60 million in cash and accelerated equity awards). According to the Court, based on publicly available information and certain information provided by Yahoo!, there was a credible basis to suspect wrongdoing, including possible breach of fiduciary duties, by the board and the CEO, and possible corporate waste.⁴⁵ Although the opinion does not represent a finding by the Court that there was in fact a breach of fiduciary duty or corporate waste, it highlights the importance of providing material information to a board of directors in executive

³⁹ *In re Citigroup Inc. Shareholder Deriv. Litig.*, 964 A.2d 106, 138 (Del. Ch. 2009).

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *In re The Goldman Sachs Group, Inc. Shareholder Litigation*, C.A. No. 5215-VCG, 2011 Del. Ch. LEXIS 151 (Del. Ch. Oct. 12, 2011).

⁴² *Id.* at 45.

⁴³ *Id.* at 46.

⁴⁴ *Amalgamated Bank, Trustee for the Longview LargeCap 500 Index Fund and the LongView LargeCap 500 Index VEBA Fund v. Yahoo! Inc.*, 132 A.3d 752 (Del. Ch. 2016).

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 783–84.

compensation determinations and of facilitating a meaningful review and evaluation of such information before approval of compensation actions.

McDonalds

The protection of the business judgment rule is also important with regard to decisions about terminations of employment of executive officers that have significant compensation consequences. In the 2023 dismissal of a stockholder complaint filed against the directors of McDonalds,⁴⁶ the Delaware Court of Chancery held that the business judgment rule protected a decision by directors to terminate the CEO without cause. Stockholders had alleged that company directors breached their fiduciary duties by terminating the employment of the company's CEO without cause in November 2019 after learning that the CEO had engaged in an inappropriate relationship with an employee. The plaintiffs alleged that the director defendants could have terminated the CEO for cause but acted in self-interest in approving a without-cause termination in order to avoid attracting litigation that would expose their own failures to address the company's problems with sexual harassment and misconduct (the company had terminated another senior executive for cause during the same month it terminated the CEO's employment). The complaint also alleged that the directors committed corporate waste by allowing the CEO to keep millions of dollars in compensation while obtaining comparatively little for the company in return.

The Court found that the record showed that the director defendants had engaged meaningfully in assessing the termination and that the business judgment rule protected the decisions of the directors, noting "[r]easonable minds can disagree about whether the Director Defendants made the right decision by opting initially to terminate the CEO without cause."⁴⁷ Even if the Defendant Directors made an objectively wrong decision, the business judgment rule protects them for liability for a good faith error."⁴⁸ With respect to the waste claim, the Court found that although reasonable minds could disagree with the actions of the directors, the bargain was not so "out of whack" as to constitute waste.

2. Adopting or Amending Compensation Arrangements in the Context of Corporate Transactions; Conflicts of Interest Transactions

Enhanced Scrutiny

Adopting or amending compensation arrangements in the context of takeover activity or certain negotiated transactions can result in heightened judicial scrutiny. If deemed a defensive measure taken in response to an actual or threatened takeover, then the adoption or amendment will be subject to judicial review under

⁴⁶ *In re McDonald's Corp Stockholder Derivative Litigation*, 291 A.3d 652 (Del. Ch. 2023).

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 663.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

an “enhanced scrutiny” standard,⁴⁹ which looks both to the board of directors’ process and its action. To be clear, a compensation arrangement will not be subjected to enhanced scrutiny merely because it is adopted in the face of a takeover threat—a board of directors must also have entered into the compensation arrangement as a defensive measure.⁵⁰ If enhanced scrutiny does apply, the directors carry the burden of proving that their process and conduct satisfy a two-pronged test (known as the *Unocal* standard):⁵¹

- the board had “reasonable grounds for believing that a danger to corporate policy and effectiveness existed,” which may be shown by the directors’ good-faith and reasonable investigation; and
- the defensive measure chosen was “reasonable in relation to the threat posed,” which may be demonstrated by the objective reasonableness of the course chosen.⁵²

If directors can establish both prongs of the *Unocal* test, their actions will receive the protections of the business judgment rule. While the *Unocal* standard still provides a board of directors reasonable latitude in adopting defensive measures,⁵³ executive compensation plans (including change in control employment arrangements) adopted in response to a takeover threat may result in a court more closely examining a board of directors’ process and actions.⁵⁴ Therefore, adopting or amending change in control employment arrangements sufficiently in advance of an actual or threatened takeover is advisable whenever possible.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ See, e.g., *Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petroleum Co.*, 493 A.2d 946 (Del. 1985); *Gilbert v. El Paso Co.*, 575 A.2d 1131, 1143–44 (Del. 1990) (subjecting the “golden parachute” employment arrangement among target’s defensive measures to enhanced scrutiny).

⁵⁰ See, e.g., *Moore v. Wallace Computer Servs.*, 907 F. Supp. 1545, 1556 (D. Del. 1995) (“In addition . . . the facts [sic] that such agreements are commonplace among chief executives of major companies and that Cronin’s severance package was identical to that of his predecessor, persuade this Court that the adoption of the golden parachute agreement was not a defensive measure.”).

⁵¹ *Unocal*, 493 A.2d at 955.

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ See, e.g., *Unitrin, Inc. v. American Gen. Corp.*, 651 A.2d 1361, 1388 (Del. 1995).

⁵⁴ See *Gilbert*, 575 A.2d at 1143–44 (applying *Unocal* standard in reviewing defensive measures, including golden parachutes and ESOPs, where “everything that [defendant directors] did was in reaction to [the] tender offer”); *Int’l Ins. Co. v. Johns*, 874 F.2d 1447, 1459 (11th Cir. 1989) (stating that the intent of the company’s board in enacting a golden parachute is determinative of the standard used; when enacted in response to a takeover threat, the *Unocal* enhanced scrutiny standard applies).

⁵⁵ See *Moore Corp. Ltd. v. Wallace Computer Servs., Inc.*, 907 F. Supp. 1545, 1556 (D. Del. 1995) (refusing to apply *Unocal* scrutiny to golden parachutes negotiated before a tender offer, but applying *Unocal* enhanced scrutiny to the failure to redeem a poison pill); and *In re Western Nat’l Corp. S’holders Litig.*, 2000 WL 710192, *39–41 (Del. Ch. May 22, 2000) (finding a board-approved employment agreement granting large severance payment and accelerated vesting of options to a senior executive did not pose an economic conflict of interest because the applicable employment agreement was adopted before potential acquirer was a shareholder).

Entire Fairness

When an actual conflict of interest that affects a majority of the directors approving a transaction is found, Delaware courts apply the most exacting standard—the “entire fairness” review—which requires a judicial determination of whether a transaction is entirely fair to shareholders as to both process and price.⁵⁶ Such conflicts may arise in situations where directors (1) appear on both sides of a transaction, as in the adoption of compensation arrangements for the directors themselves, or (2) derive a personal financial benefit that does not generally benefit the company and its shareholders.⁵⁷ In determining whether a transaction is entirely fair, “the court must consider the process itself that the board followed, the quality of the result it achieved and the quality of the disclosures made to the shareholders to allow them to exercise such choice as the circumstances could provide.”⁵⁸

Director Compensation

In the context of director and executive compensation, entire fairness scrutiny is most likely to apply where directors have approved a compensation plan specifically for themselves. Even if the compensation arrangements directly benefit certain directors, so long as the approval is made by an independent committee or by the disinterested directors, it should still be protected by the business judgment rule.⁵⁹ However, when directors who directly benefit from a proposed plan are delegated the responsibility of approving such a plan, a court will refuse the protection of the business judgment rule and scrutinize the overall fairness of the plan as it relates to the company’s shareholders.⁶⁰ See Chapter XII of this Guide for a more detailed discussion of director compensation.

Controlling Stockholder Compensation

Entire fairness scrutiny may also apply in the context of compensation awarded by a company to an officer who is also a controller of the company within the meaning of the applicable case law. A recent, high-profile example arose in the stockholder derivative litigation relating to Elon Musk’s 2018 performance-based stock option award from Tesla. The award had a grant date fair value of \$2.6 billion and a maximum value of \$55.8 billion, and consisted of 12 tranches of stock options, each representing 1% of Tesla’s total shares outstanding. Vesting of each tranche

⁵⁶ See, e.g., *Weinberger v. UOP, Inc.*, 457 A.2d 701, 710–11 (Del. 1983), *aff’d*, 497 A.2d 792, Del. Supr., July 9, 1985.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., *Ivanhoe Partners v. Newmont Mining Corp.*, 535 A.2d 1334, 1341 (Del. 1987).

⁵⁸ *Cinerama, Inc. v. Technicolor*, 663 A.2d 1134, 1140 (Del. Ch. 1994).

⁵⁹ See *Tate & Lyle PLC v. Staley Continental, Inc.*, 1988 Del. Ch. LEXIS 61, *20–21 (Del. Ch. May 9, 1988) (permitting outside directors to approve long-term incentive plan compensation for management after conducting reasonable inquiry and obtaining full board of directors’ approval).

⁶⁰ See, e.g., *id.* at *20–22 (invalidating rabbi trusts covering both inside and outside directors due to conflict of interest).

required both an increase in Tesla’s market cap by \$50 billion and the achievement of certain revenue or EBITDA targets.

In a 200-page opinion issued in January 2024,⁶¹ the Delaware Court of Chancery ordered the rescission of the entire compensation award, concluding that (1) Musk was a controller of Tesla (although he only held 21.9% of the vote power) because he had transaction-specific control as to the decision to grant his compensation award, (2) the defendants bore the burden of proving that his compensation award was “entirely fair,” unless the burden was shifted to the plaintiffs by demonstration of a “fully informed vote of the majority of the minority stockholders,” (3) though the compensation award was approved by a majority of the minority, the stockholder vote was not fully informed because the proxy statement inaccurately described key directors as “independent” and omitted certain details about the process, and (4) the defendants were not able to prove the compensation award was entirely fair as to both process and price. In December 2024, the Court once again struck down the compensation award even though it was approved again by Tesla stockholders in June 2024. The Court noted that “a stockholder vote standing alone cannot ratify a conflicted-controller transaction” and that, even if a stockholder vote could have a ratifying effect, the June stockholder vote was not fully informed because the proxy statement contained “multiple, material misstatements.”⁶²

On December 19, 2025, the Delaware Supreme Court reversed the rescission of Elon Musk’s 2018 grant by the Delaware Court of Chancery, reinstating the plan and awarding the plaintiff nominal damages.⁶³ In its opinion, the Delaware Supreme Court reversed due to a finding that (i) Elon Musk could not be restored to the *status quo ante* after working six years to meet the market capitalization and operational milestones of his 2018 equity award, and (ii) the increased value of Mr. Musk’s existing equity holdings based on prior grants (2009 and 2012 awards) did not substitute for his return to the *status quo ante*.⁶⁴ In reversing the lower court’s rescission of Mr. Musk’s 2018 grant, the Delaware Supreme Court noted that it was taking the narrower path to resolve the appeal given that rescission was an improper remedy.⁶⁵ Notably, the Delaware Supreme Court did not address the other analytical paths offered by the defendants, *i.e.*, whether the Court of Chancery erred in its application of the “entire fairness” standard to Elon Musk’s 2018 grant, or whether the second stockholder approval in June 2024 ratified the 2018 grant.⁶⁶ While a comprehensive analysis of the Tesla litigation is beyond the scope of this Guide, the case serves as an important reminder that in compensation-related transactions with an actual or potential controller, great care should be taken, to the extent possible, to structure the transaction in a manner that avoids the directors

⁶¹ *Tornetta v. Musk*, 310 A.3d 430 (Del. Ch. 2024).

⁶² *Tornetta v. Musk*, C.A. 326 A.3d 1203, 1213 (Del. Ch. 2024).

⁶³ *In re Tesla, Inc. Derivative Litigation*, 2025 Del. LEXIS 492, *6 (Del. Dec. 19, 2025).

⁶⁴ *Id.* at *27.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at *26–27.

⁶⁶ *Id.* at *27 n.80.

bearing the burden of proving the entire fairness of the compensation arrangement to a court that will exercise its own judgment, and act with the benefit of hindsight, in evaluating the arrangement.

It should be noted that the Tesla derivative litigation involving Elon Musk's 2018 equity award was filed before Delaware's 2025 enactment of Senate Bill 21, which (among other things) amended Section 144 of the Delaware General Corporation Law to provide a clear framework for controlling stockholder and interested party transactions. Under the amended Section 144 of the DGCL, corporations may avoid application of the "entire fairness" standard for compensation-related decisions approved by a committee or a majority vote of the corporation's unaffiliated stockholders.

Directors should consult with experienced outside advisors before commencing, and throughout the entirety of, the process of negotiating and approving a significant compensation award for a controller.

B. Fiduciary Duties under ERISA

ERISA is the federal law governing employee retirement and welfare benefit plans. Although its original enactment was spurred by a congressional concern for adequate funding of traditional defined benefit pension plans, ERISA has imposed from its inception a comprehensive set of requirements for many types of broad-based benefit plans, including retirement plans such as defined benefit pension plans (including cash balance plans), the well-known "401(k)" plan, employee stock ownership plans ("ESOPs"), and medical and other welfare plans. A key component of ERISA is the imposition of fiduciary duties and liabilities on individuals and entities that become fiduciaries in respect of such plans under ERISA. ERISA fiduciary duties are said to be the highest of such duties known to the law. It is critical, therefore, for compensation committee members to understand the extent to which they themselves may be liable as ERISA fiduciaries.

ERISA Fiduciaries

A person may become a fiduciary under ERISA by being specifically named as such in a plan document, by being identified as such under a procedure set forth in the plan document, or by exercising responsibilities that ERISA considers to be fiduciary in nature. Note that a named fiduciary may delegate fiduciary responsibilities to another person, who thereby becomes a fiduciary. However, a person who appoints a fiduciary is himself or herself a fiduciary with respect to that appointment. Compensation committees may, therefore, be considered ERISA fiduciaries for many reasons, including as a result of language in their charters or in plan documents, as a result of exercising administrative responsibilities for ERISA plans, by virtue of involvement in managing the assets funding ERISA plans, or because the compensation committees appoint plan fiduciaries (which may include employees of the company as well as third-party institutions such as trust companies or investment managers).

The decision to adopt or terminate a particular compensatory arrangement, even if the arrangement is itself subject to ERISA, is generally considered a “settlor function” and is not subject to ERISA’s fiduciary duty rules. However, once an ERISA plan is adopted, fiduciary duties may attach to determinations made pursuant to that plan. ERISA requires that fiduciaries exercise their fiduciary duties prudently and solely in the best interests of plan participants.

Standard of Care

In general, fiduciary duties under ERISA fall under the statutorily mandated “prudent man standard of care.” Such standard requires a fiduciary to act solely in the interest of the ERISA plan participants, for the exclusive purposes of providing benefits to the plan participants and of defraying reasonable expenses of administering the plan, all with the care, skill, prudence and diligence under the circumstances then prevailing that a prudent man acting in a like capacity and familiar with such matters would use.⁶⁷ A wide body of law has developed under this standard, which includes duties to disclose material information to plan participants, and to avoid conflicts of interest. Consequently, while it is not impermissible for an individual or entity that acts as a plan fiduciary also to have another role that affects the plan, fiduciaries must be alert to the possibility that their ERISA duties and their responsibilities to the shareholders may conflict, presenting special legal issues that must be addressed.

Consider, for example, the common situation in which a person who has responsibility for selecting the investment choices to be offered to 401(k) plan participants—including company stock—learns, in his or her capacity as a member of a board of directors, of confidential information that may, when announced, cause a significant and long-term drop in the company’s stock price: the individual’s fiduciary duty under ERISA to offer only prudent investment choices to plan participants could come into conflict with the individual’s duty under the federal securities laws not to use confidential information before it is made public and with a business strategy being pursued on behalf of shareholders generally.

Notable ERISA Litigation

This type of fact pattern has generated many lawsuits against directors and executives with respect to actions taken in respect of ERISA plans, where an effective legal defense was oftentimes a judicially created presumption of prudence.⁶⁸ However, the U.S. Supreme Court has eliminated this presumption in

⁶⁷ See 29 U.S.C. § 1104(a).

⁶⁸ See, e.g., *Moench v. Robertson*, 62 F.3d 553, 571 (3d Cir. 1995) (holding that an ESOP fiduciary who invests the assets in employer stock is entitled to a presumption that it acted consistently with ERISA by virtue of that decision).

favor of a fact-specific approach in the evaluation of such claims.⁶⁹ This fact-specific approach creates a high bar for claims involving nonpublic information, by requiring that (1) the complaint contain a plausible allegation that an alternative action could have been taken consistent with securities law and (2) a prudent fiduciary in like circumstance would not have viewed such alternative action as more likely to harm the fund than to help it.⁷⁰

Most cases have failed to proceed under this newer standard, given the complex interplay between the securities laws and ERISA. Nonetheless, a recent stock drop case involving corporate officers serving as ERISA fiduciaries with insider knowledge of undisclosed losses at the company made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court.⁷¹ Although the Court did not rule on the merits, it remanded the case, and, of significance, directed the Second Circuit to determine whether to consider the views of the SEC regarding the conflict between the ERISA-based duty to disclose versus the objectives of corporate disclosure requirements and insider trading rules under federal securities laws.⁷² The parties ultimately settled through mediation and the Second Circuit made no ruling on the conflict between the duty to disclose and insider trading rules.

Appointment Fiduciary

Many companies have chosen to have company employees and/or independent third parties, rather than members of their board of directors, serve as ERISA fiduciaries. In such cases, however, the responsibility to appoint those fiduciaries often rests with the full board of directors or the compensation committee. As noted above, those persons who appoint fiduciaries are themselves fiduciaries and, while such persons do not have the same breadth of ERISA fiduciary responsibility, they must still exercise their appointment powers prudently and solely in the best interests of plan participants (*e.g.*, the appointees must be qualified to serve as ERISA fiduciaries). This continued ERISA fiduciary responsibility also includes exercising some oversight over the performance of the appointees, generally through a duty to monitor the activities of the appointees.

Procedural Prudence

The satisfaction of ERISA fiduciary duties relies heavily on “procedural prudence,” so it is important for all ERISA fiduciaries to follow appropriate procedures, to have full access to all necessary information and expert advice pertaining to their duties, and to keep careful records of their deliberations, decisions and actions when acting in a fiduciary capacity. Boards of directors and compensation committees

⁶⁹ See *Fifth Third Bancorp v. Dudenhoeffer*, 573 U.S. 409, 419–420 (2014) (holding that the law does not create a special presumption favoring ESOP fiduciaries and the same standard of prudence applies to all ERISA fiduciaries).

⁷⁰ *Id.* at 428.

⁷¹ See *Retirement Plans Committee of IBM v. Jander*, 589 U.S. 49 (2020).

⁷² *Id.* at 52.

who have delegated ERISA fiduciary duties to qualified appointees also should receive periodic reports regarding the plans being administered by their appointees and satisfy themselves that the appointees are fulfilling their delegated functions. Obtaining and maintaining an appropriate level of ERISA fiduciary insurance for all persons acting as fiduciaries is highly recommended. Although ERISA fiduciaries may not be indemnified using the assets of ERISA plans, companies may be permitted to further indemnify their ERISA fiduciaries through bylaws or corporate resolutions.

CHAPTER IV

COMPENSATION-RELATED DISCLOSURE REQUIREMENTS

- A. Compensation Discussion and Analysis
- B. Compensation Committee Report
- C. Additional Annual Disclosure Regarding NEO Compensation
- D. Director Compensation Table
- E. Compensation Committee Governance
- F. Compensation Consultants and Advisors
- G. Risk and Broad-Based Compensation Programs
- H. Pay Versus Performance Rules
- I. Pay Ratio Disclosure
- J. Hedging Disclosure
- K. Current Reports on Form 8-K
- L. Human Capital Disclosure
- M. Conclusion

As noted in Chapter II of this Guide, compensation committees are tasked with overseeing compliance with all compensation-related disclosure requirements. The already comprehensive disclosure rules are constantly expanding and often highly complex. While compensation committee members need not become experts on the technical requirements, they should review proposed disclosures as required by the rules or as otherwise appropriate, as well as play a supervisory role in ensuring that robust processes are in place at the company to produce compliant disclosures in an efficient manner. Set forth below are the principal components of the executive compensation disclosure required each year.

A. Compensation Discussion and Analysis

The Compensation Discussion and Analysis (“CD&A”) provides investors with material information necessary for an understanding of a company’s compensation policies and decisions regarding the NEOs, which generally include the CEO, the CFO and the three most highly compensated executive officers other than the CEO and the CFO.⁷³ In particular, the CD&A must explain the rationale behind all material elements of NEO compensation, including the overall objectives of the compensation programs and the rationale underlying and method of determining specific amounts for each element of compensation. Under the Dodd-Frank Act, a company also must address in its CD&A whether (and if so, how) the company has considered the results of the most recent say on pay vote in determining compensation policies and decisions.

The CD&A is considered “filed” with the SEC; accordingly, misleading statements in the CD&A expose a company to liability under Section 18 of the Exchange Act. In addition, to the extent that the CD&A is included or incorporated by reference into a periodic report, the disclosure is covered by the CEO and CFO certifications required by the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 (“Sarbanes-Oxley”). If forward-looking information is included in the CD&A, a company may rely on the safe harbors for such information.

B. Compensation Committee Report

A company must include a Compensation Committee Report in its proxy statement and its annual report on Form 10-K (incorporation by reference into the Form 10-K from the proxy statement is permitted). The Compensation Committee Report is required to state whether a compensation committee has reviewed the CD&A, discussed it with management and recommended to the board of directors that it be included in the company’s proxy statement and Form 10-K. The names of the

⁷³ For smaller reporting companies and emerging growth companies, NEOs generally consist of the CEO and two other most highly compensated executive officers. Note that in remarks on February 17, 2026, SEC Chairman Paul S. Atkins indicated he agreed with commenters that the SEC should “reconsider the number of executives for whom compensation information is provided, to appropriately calibrate the level of disclosure with the cost.” See Paul S. Atkins, *Remarks at the Texas A&M School of Law Corporate Law Symposium*, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (Feb. 17, 2026), available [here](#).

compensation committee members must appear below the report. To help ensure the accuracy of the Compensation Committee Report, the compensation committee should have detailed discussions with management concerning the CD&A in advance of the filing deadline.

C. Additional Annual Disclosure Regarding NEO Compensation

The SEC rules require quantitative elements of executive compensation of NEOs to be disclosed in tabular format, together with narrative explanations and footnotes that describe the quantitative disclosure.

Summary Compensation Table

The central component of the tabular disclosure is the Summary Compensation Table, which discloses, by category, all compensation earned by each NEO during the prior three fiscal years,⁷⁴ including compensation attributable to salary, bonus, equity awards, change in pension value, earnings on nonqualified deferred compensation and perquisites.⁷⁵

Other required tables provide detailed information regarding:

- ***Grants of Plan-Based Awards*** – Equity awards and bonus award opportunities granted to NEOs during the last fiscal year.
- ***Outstanding Equity Awards*** – Outstanding equity awards at the end of the last fiscal year, including vesting schedule and exercise price, to the extent applicable.
- ***Option Exercises and Stock Vested*** – Stock options that NEOs have exercised during the last fiscal year and NEO stock awards that have vested during the last fiscal year.
- ***Pension Benefits*** – Pension plan participation by NEOs, including accumulated benefits and any payments during the last fiscal year.
- ***Nonqualified Deferred Compensation*** – NEO participation in deferred compensation plans, including executive and company contributions, earnings, withdrawals, distributions, and the aggregate balance at the last fiscal year-end.

Finally, companies must describe the circumstances in which a NEO may be entitled to payments and/or benefits upon termination of employment and/or in connection with a change in control and quantify the value of those payments and benefits as of fiscal year-end.

⁷⁴ For smaller reporting companies and emerging growth companies, this disclosure is required for the prior two fiscal years.

⁷⁵ See Item 402(c) of Regulation S-K, 17 C.F.R. § 229.402(c) and related Instructions.

D. Director Compensation Table

The SEC rules⁷⁶ also require a Director Compensation Table setting forth director compensation during the prior fiscal year in a format that is comparable to the Summary Compensation Table for NEOs, including disclosure with respect to perquisites, consulting fees and payments or promises in connection with director legacy and charitable award programs. Additionally, the company must provide narrative disclosure of its processes and procedures for the determination of director compensation. We discuss the considerations as to the substance of director compensation in more detail in Chapter XII of this Guide.

E. Compensation Committee Governance

Narrative disclosure regarding the governance of a compensation committee is also required by SEC rules. The disclosure must describe a company's processes for determining executive and director compensation, including (1) the scope of authority of the compensation committee, (2) the extent to which the compensation committee may delegate its authority and (3) any role of executive officers and/or compensation consultants in making determinations regarding executive and/or director compensation.⁷⁷ If compensation consultants play a role in determining executive and/or director compensation, then a company must include the disclosure described immediately below.

F. Compensation Consultants and Advisors

SEC rules require annual disclosure of the role of compensation consultants in determining or recommending executive and director compensation, including:

- the identity of the consultants engaged;
- whether the consultants were engaged directly by the compensation committee;
- the nature and scope of the assignment; and
- under certain circumstances, the aggregate fees for the services provided.

A company must also disclose whether the work of a compensation consultant who played any role in determining or recommending the form or amount of executive and director compensation raised any conflicts of interest, the nature of any such conflicts, and how the conflicts are being addressed. *See* Chapter II of this Guide for a detailed discussion of related NYSE and Nasdaq listing standards regarding the compensation committee's use of advisors.

⁷⁶ *See* Item 402(k) of Regulation S-K, 17 C.F.R. § 229.402(k) and related Instructions.

⁷⁷ *See* Item 407(e)(3) of Regulation S-K, 17 C.F.R. § 229.407(e)(3)

G. Risk and Broad-Based Compensation Programs

To the extent that risks arising from a company's compensation programs for employees generally (not just executives) are reasonably likely to have a material adverse effect on the company, the SEC rules require a discussion in the annual proxy statement of the company's compensation policies and practices as they relate to risk management and risk-taking incentives.⁷⁸ The threshold under the rules—reasonably likely to have a material adverse effect—sets a high bar for disclosure. Nonetheless, a company should engage in a systematic process involving participants from its human resources, legal and finance departments in which it (1) identifies company incentive compensation plans, (2) assesses the plans to determine whether they create undesired or unintentional risk of a material nature, taking into account any mitigating factors, and (3) documents the process and conclusions. If a company concludes that its programs are not reasonably likely to have a material adverse effect, then no disclosure is required. However, as a practical matter, it may be advisable to provide such disclosure because the proxy advisory firm Institutional Shareholder Services ("ISS") has encouraged disclosure about the review process and the company's conclusions and, to the extent that no disclosure is provided, the SEC may seek confirmation from the company that the risk review was done and that the company determined that disclosure was not required.

While the compensation committee need not be involved in the evaluation of risk as applied to incentive compensation arrangements themselves, the committee should satisfy itself that management has designed and implemented appropriate processes to make such evaluations.

H. Pay Versus Performance Rules

The Dodd-Frank Act required that the SEC promulgate rules requiring most listed companies (foreign private issuers, registered investment companies and emerging growth companies are exempt) to disclose the relationship between compensation actually paid to executives and the financial performance of the company in the proxy or information statements in which executive compensation disclosure is required under applicable rules.

Main Tabular Disclosure

The Pay Versus Performance rules, codified in Item 407(v) of Regulation S-K, require companies to disclose in a table the following information for each of the last five completed fiscal years (or three completed fiscal years, for smaller reporting companies):

⁷⁸ See Item 402(s) of Regulation S-K, 17 C.F.R. § 229.402(s).

- **Total Compensation** – The total compensation reported in the Summary Compensation Table for the principal executive officer (the “PEO”) and an *average* of the reported amounts for the remaining NEOs.
- **Compensation Actually Paid** – The compensation “actually paid” to the PEO and the *average* compensation “actually paid” to the remaining NEOs (calculated by starting with the Summary Compensation Table amounts and making certain adjustments to the amounts included for pensions and equity awards, discussed in more detail below).
- **TSR** – The company’s cumulative total shareholder return (“TSR”) on an annual basis, as well as the cumulative TSR on an annual basis, of the companies in the company’s peer group (as identified by the company in its stock performance graph or in its CD&A) expressed as the dollar value of an initial \$100 investment over the measurement period.
- **Net Income** – The company’s net income.
- **Selected Financial Performance Measure** – An amount attributable to an additional financial performance measure included in the tabular list described below, which in the company’s assessment represents the most important financial measure (other than TSR and net income) used by the company to link compensation actually paid to the NEOs for the most recently completed fiscal year to company performance. Based on a recent survey by FW Cook of proxy statements filed by S&P 500 companies, the top three most common financial performance measures chosen by companies as their company selected measure were profit (56%), revenue (17%) and returns (12%).⁷⁹

Using the information presented in the table described above, companies must describe the relationship between the executive compensation “actually paid” and the company’s (i) cumulative TSR, (ii) net income, and (iii) company-selected measure, in each case across the required measurement period. The description must also include a comparison of the company’s cumulative TSR and the cumulative TSR of the peer group over the required measurement period. This disclosure may be described as a narrative, graphically or using a combination of the two.

Selected Financial Performance Measures

In addition, companies are required to provide a “tabular list” of three to seven financial performance measures, which in the company’s assessment represent the most important financial performance measures used by the company to link compensation actually paid to NEOs, for the most recently completed fiscal year, to company performance. Companies may provide a single list, two lists (one for

⁷⁹ See FW Cook’s *Observations From S&P 500 Pay Versus Performance Disclosures* by FW Cook (June 2023), available [here](#).

the PEO and one for other NEOs) or a separate list for each NEO. A company may include non-financial measures in the tabular list if it determines that such measures are among its three to seven most important performance measures, and it has disclosed its most important three financial performance measures. Based on a recent survey by FW Cook of proxy statements filed by S&P 500 companies, the majority of companies included profit (88%), TSR (55%) and revenue (51%) in their tabular lists, and only 21% of companies in the sample included non-financial performance measures.⁸⁰

Compensation Actually Paid

As mentioned above, executive compensation “actually paid” is calculated using compensation that companies report in the Summary Compensation Table as a starting point, with adjustments relating to pension amounts and equity awards. The adjustments required to calculate the equity award component of compensation “actually paid” illustrate the complexity of this rule. This value must include:

- for awards granted in a covered fiscal year that are outstanding and unvested as of the end of such year, the fair value of the awards as of the end of the fiscal year;
- for awards granted in any prior fiscal year that are outstanding and unvested as of the end of the covered fiscal year, the change in fair value as of the end of the covered fiscal year (from the end of the prior fiscal year);
- for awards granted in any prior fiscal year (or in the same fiscal year) that become vested as of the end of a covered fiscal year, the change in fair value as of the vesting date (from the end of the prior fiscal year);
- for awards granted in prior fiscal years that fail to vest, a deduction for the amount of fair value at the end of the prior fiscal year; and
- the dollar value of any dividends paid on any award in a covered fiscal year prior to the vesting date of the award that are not otherwise included in the total compensation for the covered fiscal year.

Disclosure Reforms

Having just gone into effect in 2022, the Pay Versus Performance Rules may already be the subject of reconsideration or simplification by the SEC. In a speech on February 17, 2026, Chairman Paul S. Atkins noted that “all of the time and money spent on PVP disclosure has scarcely resulted in clear information to investors,” and Chairman Atkins agreed with commenters that the SEC should look for ways to make Pay Versus Performance disclosure “simpler for companies to

⁸⁰ See *id.*

prepare and more straightforward for investors to understand.”⁸¹ Companies should anticipate that there may be upcoming adjustments to the Pay Versus Performance framework, as the SEC signals a shift in its approach to the executive compensation framework as a whole.

I. Pay Ratio Disclosure

The Dodd-Frank Act requires that annual proxy statements include disclosure of the ratio between the CEO’s annual total compensation and the median compensation of all other employees.

Identifying the “Median Employee”

Under the rules implemented by the SEC pursuant to the Dodd-Frank Act requirement,⁸² for purposes of calculating the pay ratio, a company is required to identify its “median employee” (against whose compensation the CEO’s will be compared) by considering the annual total compensation of “all employees” (other than the CEO and contract/leased workers) as of a date selected by the company within the last three months of its most recently completed fiscal year.

Fortunately, the rules provide companies with flexibility when identifying the median employee, including that companies may narrow the relevant employee population by using statistical sampling or other reasonable methods, may identify the median employee using either (1) annual total compensation or (2) any other compensation measure that is consistently applied to all employees included in the calculation, and may make certain cost-of-living and annualizing adjustments in identifying the median employee and annual total compensation. The SEC has also issued guidance regarding the use of statistical sampling and other reasonable methodologies that has been helpful in establishing market practices as to calculations and disclosure of the elements of the CEO pay ratio.⁸³

Under the rules, companies may use the same median employee for three consecutive years, unless there has been a change in the employee population or employee compensation arrangements that the company reasonably believes would result in a significant change in the pay ratio disclosure. Note that a public company must briefly describe in its annual proxy statement the methodology it uses to identify the median employee, and if a company changes the methodology and the effects of such change are significant, then the company must briefly describe the change and the reasons for the change.

⁸¹ Paul S. Atkins, *Remarks at the Texas A&M School of Law Corporate Law Symposium*, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (Feb. 17, 2026), available [here](#).

⁸² See Item 402(u) of Regulation S-K, 17 C.F.R. § 229.402(u) and related Instructions.

⁸³ See SEC, *Division of Corporate Finance Guidance on Calculation of Pay Ratio Disclosure* (Sept. 21, 2017).

Calculating Pay Ratio

Once a company's median employee is identified, the median employee's and the CEO's annual total compensation is to be determined in accordance with the disclosure rules that prescribe the calculation of total compensation for the NEOs for purposes of the Summary Compensation Table. Several compensation consulting firms have created sophisticated pay ratio tracking systems, allowing companies to research the median and/or average pay ratios within their industries.⁸⁴ Based on a sampling of 200 large public companies across a variety of industries, as of fall 2025, the median CEO pay ratio was 246:1 and the average CEO pay ratio was 394:1.⁸⁵

J. Hedging Disclosure

An SEC rule issued pursuant to the Dodd-Frank Act requires companies to describe their policies regarding the hedging of company equity securities that are held, directly or indirectly, by employees (including officers) or directors or to state that they do not have any such policies.⁸⁶ The required disclosure covers equity securities (whether or not compensatory) of a company, its parent or subsidiary and any other subsidiary of its parent. A policy may be disclosed verbatim or in summary form. The rule does not define key terms such as “hedging” or “held, directly or indirectly,” but the promulgating release makes clear that these phrases should be interpreted broadly.⁸⁷ The rule covers emerging growth companies and smaller reporting companies, but does not apply to foreign private issuers.

It is worth highlighting that this rule only requires disclosure. It does not prohibit hedging transactions or mandate that a company adopt a hedging policy. That said, the requirement to disclose the absence of a hedging policy appears to have created a general practice of adopting such a policy.

K. Current Reports on Form 8-K

A company must report certain material actions and events relating to (1) the appointment, retirement, resignation or termination of service of directors, NEOs, and other specified senior officers, or (2) the compensation of NEOs, in a Current Report on Form 8-K within four business days following the occurrence of the action or event.

⁸⁴ See, e.g., Farient Advisors' CEO Pay Ratio Tracker, which monitors the S&P 500 and Russell 3000 companies' CEO pay ratios, available [here](#).

⁸⁵ See Meridian Compensation Partners LLC, *2025 Corporate Governance & Incentive Design Survey* (Fall 2025), available [here](#).

⁸⁶ See Item 407(i) of Regulation S-K, 17 C.F.R. § 229.407(i) and related Instructions.

⁸⁷ See Disclosure of Hedging by Employees, Officers and Directors, Release No. 33-10593, 84 Fed. Reg. 2402 at 21 (Feb. 6, 2019) (noting that the “terminology covers a broad variety of means by which equity securities can be held”).

Executive Terminations

Under SEC guidance,⁸⁸ the disclosure obligation under Item 5.02(b) of Form 8-K relating to resignation, termination or retirement is triggered by notice of a decision, whether or not in writing, but the question of whether communications represent an actual notice of a decision, as opposed to mere discussion or consideration, is a facts-and-circumstances determination. Given the timing requirements of Form 8-K, it is important that members of the compensation committee and other directors be mindful of this distinction when discussing potential officer departures, especially when the departures are a result of a determination by a board of directors to act swiftly, or if there is an unexpected resignation by a covered officer. The officers covered by this reporting requirement are broader than just NEOs, and are as follows: principal executive officer, president, principal financial officer, principal accounting officer, principal operating officer, any person performing a similar function as that of the foregoing, and any NEO not already identified in this list.

Material Compensation Arrangements with NEOs

In addition, the adoption or material amendment of a material compensatory plan, contract or arrangement with the principal executive officer, principal financial officer or any NEO must be disclosed on Form 8-K. The determination of whether a Form 8-K is required in respect of a compensatory action for a particular officer is not always black-and-white and there are meaningful exceptions that may apply with respect to ordinary-course compensation decisions, including that an award that is materially consistent with the previously disclosed terms of a plan need not be disclosed on Form 8-K if it is disclosed when Item 402 of Regulation S-K requires such disclosure. The SEC has issued a variety of guidance on these questions to help listed companies ensure they comply with the Form 8-K disclosure rules.⁸⁹

Director Elections and Terminations

Form 8-K disclosure is also implicated when a company elects a new director, except by vote of security holders, and when a director retires, resigns, is removed, or refuses to stand for re-election (with substantial incremental disclosure required where any director has resigned or refuses to stand for re-election because of a disagreement with the registrant, known to an executive officer of the registrant, on any matter relating to the registrant's operations, policies or practices).

⁸⁸ See SEC Division of Corporate Finance, Compliance and Disclosure Interpretations: Exchange Act Form 8-K, Question 117.01 (June 26, 2008).

⁸⁹ See the Compliance and Disclosure Interpretations of the Corporate Finance Division of the SEC, available [here](#).

L. Human Capital Disclosure

In August 2020, the SEC adopted certain amendments to rules on the disclosure of human capital, expanding the information required to be described in annual reports on Form 10-K.⁹⁰ Although the human capital disclosure may not fall expressly under a compensation committee’s authority or responsibility as expressed in its current charter, boards of directors should consider whether the compensation committee is best suited to provide oversight of this disclosure, given that the topics that tend to be included in the disclosure—*e.g.*, diversity and inclusion, employee benefit programs, retention and succession—often have some overlap or connection with matters that are otherwise within the compensation committee’s purview, including the determination of performance goals for incentive compensation programs.

Disclosure Standard

In short, the disclosure rules require a company to discuss, to the extent material to an understanding of the company’s business taken as a whole, the following: “the registrant’s human capital resources, including the number of persons employed by the registrant, and any human capital measures or objectives that the registrant focuses on in managing the business (such as, depending on the nature of the registrant’s business and workforce, measures or objectives that address the development, attraction and retention of personnel).”⁹¹ Notably, the SEC rules do not define the term “human capital,” choosing instead to defer to each company to determine the appropriate scope of disclosure in light of its “unique business, workforce, and facts and circumstances.”⁹²

Considerations for Disclosure

In light of this disclosure standard, a compensation committee (particularly if tasked with oversight of this disclosure) may wish to take the following steps as it makes decisions relating to the design of incentive compensation and other compensation programs: (1) consider whether human capital measures are already disclosed and are consistent with disclosed corporate goals; and (2) engage in a “bottom-up” approach to determine the relevant human capital factors, starting the discussion with business unit leaders and filtering their feedback through senior management. If the compensation committee is tasked with oversight of the human capital disclosure, it may wish to consider the following questions in determining whether and how certain human capital factors, measures or objectives should be disclosed:

⁹⁰ See Item 101(c)(2)(ii) of Regulation S-K, 17 C.F.R. § 229.101(c)(2)(ii).

⁹¹ *Id.*

⁹² See *Modernization of Regulation S-K Items 101, 103, and 105*, 85 Fed. Reg. 63726 (Oct. 8, 2020) (amending 17 C.F.R. pts. 229, 239, and 240), available [here](#).

- whether selected factors, measures or objectives can be monitored and measured on a consistent basis year over year;
- how, on a long-term basis, the factors, measures or objectives could change or need to be modified;
- how the relevant factors, measures or objectives could impact incentive compensation programs; and
- how the public disclosure of the relevant factors, measures or objectives could be viewed by the company’s various stakeholders.

A recent survey found that talent development, diversity and inclusion, talent attraction and retention, employee compensation and benefits, and monitoring culture “remained the five most frequently discussed topics” (consistent with the previous three years), although companies are generally continuing to shorten their human capital-related disclosures, in particular by decreasing diversity-related disclosures, with many companies reframing disclosures relating to diversity, equity and inclusion in response to the current environment.⁹³

The human capital disclosure should specifically and directly address the most material human capital management issues currently facing the company and avoid overly lengthy, boilerplate disclosures.

M. Conclusion

The importance of clear, thorough compensation disclosure that effectively conveys the business rationale for executive compensation decisions is greater than ever, due to the significant attention from the SEC, the media, shareholders and corporate governance activists and as a result of the heightened disclosure obligations due to the CEO pay ratio, pay versus performance rules, hedging disclosure, and disclosure relating to the timing of option grants. Companies should expect heightened scrutiny of, and accordingly clearly explain the basis for, pay levels relative to total shareholder returns, termination and change in control payments, benchmarking practices, the existence and nature of compensation clawback policies and the relationship between particular compensation arrangements and risk.

⁹³ See Gibson Dunn, *Five Years of Evolving Form 10-K Human Capital Disclosures* (Jan. 22, 2026).

CHAPTER V

METHODS OF COMPENSATION

- A. Understanding and Pursuing Compensation Goals and Objectives
- B. Equity Compensation
 - 1. Types of Equity Compensation
 - 2. Stock Exchange Rules Regarding Shareholder Approval of Equity Compensation Plans
- C. Employment Agreements and Restrictive Covenants
- D. Retirement Programs
- E. Perquisites

A. Understanding and Pursuing Compensation Goals and Objectives

“Pay-for-performance” has been the mantra for “best practices” in executive compensation for decades. While compensation programs should be designed so that compensation increases as corporate or individual performance metrics are met or exceeded, the Covid-19 crisis highlighted the importance and challenges of designing compensation programs that are responsive to unforeseen events while incentivizing behavior that preserves and enhances the long-term value of the company. In light of the current macroeconomic climate, including uncertainties surrounding tariffs and market volatility, data shows that companies have been reassessing the design of short-term and long-term incentive plans and may take actions including payout adjustments, applying discretion to incentive plan results, and considering wider performance goal ranges or changes to, or removal of, performance metrics.⁹⁴ In particular, in a November 2025 report, FW Cook noted that current approaches to long-term incentive plan design have shifted since 2019 (*i.e.*, prior to the pandemic) to de-risking of compensation programs, mitigating the challenges of multi-year financial goal setting, and providing downside protection to guard against potential disruption.⁹⁵

The highest priority for a company in designing a compensation program should be to create economic incentives and encourage particular behaviors, despite the application of external market forces or other pressures. Companies should balance the need to retain employees and incentivize them in a manner that rewards growth and appropriate risk-taking with the need to preserve the business. With respect to performance-based compensation, companies should select performance criteria that reflect true measures of operating performance and long-term value creation, and a compensation committee may consider preserving some negative discretion to adjust award amounts downward in the event of anomalous results. In addition, Glass Lewis reported a slight increase in the number of companies exercising upward discretion toward the end of 2025 (primarily under short-term incentive plans) stemming from unanticipated impacts of tariffs, and Glass Lewis predicts that exercises of upward discretion will increase in frequency.⁹⁶ Although proxy advisory firms have historically perceived the use of upward discretion negatively, Glass Lewis implies in its 2026 Proxy Season Preview that increased scrutiny will not apply where a company provides a meaningful rationale and safeguards for its actions, and where pay outcomes are explained and do not appear disconnected from the shareholder experience over the same period.

Careful thought should go into the structure and design of compensation programs to help ensure that they protect against the creation of short-term windfalls for employees that do not match long-term sustained benefits for shareholders. Moreover, a compensation committee should seek programs that it believes are in

⁹⁴ See *How U.S. Policy Shifts Are Affecting Incentive Plans, And How Organizations Are Responding*, Heather Marshall and Marc Roloson, WTW (Dec. 22, 2025), available [here](#).

⁹⁵ See FW Cook, 2025 Top 250 Report, at 2 (Nov. 2025), available [here](#).

⁹⁶ See Glass Lewis, *2026 Proxy Season Preview – United States and Canada*, available [here](#).

the best interests of shareholders generally, not programs that are merely intended to appease individual shareholder critics and the media at any given moment. These groups may have short-term interests that do not take into account the future well-being of the company and they may have interests that are inconsistent with the interests of shareholders generally.

The different types of compensation described below are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Companies can and should consider granting a mix of types of compensation based on their business needs. A compensation committee should determine, in its business judgment based on the particular needs of the business, the appropriate mix of fixed compensation (*e.g.*, annual base salary) and variable compensation (*i.e.*, short-term and long-term performance incentives), as well as the form of compensation (*e.g.*, stock options, restricted shares, restricted stock units or cash-based payments). No particular compensation vehicle should be off the table simply because it has been criticized in the media or by shareholder activists, although committees should understand how awards will be considered by proxy advisory firms in connection with the “say on pay” vote recommendation.

Due to the 2017 elimination of the performance-based compensation deduction exemption under Section 162(m) (described in Chapter VI of this Guide), incentive compensation awards can no longer be structured in a manner that ensures full tax deductibility under Section 162(m). While these changes have increased the after-tax cost of senior management compensation, they have also presented an opportunity for companies to take a fresh look at their compensation plan designs. From a corporate tax standpoint, the changes placed discretionary bonuses and service-based awards on equal footing with performance-based arrangements and provided companies with greater flexibility to address the impact on performance of unexpected events without compromising the deductibility of an award. Despite the elimination of the Section 162(m) performance-based compensation exception, sound incentive design and shareholder expectations have resulted in companies continuing to link pay to performance and there have not been dramatic design changes (although we have seen companies be more willing to exercise discretion to modify or adjust performance goals to address unexpected circumstances or events, and recently, proxy advisors have signaled a shift towards tolerating long-range time-vesting awards where vesting is over an extended period or where there are post-vesting retention requirements⁹⁷).

B. Equity Compensation

1. Types of Equity Compensation

The manner in which most companies provide executives with equity compensation continues to evolve. We have set forth below the material characteristics of various types of equity compensation awards to aid committee members in understanding

⁹⁷ See *ISS U.S. Executive Compensation Policies Frequently Asked Questions*, No. 35 (Updated Dec. 9, 2025), available [here](#).

the issues involved in the design of equity compensation alternatives. To facilitate decision-making with respect to the granting of equity compensation awards, compensation committees should familiarize themselves with the economic, tax and accounting implications of granting different forms of equity compensation.⁹⁸

The discussion below is limited to considerations regarding equity awards granted by U.S. corporations to U.S. taxpayers, but consideration should also be given to the securities, disclosure and tax implications of granting different forms of equity compensation in non-U.S. jurisdictions.

Stock Options

Though they have become less frequently utilized at publicly traded companies for a variety of reasons, including that ISS does not consider standard time-based stock options to be performance-based,⁹⁹ stock options can be a valuable tool to incentivize employees. Stock options provide employees with the opportunity to buy shares of company stock at a fixed price during a specified period of time, allowing the employee to benefit from appreciation in the value of company stock. Stock options typically have an exercise price equal to the fair market value of the underlying stock on the date of grant. Vesting of stock options generally is contingent upon an employee's continued employment for a specified period of time (service-based options) and/or upon the achievement of specified performance goals, which may be an additional condition to vesting (performance-based options) or may result in vesting at an earlier point in time (performance-accelerated stock options).

The principal benefits and drawbacks to granting stock options are as follows:

- ***Benefits***
 - Generally not subject to Section 409A of the Code if the following conditions are met: (1) the strike price is equal to or greater than fair market value on the grant date, (2) the option relates to “service recipient” stock, and (3) the stock option does not otherwise include any deferral feature.
 - Because stock options are not considered outstanding shares until exercised, they are not counted in the denominator for calculating earnings per share.
 - Optionees only realize a benefit from the award if the value of the stock exceeds the exercise price and do not realize any loss if the stock price never exceeds the exercise price, therefore encouraging stock option holders to

⁹⁸ The U.S. Internal Revenue Code provisions and the stock exchange rules referenced in this Chapter V are outlined and discussed more fully in Chapter VI of this Guide.

⁹⁹ See *ISS U.S. Executive Compensation Policies Frequently Asked Questions*, No. 33 (Updated Dec. 9, 2025), available [here](#).

pursue strategies to increase stock price, affording shareholders increased opportunities to recognize gains.

- Because stock options generally are not taxable until exercise, optionees have a degree of control over when they incur taxes with respect to stock options.

- ***Drawbacks***

- An accounting charge must be recognized following the grant even though no economic benefit may be derived by the optionee (although it is possible that the value ultimately achieved by the optionee will exceed the charge recognized).
- Because stock option holders receive a benefit if the stock price increases after grant, but have no proportionate exposure to downside risk (with a fixed value of \$0 if the price decreases after grant, regardless of by how much), there is a perception that stock option holders may be incentivized to pursue riskier strategies to cause stock prices to peak.
- Likely disconnect between amount of pay received by optionee and amount of expense to company.
- Because optionees typically have a long period during which to exercise their stock options, a well-timed exercise can result in significant gain even where the company's stock does not provide commensurate long-term gain for shareholders.
- The grant of stock options results in an increase of so-called "overhang," which ultimately can result in dilution of existing shareholders if the stock options are exercised. We note that institutional shareholders often measure dilution, taking into account outstanding stock options and/or even reserved option shares.
- In a falling stock market or where a company's stock is undervalued, underwater stock options may lose retentive value.
- Internal controls surrounding the grant of stock options have increased in complexity.
- ISS does not consider time-based stock options to be performance-based compensation for purposes of its "pay-for-performance" analysis.

Stock Appreciation Rights

Stock appreciation rights ("SARs") provide employees the right to receive an amount equal to the appreciation in value of company stock over a certain price during a specified period of time. Upon the exercise of a SAR, the company pays

the employee cash, stock or a combination thereof equal to such net appreciation value.

The principal benefits and drawbacks of granting SARs generally are the same as granting stock options, except:

- ***Benefits***

- SARs that may be settled only in cash are not considered equity compensation under NYSE and Nasdaq rules. Accordingly, no shareholder approval is required under such rules with respect to such awards.
- SARs that may be settled only in cash are not equity securities under U.S. federal securities laws, and therefore no registration statement is required to be maintained with respect to such awards.
- The exercise of SARs does not require the holder to pay an exercise price for which he or she may need to borrow against the exercise proceeds or engage in a broker-assisted cashless exercise, either of which must be structured to comply with applicable securities laws and the company's policies regarding hedging and pledging and insider trading.
- SARs settled in cash instead of stock will not result in equity dilution.

- ***Drawbacks***

- SARs settled in cash instead of stock will not increase the employee's holdings of company stock.
- SARs settled in cash are treated as liability awards for accounting purposes (requiring quarterly adjustments to the compensation charge based on the price of the stock underlying the SARs).
- SARs settled in cash will require an outlay of cash by the company.

Restricted Stock

Restricted stock is a grant of shares of company stock subject to specified vesting provisions and limitations on transfer. Vesting of restricted stock typically is contingent upon an employee's continued employment for a specified period of time (service-based restricted stock) and/or upon the achievement of specified performance goals, which may be an additional condition to vesting (performance-based restricted stock) or may result in vesting at an earlier point in time (performance-accelerated restricted stock).

The principal benefits and drawbacks of using restricted stock are as follows:

- ***Benefits***

- Holders of restricted stock share in both increases and decreases in the company's stock price, which directly aligns their interests with shareholders.
- From the perspective of employees, restricted stock may represent a more tangible benefit than stock options.
- Holders of restricted stock can vote and receive dividends, although it is worth noting that ISS considers the payment of dividends or dividend equivalents on equity awards prior to vesting to be a problematic pay practice,¹⁰⁰ and therefore companies may decide that dividends instead will accrue and not be paid unless and until the underlying shares become vested.
- The ability of employees to make an election under Section 83(b) of the Code to recognize the value of the restricted stock at the time of grant may enable an employee to achieve a favorable tax result if the value of the restricted stock appreciates during the vesting period (although such elections are uncommon at public companies).
- Restricted stock generally is not subject to Section 409A of the Code.
- Holders of restricted stock will realize value even if the price of company stock decreases during or after the vesting period. Accordingly, compared to stock options or SARs, restricted stock may have greater retentive value in a down market and may be less likely to encourage risky strategies.

- ***Drawbacks***

- Employees will receive some value from restricted stock even if the stock performs poorly.
- Shares of restricted stock are outstanding and are included in the denominator for computing diluted earnings per share.

Restricted Stock Units

A restricted stock unit ("RSU") is a contractual right to receive a share of company stock or cash equal to the value of a share of company stock. Settlement of RSUs (*i.e.*, delivery of the company shares or payment of cash) occurs on a fixed date or dates or upon the occurrence of a specified event or events. As is the case with

¹⁰⁰ See *ISS U.S. Executive Compensation Policies Frequently Asked Questions*, No. 52 (Updated Dec. 9, 2025).

restricted stock, vesting of RSUs may be service-based, performance-based and/or performance-accelerated.

The principal benefits and limitations of using RSUs as a means of compensation are the same as those of restricted stock, except:

- ***Benefits***

- RSUs that can be settled only in cash are not equity compensation under NYSE and Nasdaq rules. Accordingly, no shareholder approval is required with respect to cash-based RSUs under such rules.
- RSUs that can be settled only in cash are not equity securities under U.S. federal securities laws, and therefore no registration statement is required to be maintained with respect to such awards.
- RSUs that are ultimately settled in cash instead of stock will not result in shareholder dilution.
- Because RSUs are not “property” under Section 83 of the Code and merely represent a general unsecured promise to pay a future amount, an employee may postpone taxation beyond vesting (the company’s deduction is similarly delayed) until such time as the RSUs are settled. Accordingly, RSUs can allow employees to retain an interest in company stock and, consequently, company performance for an extended period of time without triggering a tax liability, subject to Section 409A of the Code.
- RSUs can be structured (if done in advance) to delay delivery of stock to a future date post-termination of employment, which could help align executives’ interests with shareholders and facilitate enforcement of clawbacks.

- ***Drawbacks***

- RSUs settled in cash instead of stock require a cash outlay by the company, and unless such settlement could jeopardize the company as an ongoing concern (a high standard), Section 409A of the Code does not allow the company to delay payment even if such a cash outlay could significantly impair the company financially (*e.g.*, cause it to be in default under its credit facility).
- RSUs settled in cash instead of stock will not increase the employee’s holdings of company stock and typically do not count towards share ownership requirements.
- RSUs settled in cash are treated as liability awards for accounting purposes (requiring quarterly adjustments to the compensation charge based on the price of the stock underlying the RSUs).

- RSUs that provide for the deferral of payment post-vesting may be subject to Section 409A of the Code, depending on their terms, which can limit a company's flexibility to modify such awards (*e.g.*, accelerate settlement, or further delay settlement, of previously vested RSUs).
- Because RSUs are not property, grantees cannot make an election under Section 83(b) of the Code to provide favorable tax treatment for post-grant appreciation.

2. Stock Exchange Rules Regarding Shareholder Approval of Equity Compensation Plans

General Rules

NYSE and Nasdaq listing standards require listed companies to obtain shareholder approval of most equity compensation plans. A compensation committee should be aware that these rules may require shareholder approval of proposed plans and material plan amendments. NYSE and Nasdaq rules *exclude* the following types of plans from this shareholder approval requirement if all applicable requirements for the particular exclusion are met:

- ***Inducement Exception*** – Equity grants made as a material inducement to an individual becoming an employee of the company or any of its subsidiaries. Note that, promptly following a grant of any inducement award in reliance on this exemption, companies are required to disclose in a press release the material terms of the award, including the recipient(s) of the award and the number of shares involved.
- ***M&A-Related Exceptions*** –
 - *Existing Awards* – Rollover of outstanding options and other equity awards in connection with a merger or acquisition.
 - *Share Reserve* – Post-acquisition grants to those who are not employees of the acquirer at the time of the acquisition of shares remaining under a pre-existing target plan that had been approved by the target's shareholders. Such available shares may be used for post-transaction grants with respect to the acquirer's equity, either under the pre-existing target plan or another plan. But note that the use of such share reserves will be counted by the NYSE and Nasdaq in determining whether the transaction must receive shareholder approval as an issuance of 20% or more of the company's outstanding common stock.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ See NYSE Listed Company Manual, Rule 303A.08; Nasdaq Listing Rules 5635 and IM-5635-1.

- ***Other Exceptions*** –
 - Arrangements under which employees receive cash payments based on the value of shares rather than actual shares (*e.g.*, cash-settled RSUs).
 - Arrangements that are made available to shareholders generally (*e.g.*, a typical dividend reinvestment plan).
 - Arrangements that merely provide a convenient way for employees, directors or other service providers to purchase stock at fair market value.
 - Plans intended to qualify under Section 401(a) of the Code (qualified pension, profit-sharing and stock bonus plans) or Section 423 of the Code (employee stock purchase plans) (but note that shareholder approval for a Section 423 plan is separately required by the tax rules).
 - “Parallel excess plans,” a narrowly defined category of excess benefit plans.

Material Revisions

The NYSE and Nasdaq rules provide the following examples of revisions to equity compensation plans that are considered “material” and therefore require shareholder approval:

- a material increase in the number of shares available under the plan, other than an increase solely to reflect a reorganization, stock split, merger, spin-off or similar transaction;
- an expansion of the types of awards available under the plan;
- a material expansion of the class of individuals eligible to participate in the plan;
- a material expansion of the term of the plan;
- a material change to the method of determining the strike price of options under the plan; and
- a deletion or limitation of any provision prohibiting repricing of options.

In light of the requirement that material amendments be approved by shareholders, a compensation committee should consider requesting that newly adopted plans be drafted to ensure maximum flexibility in the types of awards that can be granted and the terms and conditions thereof.

C. Employment Agreements and Restrictive Covenants

Employment Agreements

Some companies enter into employment agreements with senior executives to memorialize the terms and conditions of their employment, which often include position and duties, term of employment, base salary, cash and equity incentive opportunities, benefits and perquisites, severance payment and benefits, as well as restrictive covenants (*e.g.*, noncompete and nonsolicit provisions).

Employment agreements are most often individually negotiated and can be a useful tool for the recruitment and retention of executives. That said, it is not necessary that companies use employment agreements. For example, severance is often a key component of employment agreements, and generally severance can be provided just as effectively through a severance plan (which has the advantage of uniformity and ease of administration). To mimic bilateral agreements, severance plans can be drafted to prohibit adverse amendment without participant consent. Another common feature of employment agreements is restrictive covenants, which alternatively may be set forth in a standalone restrictive covenant agreement, equity or other incentive award agreements, severance plans or other appropriate documents. Ultimately the decision of whether to use employment agreements is for each company to make based on its own business needs.

Compensation committee members should be aware that entering into employment agreements with executive officers may trigger disclosure obligations—most notably current report on Form 8-K if the agreement is with a named executive officer. *See* Chapter IV of this Guide for more detail on compensation-related disclosure requirements.

Restrictive Covenants – Generally

Restrictive covenants in the employment context are frequently entered into in connection with an employment agreement or other compensatory arrangement. These covenants prohibit the employee from engaging in certain activities—most commonly, competing, soliciting customers or other employees away from the employer, disparaging the employer and disclosing or using the employer’s confidential information or trade secrets outside of the employment relationship. In addition, employees may be subject to affirmative covenants, such as a duty to cooperate in the event of litigation or to notify potential future employers of the existence of restrictive covenants, which may impair the employee’s ability to work for the potential employer.

Restrictive Covenants – Noncompetes

Noncompetes in the employment context are covenants that restrict employees from engaging in a range of competitive activities in a specified geographic area for a specified period of time. Noncompetes are generally the most constraining type of restrictive covenant that is applied to employees, and may be one of the

most difficult for an employer to enforce, especially amidst the trend of increasing skepticism towards employment-based noncompetes on the part of legislatures, courts and regulatory agencies in recent years.

In the context of corporate transactions, the enforceability of noncompetes against executives may impact the applicability of the excise tax under Sections 280G and 4999 of the Code. This is because noncompetes that substantially constrain the affected executive's ability to perform services and are reasonably likely to be enforced are recognized as having value to the company, which value may serve as an offset against amounts that would otherwise be subject to the excise tax. *See* Chapter VI of this Guide for a more detailed discussion of the excise tax under Sections 280G and 4999 of the Code.

Enforceability under State Law

The enforceability of a noncompete is generally a matter of state law, and rules vary widely by jurisdiction. Many states have enacted statutes prohibiting or restricting the use of noncompetes in the employment context, especially in recent years. For example, California, North Dakota, Oklahoma and Minnesota generally prohibit the use of employment-based noncompetes, subject to limited statutory exceptions (*e.g.*, the sale of a business). Other states such as Massachusetts, Illinois and Washington have statutes that significantly restrict employers' ability to enforce noncompetes against their employees. Although not all states have noncompete statutes, many states consider noncompetes to be a disfavored restraint on trade. Accordingly, courts generally require that the employer's interests that the noncompete is designed to protect be weighed against the burden imposed on the employee and the public interest.

Although the law varies by state, an enforceable noncompete provision will often contain the following elements: a protectable interest (*e.g.*, goodwill, trade secrets and confidential information), consideration (*e.g.*, compensation and offer of employment), and reasonableness as to duration, geographic scope and activities restrained. Notably, noncompetes are more likely to be enforced when entered into in connection with the sale of a business than when entered into in connection with a standard employment relationship (the so-called "sale of business" exception, which is also often recognized by state statutes that generally prohibit noncompetes).

Vacated FTC Noncompete Ban

In April 2024, the Federal Trade Commission ("FTC") issued a final rule prohibiting noncompete clauses for nearly all U.S. workers on the basis that such clauses are "unfair methods of competition" in violation of Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act. Originally slated to become effective on September 4, 2024, the FTC rule was set aside in August 2024 by the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas with nationwide effect. The Court found that the FTC lacked statutory authority to promulgate the noncompete rule, which was arbitrary

and capricious. In October 2024, the FTC appealed the Texas district court’s decision to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. On September 5, 2025, the FTC filed to accede to vacatur of the noncompete ban by taking steps to dismiss its appeals to the Fifth Circuit.¹⁰² Although the FTC formally abandoned the proposed noncompete ban, the FTC continues to pursue targeted enforcement actions with respect to noncompetes that it views as unlawfully anticompetitive.

Forfeiture for Competition – the “Employee Choice” Doctrine

As a result of the increasing limitation on the use of noncompetes, companies are in need of alternative ways to protect investments in research and development, promote employee training and safeguard confidential information and trade secrets. The “forfeiture for competition” clause—which is similar to a noncompete clause but different in important respects—may offer such an alternative.

Forfeiture for competition essentially means that an employee who chooses to compete following termination of employment will forfeit the right to receive certain compensation or benefits and/or the right to retain certain compensation or benefits previously paid or provided (*e.g.*, equity or other incentive awards or severance). In contrast to a noncompete, a forfeiture for competition clause does not prohibit the employee from competing; rather, the employee is permitted to compete so long as the employee gives up certain compensation or benefits. This of course limits the employer’s remedies—*e.g.*, an employer would not be able to actually enjoin an employee from competing—and employees may not in all cases be sufficiently deterred from competing.

In Delaware and certain other jurisdictions, forfeiture for competition provisions are generally analyzed by courts under the “employee choice” doctrine, which treats such provisions as ordinary contract terms rather than restraints on trade that must be shown to be reasonable. In its *Cantor Fitzgerald* decision in January 2024,¹⁰³ the Delaware Supreme Court reaffirmed the employee choice doctrine in the context of a limited partnership agreement that provided former partners who engage in competitive activity within a specified period following departure would, among other things, forfeit certain amounts attributable to their capital accounts that would otherwise be payable. The Delaware Supreme Court reversed the Court of Chancery’s ruling and held that public policy considerations weigh in favor of enforcing the forfeiture for competition provisions, which were agreed to among sophisticated parties and are not restraints on trade subject to a reasonableness review. Applying similar reasoning, the Delaware Supreme Court, in *LKQ Corp. v. Rutledge* in December 2024,¹⁰⁴ affirmed the enforceability of forfeiture for competition provisions in employee equity award agreements outside the partnership context. Against the backdrop of increasing skepticism towards

¹⁰² See Press Release, U.S. Federal Trade Commission, Federal Trade Commission Files to Accede to Vacatur of Non-Compete Clause Rule (Sept. 5, 2025), available [here](#).

¹⁰³ *Cantor Fitzgerald, L.P. v. Ainslie*, 312 A.3d 674 (Del. 2024).

¹⁰⁴ *LKQ Corp. v. Rutledge*, 337 A.3d 1215 (Del. 2024).

noncompetes, the *Cantor Fitzgerald* and *LKQ Corp.* decisions are a welcome affirmation that forfeiture for competition provisions in Delaware law-governed partnership, equity award and other agreements voluntarily entered into by sophisticated parties will generally be upheld.

By contrast, the California statute governing noncompetes does not distinguish between noncompetes and forfeiture for competition provisions, and courts in California have found forfeiture for competition provisions to constitute an impermissible restraint on trade.

However, it should be noted that despite the willingness of the Delaware courts to enforce forfeiture for competition provisions, Delaware continues to apply increasing scrutiny in examining applicable restrictive covenants. In *BankUnited, N.A. v. Shulick*, the Delaware Court of Chancery held that a nonsolicit that applies to both current and prospective customers and clients and broadly purports to prohibit the restricted party from contacting, or attempting to call upon, any client or customer about whom the restricted party “received information” during the applicable restricted period is overly broad and not appropriately tailored to protect the employer’s legitimate interests.¹⁰⁵ Further, an employee nonsolicit that prohibits unsuccessful “attempts” at solicitation is overbroad.¹⁰⁶ The Court declined to blue-pencil the nonsolicit provisions, in part given the Court’s finding that the defendants did not know the award agreements containing the restrictive covenants existed, despite the fact the employer would likely be able to prove the employees assented to their award agreements through the stock plan administrator’s online benefits portal.¹⁰⁷ In light of decisions from jurisdictions such as Delaware that have historically been viewed as supportive of protecting an employer’s right to enforce restrictive covenants, employers should take care to ensure restrictive covenants are appropriately tailored and not overly broad, and there should be a clear record of employees acknowledging, and affirmatively agreeing to be bound by, such covenants.

Florida CHOICE Act

Despite the general trend of states becoming more hesitant to enforce noncompetes in the employment context, Florida enacted the Florida Contracts Honoring Opportunity, Investment, Confidentiality and Economic Growth (CHOICE) Act on July 3, 2025,¹⁰⁸ which creates a presumption that covered noncompetes are enforceable. The CHOICE Act applies to noncompetes with an employee or individual contractor who earns or is reasonably expected to earn a salary greater than twice the annual average wage of the Florida county in which the employer has its principal place of business (or where the employee resides, if the employer’s principal place of business is not in Florida). Under the CHOICE Act, a covered

¹⁰⁵ *BankUnited, N.A. v. Shulick*, 2026 Del. Ch. LEXIS 1, at *21–23 (Del. Ch. Jan. 2, 2026).

¹⁰⁶ *Id.* at *24.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.* at *25.

¹⁰⁸ Fla. Stat. § 542.41 *et seq.* (2025).

noncompete agreement may extend for a period of up to four years, provided that certain procedural and other requirements are met.

Restrictive Covenants – Confidentiality and Required Carveouts

Confidentiality provisions generally prohibit an employee from disclosing or using the employer's confidential information in unauthorized manners. Unlike a noncompete, confidentiality provisions are often of indefinite duration (lasting as long as the information remains confidential) and do not have geographic scope limitations. Confidential information is typically defined in a broad manner that includes a laundry list of trade secrets, customer lists and other proprietary information of the employer.

Whistleblower Carveout

When drafting confidentiality covenants (as well as nondisparagement and similar covenants), companies should make sure there are proper carveouts for whistleblower activity, litigation, governmental investigations and other matters. In particular, companies should take note of Rule 21F-17 under the Exchange Act, which prohibits any action that impedes an individual from communicating directly with SEC staff about potential securities law violations, including enforcing (or threatening to enforce) a confidentiality agreement with respect to such communications. Targeting violations of this whistleblower protection rule has become a priority for the SEC since 2015. In September 2024, the SEC announced that it had settled charges against seven public companies for violating the rule, with the companies agreeing to pay over \$3 million in total in civil penalties and to remediate the violations.

In light of the SEC's focus on Rule 21F-17, companies would be well-advised to conduct a comprehensive review of all documents applicable to employees and other service providers—including employment and consulting agreements, offer letters, severance agreements, releases, restrictive covenant and proprietary information agreements and employee handbooks—that could be viewed as impeding whistleblower protections to ensure compliance. Such documentation should include a clear, express statement that communicating and cooperating with the SEC is expressly permitted (as well as acknowledging any other legally protected whistleblower rights), that individuals are not being asked to waive such rights or the right to receive whistleblower awards and that individuals are not required to seek prior approval from the company before exercising such rights. Any new employment agreements or restrictive covenant agreements containing confidentiality provisions and agreements containing a release of claims should include appropriate whistleblower carveouts.

D. Retirement Programs

In addition to the other compensation programs described above, companies often provide executives with retirement benefits under either defined contribution plans

(e.g., 401(k) plans) or defined benefit plans (e.g., pension plans that provide a fixed retirement benefit based on years of service and final pay). These arrangements can either be (1) “qualified plans,” which provide the company with tax benefits, but generally, must be provided to a large portion of the employees and are subject to limitations on, among other things, the aggregate benefit payable to participants under the plans and complex rules under the Code and ERISA, or (2) “nonqualified plans,” which may be limited to senior executives and provide them with additional retirement benefits that are not subject to the limitations imposed under the Code and ERISA.

Qualified Plans

Compensation committees should be sure to understand the applicable funding and contribution requirements of the company’s tax-qualified retirement plans. The obligations under these plans, as well as the value of assets funding those obligations, are disclosed in a company’s financial statements, although a company’s management and compensation committee should be aware that the manner in which these obligations are calculated for accounting and reporting purposes differs from the manner in which these obligations are calculated under ERISA for purposes of determining funding obligations. And, as discussed in Chapter III of this Guide, boards of directors should understand the ERISA fiduciary law implications of maintaining qualified retirement plans.

Nonqualified Plans

Compensation committees should be sure to understand the cost of any nonqualified retirement plan arrangements, including any impact of increases in annual compensation on such cost. Moreover, compensation committees should be aware that, since these programs generally represent an unsecured promise by the company to pay amounts to executives in the future (which constitute accrued liabilities that appear in a company’s financial statements), they effectively result in executives being creditors of the company. As creditors of the company, executives with large nonqualified retirement benefits may be incentivized to act more conservatively with regard to risk-taking and capital investment, especially as they approach the stated retirement age when their benefits become payable.

E. Perquisites

Perquisites should be provided to executive officers only with full disclosure to the compensation committee. Any compensation or other benefit received by any officer from any affiliated entities (using a low threshold for the definition of an affiliated entity) should be carefully reviewed to confirm compliance with the company’s code of business conduct and ethics and applicable law. Perquisite programs and company charitable donations to any organizations with which an executive is affiliated should be carefully scrutinized to make sure that they do not create any potential appearance of impropriety. As a reminder, perquisites provided to any NEO that in the aggregate are equal to \$10,000 or more in any given year

must be disclosed in the proxy statement (as described in more detail in Chapter IV of this Guide).

Increasing Scrutiny

Regulators, institutional shareholders and proxy advisory firms are closely scrutinizing executive compensation in general and executive perquisites in particular. In recent years, the SEC has significantly increased its enforcement actions on inadequate disclosure of executive perquisites in proxy statements, especially relating to personal use of corporate aircrafts and other travel-related perquisites. Note that the enforcement actions are not focused solely on whether the perquisites in question are of material value for disclosure purposes, but also on whether a company has in place adequate internal control and procedures for identifying, calculating and disclosing perquisites. Furthermore, the Internal Revenue Service (“IRS”) announced in February 2024 that it planned to begin focused audits of aircraft usage by large corporations (as well as large partnerships and high-income taxpayers), including whether the aircraft usage is properly allocated between business and personal use for tax purposes.¹⁰⁹

In response to the increasing scrutiny, many companies have modified or eliminated perquisite programs in recent years, in some cases replacing the value of such benefits with other forms of compensation that are subject to less scrutiny (such as base salary) or requiring that executives reimburse the company for the incremental value of the perquisites the company provides.

At the same time that perquisites are increasingly under the regulatory microscope, the SEC has indicated that it is looking to modernize the perquisite disclosure requirements to reflect the changing global landscape. As part of the SEC’s Executive Compensation Roundtable in June 2025, Commissioner Hester Peirce noted that “painstakingly calculated tallies” of perquisites “do little to fill out an investor’s picture of the company,” signaling that the SEC may reconsider perquisite disclosure requirements in connection with its broader review of the Item 402 disclosure framework.¹¹⁰ In particular, in light of the tragic December 2024 incident in which a senior executive of UnitedHealthcare was shot to death in a targeted attack in Manhattan, companies and investors have been increasingly focused on executive security benefits, which under 2006 SEC guidance are treated as perquisites and as a personal benefit, even where the security benefit serves a business purpose or conveniences the company, if the benefit is not integrally and directly related to the executive’s job performance.¹¹¹ Commissioner Peirce noted

¹⁰⁹ See IR-2024-46 News Release, *IRS Begins Audits of Corporate Jet Usage; Part of Larger Effort to Ensure High-Income Groups Don’t Fly Under the Radar on Tax Responsibilities* (Feb. 21, 2024), available [here](#).

¹¹⁰ Hester M. Peirce, *Spare the Trees So Investors Can See the Forest: Remarks Before the Executive Compensation Roundtable*, U.S. Sec. & Exch. Comm’n (June 26, 2025), available [here](#).

¹¹¹ See *Executive Compensation and Related Person Disclosure*, 71 Fed. Reg. 53158, at 53176 (Sept. 8, 2006), available [here](#).

in her June 2025 remarks that “now may be time for the [SEC] to return to a more nuanced approach to personal security disclosure that considers the context in which those measures are provided.”¹¹² Echoing Commissioner Peirce’s remarks, in a speech on February 17, 2026, Chairman Paul S. Atkins noted that he agreed with commenters that the SEC should “modernize its perks disclosure requirements to reflect how the world and security threats have evolved over the past twenty years.”¹¹³ Amidst shifting attitudes towards, and scrutiny of, perquisites and other compensation elements, procedure and disclosure are often as important as the substance of underlying compensation packages. And while criticism cannot always be avoided, actions taken by a well-informed and objective compensation committee, which are then appropriately disclosed to shareholders, will be shielded from liability.

¹¹² *Id.*

¹¹³ Paul S. Atkins, *Remarks at the Texas A&M School of Law Corporate Law Symposium*, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (Feb. 17, 2026), available [here](#).

CHAPTER VI

SELECT TAX RULES ON COMPENSATION

- A. Section 162(m) of the Internal Revenue Code
 - 1. General
 - 2. Expansion of Impacted Companies and “Covered Employees”
 - 3. Continuation of Section 162(m) Compliance Procedures
- B. Section 409A of the Internal Revenue Code

This Chapter VI discusses select portions of the tax code with particular relevance to executive compensation—Section 162(m) (which limits a public company’s deduction for compensation paid to certain employees) and Section 409A (which governs nonqualified deferred compensation). Another key tax code compensation committee members should be aware of is Section 280G, which relates to the so-called “golden parachute” excise tax and is discussed in Chapter VII of this Guide.

A. Section 162(m) of the Internal Revenue Code

1. General

Section 162(m) generally disallows a publicly traded company’s federal income tax deduction for compensation paid to “covered employees” in excess of \$1 million during the company’s taxable year. This \$1 million deduction limit covers all types of compensation, including cash, property and the spread on the exercise of options. For more than two decades following the enactment of Section 162(m) in 1993, public companies structured their executive compensation programs to take advantage of an exception to this deduction limitation for “performance-based compensation” keyed to a pre-established, objective and nondiscretionary goal and formula.¹¹⁴ However, the 2017 Tax Reform Act eliminated this exception.

Accordingly, companies no longer need to structure their compensation programs to comply with the requirements of the “performance-based compensation” exception, including (1) subjecting their cash bonus plans to shareholder approval, (2) setting forth permissible performance goals in their equity plans, and (3) seeking shareholder approval of applicable performance goals every five years. Further, individual award limits are no longer necessary in equity plans from a tax planning perspective (other than for tax-qualified incentive stock options); however, proxy advisory firms such as ISS have issued statements making it clear that in their view companies should continue to use performance-based compensation structures and that plans should continue to contain individual award limits, even without the benefit of the performance-based compensation deduction exception under Section 162(m). Based on a November 2025 report by FW Cook, among the 250 largest companies by market capitalization, the use of performance-based awards has remained relatively stable over the past five years, while the use of stock options has declined (with the percentage of performance-based awards comprising the average grant value mix for company CEOs increasing from 59% to 62% from 2020 to 2025, with the percentage of such mix comprising stock options decreasing from 18% to 15% over the same period).¹¹⁵ However, ISS has

¹¹⁴ Note that for certain health insurance providers, the deduction limitation has been lowered from \$1 million to \$500,000 (*see* Section 9014 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, Pub. L. 111-148, 124 Stat. 119, 868 (2010)), and there has been no exception for performance-based compensation for some time.

¹¹⁵ *See* FW Cook, 2025 Top 250 Report, at 8-9 (Nov. 2025), available [here](#).

recently signaled a shift toward tolerating long-term incentives with time-based vesting requirements only, as discussed above in Chapter V.A of this Guide.

Elimination of the performance-based exception has resulted in a significant increase in disallowed tax deductions and other important consequences, which we discuss below. Nevertheless, to date, companies have accepted the lost deductions as a necessary consequence of the competitive marketplace for talent. And by now, most incentive compensation plans and arrangements and the manner in which they are administered have been modified as necessary to eliminate the framework and limitations of the now-defunct performance-based exception. It is, however, important to ensure that the company is maintaining proper internal controls to ensure compliance with the broader limitations on deductible compensation.

2. Expansion of Impacted Companies and “Covered Employees”

Prior to the 2017 Tax Reform Act, Section 162(m) generally only applied to the compensation payable to “covered employees” of companies with publicly traded equity securities. The 2017 Tax Reform Act and the regulations thereunder expanded the scope of entities subject to Section 162(m) to include the potential coverage of foreign private issuers, companies with public debt, and partnerships, and also eliminated transition relief previously available to newly public companies. In a reversal of prior IRS guidance, the 2020 final regulations applied the Section 162(m) deduction limitation to a public company’s distributive share of a deduction for compensation paid by a partnership to the company’s covered employees, subject to certain grandfathered arrangements in effect on December 20, 2019.

Once a Covered Employee, Always a Covered Employee

The 2017 Tax Reform Act also substantially expanded the original definition of “covered employees” for purposes of Section 162(m). The definition had been limited to a company’s principal executive officer and the three other most highly compensated executive officers who are required to be named in the company’s executive compensation disclosure under SEC disclosure rules, but did not cover the company’s principal financial officer. In addition to including principal financial officers, the 2017 Tax Reform Act definition imposed permanent “covered employee” status on any officer who was or is a “covered employee” for any tax year beginning after December 31, 2016. The final Section 162(m) regulations issued by the IRS in 2020 include an elaborate framework for determining when a public company must treat an individual as a covered employee by virtue of the person having been a covered employee of a predecessor of the public company. The rules vary based on transaction context, but generally sweep quite broadly.

These changes increased the number of active employees who can be “covered employees” in a given year and eliminated a corporation’s ability to deduct amounts in excess of \$1 million paid following a covered employee’s termination of

employment. Accordingly, companies should be mindful that individuals who appear in the Summary Compensation Table in the annual proxy statement for one year will be “covered employees,” effectively forever.

Additional Covered Employees Beginning in 2027; Scope of Deduction Limitation

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (“ARPA”) further amended the definition of “covered employees” for tax years beginning after December 31, 2026 to include an additional five highest compensated employees, regardless of whether classified as executive officers (although employees covered only as a result of this expanded rule will not have permanent covered employee status). In proposed regulations issued in January 2025,¹¹⁶ the IRS contemplates that these additional five employees will be identified based on their compensation that would, but for Section 162(m), be allowed as a deduction; this is different than the methodology that applies to determine the individuals who are covered employees by reason of being the three most highly compensated executive officers other than the CEO and CFO, which is based on total compensation required to be disclosed under the Exchange Act.

While the expanded definition does not become effective until 2027, companies might consider starting to implement a process for applying the methodology in the proposed regulations to identify individuals who might be covered by the expanded definition. In addition, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, enacted on July 4, 2025,¹¹⁷ expands the scope of entities that must be aggregated for purposes of applying the \$1 million deduction limitation and includes controlled groups of corporations, trades or businesses under common control (including partnerships, sole proprietorships, and other non-corporate entities), and employees of an “affiliated service group” within the meaning of Section 414 of the Code. The new aggregation rules are effective for tax years beginning after December 31, 2025, prior to when the expanded scope of “covered employees” under ARPA goes into effect in 2027.

Compensation Structuring Considerations

Overall, while companies could theoretically try to structure compensation so that there is limited turnover in the Summary Compensation Table population, we have found such planning to be uncommon, with virtually all companies concluding that the importance of making commercially appropriate compensation decisions outweighs such structuring considerations. Companies should, however, regularly review their list of executive officers and eliminate any individuals whose job functions do not warrant such classification. This can be an effective gatekeeper on the number of permanent covered employees for Section 162(m) purposes since

¹¹⁶ See Certain Employee Remuneration in Excess of \$1,000,000 under Internal Revenue Code Section 162(m), 90 Fed. Reg. 4691 (Jan. 16, 2025) (amending 26 C.F.R. part 1), available [here](#).

¹¹⁷ See One Big Beautiful Bill Act, Pub. L. No. 119-21, § 70603, 139 Stat. 72 (2025).

non-executive officers would not be included in the Summary Compensation Table in the first place. Also, as the covered employee population is backward-looking and therefore continually expanding, companies should maintain a list of all covered employees and update it annually.

The extension of “covered employee” status beyond termination of employment favors installment payments of deferred compensation and severance obligations over lump sum payments, in an effort to maximize the payments that fall below the \$1 million limit in any given year. In most cases, however, we again have observed that design and business considerations trump tax structuring.

3. Continuation of Section 162(m) Compliance Procedures

As noted above, prior to the 2017 Tax Reform Act, the \$1 million deduction limit did not apply to “performance-based compensation” that met certain requirements. Such performance-based compensation was required to be payable solely on account of attaining one or more pre-established, nondiscretionary and objective performance goals established no later than 90 days after the beginning of the service period to which the goal relates and within the first 25% of such period. The rules also required that establishment of the performance goals was determined by a compensation committee (or a subcommittee thereof) of the board of directors composed solely of two or more “outside” directors within the meaning of Section 162(m), and that at the end of the period and before the compensation was paid, such committee of “outside” directors certified that the performance goals and any other material terms had been satisfied.

Given the 2017 elimination of the performance-based compensation deduction, public companies that no longer maintain any “grandfathered” arrangements are not required to ensure that compensation committee members meet the requirements of “outside” directors under Section 162(m). For these companies, corresponding updates may be made to director and officer questionnaires, compensation committee charters, equity plan documents, and other arrangements that previously referenced the “outside” director requirements.

“Grandfathered” arrangements are, generally, written binding contracts in effect as of November 2, 2017, which are not materially modified (*i.e.*, amended to either increase compensation or accelerate the payment of compensation without a time-value discount) thereafter. The 2020 IRS final regulations construe narrowly the scope of this grandfathering rule.¹¹⁸ Under these final regulations, the IRS clarified that arrangements permitting but not requiring the exercise of negative discretion when a compensation committee determines a bonus, do not constitute grandfathered arrangements for purposes of the performance-based compensation deduction exception. As of 2026, any remaining grandfathered arrangements are likely stock options, which do not require a certification by “outside” directors. It

¹¹⁸ Treasury Regulations Section 1.162-33, 26 C.F.R. § 1.162-33.

has therefore become increasingly uncommon for Section 162(m) to be relevant to compensation committee composition.

B. Section 409A of the Internal Revenue Code

Section 409A imposes penalties on participants in nonqualified deferred compensation arrangements that do not comply with the strict requirements of the rules published under Section 409A. “Deferred compensation” for these purposes can, perhaps unexpectedly, include severance payments and reimbursement rights. Given the far-reaching impact of Section 409A, companies have rightly devoted, and continue to devote, a great deal of time and resources to implementing and operating programs to comply with Section 409A. While a compensation committee should satisfy itself that the company is aware of and is complying with the legislation, the committee need not spend inordinate amounts of time trying to understand the intricacies of the technical rules that have no impact on the arrangements’ commercial terms. Note that for certain tax-indifferent parties (*e.g.*, foreign corporations in “tax havens” and partnerships allocating income to tax-exempt organizations), Section 457A of the Code effectively makes it impossible to adopt nonqualified deferred compensation arrangements (even if the arrangements meet the stringent requirements of Section 409A), because it generally requires nonqualified deferred compensation to be included in income at the time of vesting (thus preventing any further delay of taxation).

CHAPTER VII

CHANGE IN CONTROL COMPENSATION ARRANGEMENTS

- A. Addressing Executive Uncertainty in a Deal Environment
- B. Forms of Compensatory Arrangements
 - 1. Change in Control Protections
 - 2. Stock-Based Compensation Plans
 - 3. Separation Plans
 - 4. Deferred Compensation Plans
 - 5. Rabbi Trusts
 - 6. Retention Programs
- C. Considerations in Mergers of Equals
- D. Section 280G of the Internal Revenue Code
 - 1. General Rules
 - 2. General Approaches
 - 3. Mitigation Planning

A. Addressing Executive Uncertainty in a Deal Environment

As institutions face industry consolidation amid regulatory, competitive and business model challenges, employees are understandably anxious about the future should their employer be acquired by or merge with another entity—whether in a friendly, distressed or hostile deal. To offset these pressures and to permit successful recruitment and retention of executives, many companies have adopted arrangements containing change in control provisions. These typically include change in control severance (or employment agreements providing enhanced severance in connection with a change in control), acceleration of equity compensation awards and accelerated payment and/or vesting of deferred compensation in the event of a qualifying termination in connection with a change in control. A 2023 study of executive change in control arrangements by Meridian Compensation Partners noted that 78% of the study group companies maintained some form of change in control arrangement providing for cash severance, and 93% of the study group companies provided for the “double trigger” (*i.e.*, a change in control plus a qualifying termination of employment) acceleration of vesting of outstanding equity awards in connection with a change in control, or “single trigger” vesting on the change in control, in the event that the successor in the transaction elects not to assume the outstanding equity awards.¹¹⁹

Change in control severance and other arrangements are not intended to deter combinations; rather, by reducing the personal uncertainty and anxiety arising from a merger, such arrangements can help to assure full and impartial consideration of takeover proposals by a company’s management and aid a company in attracting and retaining key executives. These arrangements, prevalent at U.S. public companies, are both legal and proper, and widely recognized as effective retention and recruiting devices. Potential merger partners will likely have similar arrangements and be familiar with them from prior transactions. The costs associated with change in control arrangements are expected transaction expenses and there is no evidence that appropriately structured arrangements negatively impact shareholder value or are unacceptable to ISS, Glass Lewis or institutional shareholders generally.

Compensation issues, such as the treatment of equity awards, severance protection and retention, continue to be of critical importance in transactions. Changes in compensation arrangements stemming from the influence of proxy advisors, including the trends of eliminating “golden parachute” excise tax gross-ups and single-trigger vesting, and the increasing prevalence of performance-based and deferred equity awards, require companies to understand and consider in careful detail the consequences and tax implications of a change in control. Attention must be paid to the applicable statutes and regulations to make sure that all tax and other technical concerns are understood and properly addressed in any arrangement.

¹¹⁹ See Meridian Compensation Partners, *2023 Study of Executive Change-in-Control Arrangements, December 2023*, available [here](#).

Severance and other change in control protections should be reevaluated periodically in light of the changes in a company's compensation programs from year to year.

The importance of change in control arrangements, both the economics and procedural protections, was brought to light in the days following Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter (now X Corp.) in late 2022, where Mr. Musk took the position that certain senior executives were fired for "cause" and therefore would receive no termination payments and benefits. In March 2024, following exhaustion of the administrative procedures under the applicable change of control severance program, several former Twitter executives sued Musk, X Corp. and others seeking payment of the severance benefits. In November 2024, the United States District Court, Northern District of California denied the defendants' motion to dismiss one of the causes of action, namely the former executives' claim that Mr. Musk and X Corp. terminated their employment for the purpose of interfering with their rights to severance benefits, a purported violation under ERISA.¹²⁰ The lawsuit was settled and the civil case was terminated in October 2025, although the terms of the settlement were not disclosed.

B. Forms of Compensatory Arrangements

1. Change in Control Protections

Many companies have adopted change in control protections for senior management. Typically, these protections are provided through change in control severance or employment agreements or, increasingly, severance protection plans. A change in control employment or severance protection agreement or plan often becomes effective only upon a change in control (or occasionally in the event of a termination of employment in anticipation of a change in control, often during a prescribed window). A standard agreement or plan usually provides for a one- or two-year term after the change in control during which time the status quo is preserved for the executive in terms of duties, responsibilities, work location and certain levels of compensation and employee benefits. In general, if the status quo is not preserved and the executive resigns, or if the executive's employment is terminated by the company without cause, then the executive would be entitled to severance pay (typically, a multiple of base salary plus an annual bonus amount) and benefits (such as subsidized continued healthcare coverage).

Key Definitions

- *Change in Control* – When implementing or reviewing a change in control arrangement, careful attention should be paid to the change in control triggering events. Getting the definition of "change in control" right is critical to the practical operation of change in control provisions, especially when it is uncertain whether a deal will be consummated in a timely manner (or possibly

¹²⁰ See *Agrawal v. Musk*, 2024 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 199177, at *6 (N.D. Cal. Nov. 1, 2024).

ever) due to regulatory, antitrust or other impediments to closing. Change in control definitions should not trigger upon an event prior to the closing of a deal, such as the signing, public announcement, or shareholder approval of a merger agreement. These provisions not only create risks if a deal is not consummated, but also prevent the arrangements from fulfilling their intended purpose: to retain employees through the closing of a transaction. ISS also considers a change in control definition to be “liberal” where it falls below reasonable standards of what an investor may consider to be an actual change in control of the company, and a plan that contains a liberal change in control definition that could result in vesting of awards by any trigger other than a full “double-trigger” is considered a negative overriding factor.¹²¹ The events that give rise to a change in control should be objectively defined. Definitions that give a board of directors the ability to determine when an event does not constitute a change in control, while seemingly preserving flexibility, could result in conflicts between the board and management at a particularly awkward and critical time and therefore are likely to place the board in an untenable position both legally and practically.

- *Cause* – Cause definitions should be drafted narrowly to avoid creating a potential for acquirer abuse that would undermine the objective of the severance arrangements. Besides appropriately narrow triggers, there should also be robust procedural protection built into the cause definition to ensure executives are treated fairly following a change in control. Potential procedural protections include (1) notice and cure, (2) requiring a two-thirds or three-fourths majority of the board of the ultimate parent company to find Cause and (3) stipulating that board or company determinations are subject to *de novo* review by a court.
- *Good Reason* – Good reason definitions should be drafted broadly to ensure that an acquirer cannot avoid paying severance by forcing target executives to quit after making adverse changes to the terms and conditions of their employment. While each company should assess the specifics for itself, generally good reason should be triggered upon the following types of events: (1) material diminution in position, authorities, duties or responsibilities, (2) reduction in base salary, target bonus opportunity, target long-term incentive opportunity or other components of compensation or benefits, (3) relocation of the executive’s principal location of employment by a certain distance (*e.g.*, 30 miles) and (4) the company’s material breach of agreements with the executive.

Severance Formula

Severance payments are generally expressed as a multiple (*e.g.*, two times) of pay. Less typically, they correspond to the term of the agreement such that the amount of severance declines for each day that the executive remains employed under the

¹²¹ See ISS *U.S. Equity Compensation Plans Frequently Asked Questions*, No. 22 (Updated Dec. 17, 2025), available [here](#).

agreement during the term. Ultimately, the amount of severance payable is most relevant, and is dependent upon both the multiple of pay and the definition of “pay,” which is typically expressed as the sum of base salary and bonus (which is commonly defined as target bonus or the higher of target bonus and average actual bonuses over the three prior years). In the change in control context, severance is almost universally paid in a lump sum because of the concern that an acquirer may cease to continue installment payments.

Most change in control employment or severance protection agreements and plans also contain provisions addressing the so-called “golden parachute” excise tax applicable under Sections 280G and 4999 of the Code, which is discussed in more detail below.

2. Stock-Based Compensation Plans

In addition to employment and severance protection agreements and plans, companies should review their stock-based compensation plans for change in control provisions. Plans often contain provisions for accelerated vesting of stock awards either upon a change in control (“single-trigger” vesting) or upon a qualifying termination of employment thereafter (“double-trigger” vesting). Since performance goals may no longer be relevant or may not be measurable following a transaction, it is often advisable for award agreements to provide that performance goals are deemed achieved at the completion of the transaction at the greater of the target level and the level of actual performance (as measured immediately prior to the completion of the transaction), with the award then continuing as a time-vesting award. Stock plans also often provide an extended post-termination exercise period for stock options and SARs upon terminations of employment following a change in control (*e.g.*, the lesser of three years or the remainder of the original term). Since these provisions may result in parachute payments under Section 280G of the Code (discussed in more detail below), plan amendments should be considered and implemented in the context of an overall review of change in control employment protections, and the associated costs should be analyzed in that context.

While ISS encourages double-trigger change in control vesting, single-trigger vesting provisions in an equity plan will not automatically result in a negative recommendation for the equity plan—for instance, where a plan provides for single-trigger vesting only when an acquirer declines to assume the outstanding equity awards. However, equity plans that include both single-trigger vesting and a liberal “change in control” definition are considered a negative overriding factor by ISS, as noted above. For purposes of evaluating equity plans, ISS in recent years modified its equity plan scorecard regarding change in control vesting features, from awarding or withholding points based on the actual vesting treatment of equity awards on a change in control, to awarding points based on the quality of disclosure of change in control vesting provisions. Full points for this factor under the scorecard will be given if the plan discloses with specificity the change in control treatment of both time-vesting and performance-based vesting awards. If there is

no change in control provision in the plan, or if the plan allows discretionary vesting, then zero points will be earned for this factor.

In designing employee stock plans, as well as other types of benefit and compensation plans, companies should be sensitive to the need to retain key personnel through the closing of a transaction to help ensure that the board of directors is delivering to the acquirer an intact management team. It is also important to ensure that there is harmony between the terms of the equity plans and award agreements and any severance arrangements.

Despite the terms of the stock plan and award agreements, the treatment of equity awards in a transaction is often a negotiated point between the parties. Most equity plans contain flexible adjustment provisions to accommodate treatment that deviates from the default change in control provisions, as long as the negotiated treatment is not adverse to the award holders.

3. Separation Plans

In addition to change in control arrangements for senior executives, many public companies have adopted change in control separation plans for less senior executives, sometimes covering the entire workforce. These separation plans either formalize existing practices (applicable whether or not in connection with a change in control) or provide enhanced severance in the event of a layoff occurring within a limited period (such as one or two years) after a change in control. These plans generally provide for cash severance payments determined on the basis of seniority/position, pay and years of service or some combination of these factors, although a minimum and a maximum number of weeks of pay is usually specified, and may provide continuation of benefits with the company paying all or a portion of the expense and outplacement services. Severance usually is payable following an involuntary termination without cause and sometimes due to a constructive termination, such as workplace relocation, decrease in base salary or wages, or material diminution in duties.

Due to the large numbers of people involved, separation plans should be adopted after a careful review of the estimated costs, including an analysis of the potential impact of golden parachute excise tax and deductibility provisions of the Code on the payments and benefits provided under the plan. Further, companies should be sensitive to the fact that in a merger involving facility closings or similar reductions in force on both sides, harmonizing the target and acquirer's severance policies may make sense, so that similarly situated employees of the acquirer and target who are laid off are treated uniformly.

4. Deferred Compensation Plans

Due to the credit risk associated with the payment of deferred compensation and other unfunded nonqualified plan benefits, plans often provide for, or participants elect, an immediate lump-sum payment of the entire account balance upon a change

in control. Any such election should be reviewed to ensure that it complies with Section 409A of the Code (discussed in more detail in Chapter VI of this Guide). Companies should also evaluate whether triggering such payment obligations upon a change in control could put pressure on the company's cash position, which may in some cases affect how potential acquirers view the transaction.

The definition of "change in control" applicable to change in control distribution provisions in, or individual elections under, deferred compensation plans for employees and directors should be reviewed and understood prior to a transaction, since Section 409A imposes significant limitations on the ability to alter distribution provisions or elections after they are established. Although some companies may prefer the administrative ease of having only one change in control definition for all purposes, a change in control definition that mirrors the definition in Section 409A is not required for all change in control provisions in all compensation arrangements. In general, companies should use definitions that they believe indicate a true transfer of control of the company and should provide, only to the extent required by Section 409A, that the definition will be triggered only if such event also constitutes a "change in control event" within the meaning of Section 409A.

5. Rabbi Trusts

A rabbi trust is a trust created for the purpose of setting aside assets that may be used to fund an employer's non-tax-qualified benefit obligations, such as traditional deferred compensation balances, although in a change in control situation, severance is sometimes also covered by the trust. In general, companies adopt rabbi trusts for two reasons: (1) to provide a way to set aside funds to meet future obligations to pay deferred compensation or unfunded retirement benefits; and (2) to reassure employees that the assets to pay their compensation will be available and in the hands of a neutral third party. The latter concern is generally the primary motivation in establishing rabbi trusts that are only required to be funded upon a change in control. If there is a genuine concern that an acquirer may refuse to pay certain benefits after a change in control, a rabbi trust can be designed to allow payments to be made by the trustee in accordance with procedures designed to protect the employees against unfair treatment by the acquirer. Because an acquirer, especially in a friendly transaction, is rarely reluctant to pay severance following a change in control where the entitlement is clear, the rabbi trust's effectiveness in ensuring payment is rarely tested.

It should also be noted that under the U.S. tax rules pursuant to which rabbi trusts are able to exist, funds deposited into rabbi trusts remain general assets of the company, subject to the claims of unsecured creditors of the company in the event of a bankruptcy.

Finally, before implementing a rabbi trust, especially one containing a provision that requires full funding or makes the trust irrevocable on a change in control or imminent change in control, the compensation committee should consider the types

of liabilities being funded and the timeline for the payment of such obligations, the costs involved in funding and maintaining the trust, and the costs of using the trustee as paying agent/administrator for the payment of benefits that are funded through the trust upon a change in control. The funding obligation and related costs may be large in relation to the benefits to participants and may cause concern on the part of potential acquirers if significant funding is triggered upon a change in control.

6. Retention Programs

A retention program is a helpful tool to ensure that the employees who are necessary to the completion of a transaction and the transition following closing are retained and incentivized to stay focused and committed. Retention is an issue for both the seller and the buyer, with the seller often most concerned about retaining key employees through closing and the buyer more focused on the transition beyond the closing. The specific terms of the retention program, such as total amount and general payment timing and terms, are negotiated in connection with a transaction by the management teams. Individual awards are usually made during the period between signing and closing. The impact of the excise tax under Section 280G of the Code and the application of Section 409A of the Code should be understood and considered when developing retention programs and allocating awards thereunder. Companies should understand the disclosure obligations relating to the adoption of a retention program and the grant of awards thereunder, which could require filing a current report on Form 8-K if named executive officers are participating (*see* Chapter IV of this Guide for more details).

C. Considerations in Mergers of Equals

The characteristics of “mergers of equals” or “MOEs” generally include a no or low premium deal, with social issues (*e.g.*, headquarters, name of combined company, composition of the management team), governance matters (*e.g.*, the composition of the board and its committees, the designation of the chairman or lead independent director) and CEO succession addressed in greater detail than in other transactions. The succession, compensation and benefits issues in an MOE are complex, requiring a careful analysis of the existing arrangements of both parties to the transaction, as well as the tax implications under Sections 280G and 409A of the Code. In recent MOEs, new agreements (employment, consulting or both) are almost always entered into with the CEOs of each party to the transaction at the time the merger agreement is signed, with the view that establishing the ongoing executive leadership and any planned transitions are important aspects of the transaction. MOE parties usually seek a balanced and equitable approach to retention and compensation matters with a view towards maintaining appropriate parity in the treatment of similarly situated employees from both sides, recognizing that synergies are a critical aspect of most MOEs. As with most compensation and employee retention matters, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

D. Section 280G of the Internal Revenue Code

1. General Rules

The so-called “golden parachute” excise tax rules under Sections 280G and 4999 of the Code subject “excess parachute payments” to a dual penalty: the imposition of a 20% excise tax upon the recipient and the nondeductibility of such payments for U.S. federal income tax purposes by the paying company. “Excess parachute payments” result if the aggregate payments received by a “disqualified individual” that are “contingent on a change in control” equal or exceed the safe harbor, which is three times the individual’s “base amount” (the average annual taxable compensation of the individual for the five years preceding the year in which the change in control occurs). In such case, the excess parachute payments are equal to the excess of (1) such aggregate change in control payments over (2) the employee’s base amount. In other words, the excise tax and nondeductibility rules apply not just to the excess over the safe harbor of three times the base amount, but, once triggered, apply to the whole amount in excess of one time the base amount.

2. General Approaches

Three approaches generally are taken to dealing with golden parachute tax penalties in change in control agreements and plans:

- ***Straight Cutback*** – Payments that are contingent on a change in control can be cut back to one dollar below the safe harbor, so that no payments are considered parachute payments;
- ***Better Net Cutback*** – Payments that are contingent on a change in control can be cut back to one dollar below the safe harbor, but only if the result is to give the employee a larger after-tax amount than if the payment were not cut back (a so-called “better net after-tax” cutback); or
- ***Gross-Up*** – Payments can be “grossed-up” so that the employee is in the same after-tax position as if there were no excise tax.

After an analysis of the amounts involved, many companies historically adopted a “gross-up” provision in order to ensure that the excise tax would not undo the intended goals of the compensation arrangements. In addition, gross-ups often were provided in order to ensure fair and uniform treatment because the mechanics of the excise tax rules disproportionately impact certain groups of employees, including recently promoted and newly hired employees, employees who do not exercise options, and employees who elect to defer compensation. Moreover, changes in the design of compensation programs (e.g., longer vesting periods, cliff vesting as opposed to installments, and a greater allocation of performance-based compensation and mandatory deferrals) have exacerbated the impact of Section 280G on executives. For example, as a result of the manner in which the regulations under Section 280G value performance-based compensation for purposes of

determining the amount of the payments contingent on a change in control, the excise tax is more likely to apply to employees who receive change in control acceleration of performance-based compensation than it is to those who receive acceleration of time-based awards.

Unfortunately for the affected individuals, the now near-universal view of proxy advisors, such as ISS, is that the adoption of golden parachute excise tax gross-ups in new, extended or materially modified agreements or executive change in control plans is a “problematic” pay practice that is likely to result in a negative recommendation on a say on pay vote or, where there is no say on pay vote, or where concerns expressed by ISS on a say on pay vote are not addressed in the following year, a “withhold-the-vote” recommendation for the compensation committee members or even the entire board of directors.¹²² Companies that have implemented golden parachute excise tax gross-ups in preexisting agreements and plans and have determined that such gross-ups are in the best interests of the company and its shareholders need not eliminate them to avoid scrutiny by ISS, as ISS generally will make its recommendations regarding the periodic “say on pay” vote (but not the “golden parachute say on pay” vote) taking into account only agreements and plans that are new, extended or materially amended. Those companies that wish to preserve such gross-ups should only amend the arrangements that contain the gross-ups with great care, as such amendments could de-grandfather the arrangements and result in ISS review. While an extension of an existing agreement will trigger ISS review, the automatic renewal of an agreement with an “evergreen” provision (itself a feature that ISS does not consider a “best practice”) generally will not be deemed an “extension” for that purpose.¹²³

In light of ISS’s position on golden parachute excise tax gross-ups, many companies have elected to implement “better net after-tax” cutbacks. That being said, as the deductibility of compensation at the senior executive level is already limited due to the changes to Section 162(m), the lost deduction if Section 280G were to apply has become less relevant.

3. Mitigation Planning

In the context of a transaction, target companies should engage a qualified accountant to perform Section 280G calculations and analysis well in advance of the transaction to make sure there is sufficient lead time for implementing mitigation strategies, which in many cases can eliminate or significantly reduce the executives’ excise tax exposure without resorting to cutbacks or gross-ups. Some examples of common mitigation strategies include:

- ***Income Acceleration*** – Accelerating income (*e.g.*, from bonus payments and equity award vesting and settlement) into the year before the year of closing has

¹²² See ISS U.S. Proxy Voting Guidelines, at 17 (Updated Dec. 9, 2025), available [here](#).

¹²³ See Chapter VIII of this Guide for a more detailed discussion of say on pay votes and ISS and Glass Lewis.

the effect of boosting the safe harbor amount under the rules, thereby reducing or potentially avoiding altogether the excise tax.

- ***Noncompete Valuation*** – Noncompetes are recognized under the rules as having value to the company and thus can be used to offset amounts that may otherwise be subject to the excise tax. In order for the value of a noncompete to be recognized, it must substantially constrain the individual’s ability to perform services and be reasonably likely to be enforced. Given the uncertain landscape around the enforceability of noncompetes, the valuation of noncompetes for purposes of Section 280G mitigation should be carefully considered and analyzed. *See* Chapter V of this Guide for a more detailed discussion of noncompetes.

In the past few years, there has been a trend for target companies to implement excise tax gross-ups in connection with the negotiation of a particular change in control transaction, particularly in circumstances (*e.g.*, transaction price provides a very high premium to market price) where executives would be harshly impacted by the excise tax even after applying all available mitigation alternatives.

CHAPTER VIII

SAY ON PAY AND SHAREHOLDER RELATIONS

- A. Say on Pay
 - 1. The Say on Pay Vote
 - 2. The Say When on Pay Vote
 - 3. The Golden Parachute Say on Pay Vote
- B. Shareholder Proposals
- C. The Impact of ESG-Related Goals and the Future of Executive Compensation
- D. Shareholder Advisory Firms – Voting Guidelines
- E. The Rise of Institutional Investor Voting Guidelines

Annual, mandatory say on pay shareholder advisory votes are for the most part an ordinary fact of life for public companies. Concern over say on pay support levels continues to influence company action, both in terms of compensation design and shareholder outreach strategy. This Chapter VIII discusses the evolution of say on pay, as well as other notable developments in the area of compensation-related shareholder proposals, ESG-related trends, and the compensation policies of proxy advisory groups (notably, ISS).

A. Say on Pay

Since 2010, the Dodd-Frank Act has mandated three different types of nonbinding shareholder votes on compensation matters:

- **Say on Pay** – No less frequently than once every three calendar years, each public company must submit the compensation of its NEOs to a nonbinding shareholder vote (the “say on pay” vote). Most public companies have opted for annual say on pay votes.
- **Say When on Pay** – No less frequently than once every six calendar years, each public company must submit for a nonbinding shareholder vote the question of whether the say on pay vote should be held annually, biennially or triennially (the “say when on pay” vote). As discussed below, this vote occurred most recently in 2023 for most companies.
- **Golden Parachute Say on Pay** – In any proxy statement or consent solicitation for a shareholder meeting to approve an acquisition, merger, consolidation or sale of substantially all of a company’s assets, a public company must submit all golden parachute arrangements covering any of its NEOs to a separate nonbinding shareholder vote (the “golden parachute say on pay” vote), unless the arrangements have already been subject to a say on pay vote.

1. The Say on Pay Vote

General

The say on pay vote must cover the compensation of a company’s NEOs, as disclosed in accordance with Item 402 of Regulation S-K, including the CD&A; it does not cover director compensation, nor does it cover the portion of the proxy statement disclosure related to compensation and risk with respect to broad-based programs. The vote is a single line item on the relevant compensation arrangements in their entirety. The SEC rules do not require companies to use specific language or a prescribed format in “say on pay” resolutions, although they include a nonexclusive example of a resolution that would satisfy the applicable requirements. The proxy statement must include an explanation of the effect of the vote (*i.e.*, that it is nonbinding), and future proxy statements must address whether (and if so, how) the company has considered the results of the most recent vote in determining compensation policies and decisions.

The say on pay vote serves as an important barometer of shareholder views of a public company's compensation practices. As discussed below, ISS has indicated that it utilizes say on pay votes, where offered, as its primary vehicle for expressing dissatisfaction with compensation practices. While the say on pay vote is nonbinding, companies are quite focused on receiving a favorable outcome, and poor results have the potential to trigger significant investor pressure and even litigation.

Statistics and Trends

In 2025, 31 Russell 3000 companies failed Say on Pay, representing a 1.4% failure rate, with average support levels for Russell 3000 companies at approximately 90.6% in 2025. ISS recommended a vote against approximately 11.5% of Russell 3000 and 9.9% of S&P 500 company proposals in 2025, so a favorable vote was achieved even in a significant majority of the cases where ISS had made a negative recommendation. However, an ISS negative recommendation correlated with lower support levels. Companies that received an ISS "against" recommendation achieved an average vote result of 23% lower (in the case of Russell 3000 companies) and 27% lower (in the case of S&P 500 companies).¹²⁴

Despite generally positive year-over-year say on pay results, companies should approach each proxy season with a fresh perspective, as changes in company performance, company compensation programs, and investor guidelines can have significant impact. As discussed below, ISS engages in extra scrutiny of company responses to say on pay for those that did not achieve 70% support in the prior year's say on pay vote, and has indicated a willingness to more actively recommend withhold votes from members on compensation committees where there is a view that companies with low support are not sufficiently responsive to shareholder feedback received.

Strategies for a Positive Vote

Each company's situation is unique, but, generally, the steps a company can take that will best position the company for a positive say on pay vote remain fairly constant from year to year, and include the following:

- *Analyze Prior Year's Results and Monitor Shareholder Policies.* Companies should review the voting policies of major shareholders and understand the ways in which their compensation practices may deviate from those policies. As part of that review, companies should revisit the prior year's vote results and proxy advisory firm recommendations in order to understand issues that may be particularly sensitive for the advisory firms and major shareholders. While companies should not make substantive compensation decisions that they do not believe are in the interests of long-term value creation merely in the hopes of increasing support for their say on pay proposals, changes may be appropriate

¹²⁴ See Semler Brossy, *2025 Say on Pay & Proxy Results Report* (January 15, 2026), available [here](#).

where a company determines, upon reflection, that its compensation arrangements could be improved based on feedback from its shareholders and proxy advisors.

- *Communicate with Shareholders through the CD&A.* The CD&A represents a critical communication tool in the effort to win say on pay votes. A company should use an executive summary to highlight key points and key developments since the prior year, shareholder-favored practices that the company maintains, and “hot button” practices that the company does not maintain. Given the large number of proxy statements that the typical institutional shareholder must review each proxy season, ease of readability is critical.
- *Directly Engage with Shareholders.* Whether or not a given company has received low support in the prior year, institutional investors and proxy advisors have come to expect companies—especially those that have reason to be concerned about low support at the next annual meeting (*e.g.*, its three-year TSR is low)—to be offering a direct dialogue not just immediately before ISS issues its report, but throughout the year, and before annual compensation goals and targets are set for an upcoming year. This is a process that requires careful consideration, and involves:
 - identifying significant shareholders that should be approached and, if available, their voting policies;
 - determining the person at each identified shareholder who should be contacted, with the goal being to gain the ear of a decision-maker and recognizing the delineation at most large institutions between the investment management team and the proxy voting team;
 - deciding who should make the approach to the identified shareholders, understanding that some shareholders prefer to meet with compensation committee members (particularly, the chair), while others prefer meeting with in-house subject matter experts in the executive compensation, human resources or legal functions (but not the CEO, as the discussion is often about his or her own compensation) and outside advisors;
 - figuring out the ideal time to approach the identified shareholders, with the understanding that telephone calls and meetings that occur outside of the proxy season are most likely to gain focused shareholder attention and also provide an opportunity for a second approach to the shareholders after the issuance of the ISS report if it is problematic; and
 - crafting a section of the CD&A to describe the shareholder engagement process, including any changes in compensation programs based on shareholder feedback.

- *Respond to ISS’s Recommendations.* As noted above and discussed below, ISS wields significant influence in the say on pay process.
 - ISS Corporate Solutions can be engaged, for a fee, to analyze, among other things, elements of equity plans being proposed for approval to shareholders, as well as compensation arrangements that may be up for approval in any say on pay advisory vote. The purpose of obtaining such a review in advance of a company filing its annual proxy is to allow companies to address any issues that ISS Corporate Solutions may identify as problematic, either through shareholder engagement, enhanced proxy disclosure, or both.
 - After the proxy statement has been filed, ISS will issue its report regarding the say on pay proposal. While at one time, ISS gave U.S. S&P 500 companies an opportunity to comment on ISS’s report before it is finalized, ISS has discontinued this practice, although it will issue an “Alert” if it is notified of a factual error to update a previously issued proxy report. ISS has also advised that if “significant new information is publicly disclosed in a timely manner,” ISS will issue an “Alert” only if (1) it is “warranted,” as determined by ISS, and (2) sufficient time is available before voting deadlines in that market for their institutional investor clients to review any changes in the Alert “(which could include a change to a previously issued vote recommendation).”¹²⁵

The evolution of the ISS review process emphasizes how critical an ongoing annual shareholder outreach program is. Along with clear and complete disclosure, ongoing shareholder outreach will assist a company in being able to quickly and directly solicit and obtain shareholder support of its compensation arrangements, despite a negative ISS say on pay recommendation.

2. The Say When on Pay Vote

The Dodd-Frank Act requires a nonbinding vote, at least once every six calendar years, to determine the frequency of say on pay votes. SEC rules require that shareholders receive the option to vote for one of four choices (annual, biennial, triennial or abstain). Thus, a company cannot offer a “yes” or “no” vote on its preferred option, although the company may make a vote recommendation.¹²⁶ In 2011, when most companies were required to first conduct a frequency vote, the annual option received the most support at approximately 80% of companies, the

¹²⁵ See FAQs Regarding ISS Proxy Research, available [here](#) (last visited March 2026).

¹²⁶ Note that, under SEC rules, companies may vote uninstructed proxy cards in accordance with management’s recommendation for the frequency vote *only* if the company (1) includes a recommendation for the frequency vote in the proxy statement, (2) permits abstention on the proxy card, and (3) includes language in bold regarding how uninstructed shares will be voted on the proxy card.

triennial option received support at approximately 19% and the biennial option received support at approximately 1%. In response, over 70% of Russell 3000 companies elected to conduct votes annually. Since then, the overwhelming majority of companies conduct votes annually, due in no small part to both ISS and Glass Lewis announcing that they will generally recommend in favor of an annual vote for companies submitting a say when on pay vote to shareholders. In fact, ISS will recommend an “against” or “withhold” vote on the entire board if a company implements a say on pay vote on a less frequent basis than the frequency of timing that received the majority or plurality of votes cast at the most recent shareholder meeting. Given the six-year cycle, most companies submitted to shareholders a proposal on say on pay frequency in the 2023 proxy season, and will next need to do so in the 2029 proxy season.

An annual say on pay vote offers many practical benefits. Providing shareholders with an annual say on pay vote gives shareholders an avenue other than director elections to express their dissatisfaction with pay practices at the company and, therefore, may save directors the embarrassment of receiving a significant number of “no” votes. In addition, holding an annual say on pay vote may help the company avoid antagonizing shareholders that favor an annual vote.

One note on disclosure: a company must disclose in a current report on Form 8-K its decision regarding the frequency of the say on pay vote in light of the results of the say when on pay vote. The Form 8-K must be filed no later than 150 calendar days after the date of the applicable meeting, and in any event no later than 60 calendar days prior to the deadline for submission of shareholder proposals for the subsequent annual meeting. Companies must include in their proxy materials disclosure of the current frequency of say on pay votes and when the next scheduled say on pay vote will occur.

3. The Golden Parachute Say on Pay Vote

Under the Dodd-Frank Act, the golden parachute say on pay vote applies to any proxy statement or consent solicitation for a shareholder meeting to approve an acquisition, merger, consolidation or sale of substantially all of a company’s assets.

Tabular Disclosure

SEC rules require disclosure in a prescribed tabular format of all golden parachute compensation arrangements in connection with any such transaction. For this purpose, SEC rules define “golden parachute” fairly broadly to encompass all agreements and understandings between the target or the acquirer and each NEO of the target or the acquirer that relate to the transaction. However, *bona fide* new employment arrangements with the acquirer often can be excluded. If a company previously has submitted golden parachute arrangements to a say on pay vote and has not modified those arrangements, then the company will not be required to submit those arrangements to the golden parachute say on pay vote, so long as the company’s disclosure for the prior say on pay vote satisfied the tabular disclosure

and other requirements applicable to golden parachute say on pay votes.¹²⁷ Notwithstanding this exception, in our experience it is unusual that a target company is able to rely solely on its disclosure for the prior say on pay vote, so companies should expect full disclosure of their NEOs' arrangements in the merger proxy statement (arrangements with other executive officers providing for interests in the transaction that differ from shareholders generally also must be disclosed, although not in a tabular format).

Proxy Advisor Policies

ISS's current policy on these votes is to make recommendations on a case-by-case basis on proposals to approve golden parachute compensation, consistent with policies on problematic pay practices related to severance. ISS's golden parachute say on pay analysis includes an evaluation of a company's existing arrangements, as well as any new ones. ISS's views on change-in-control arrangements when making recommendations in connection with a "say on golden parachute" vote remain centered on whether a golden parachute proposal indicates problematic features: (1) maintaining existing vesting criteria is preferable to waiving vesting criteria; (2) pro rata vesting upon a change in control based on actual goal achievement for performance awards and/or based on partial completion of the vesting period is preferable to full vesting upon a change in control (which is viewed negatively), although double-trigger vesting (*i.e.*, requiring both a change in control and a qualifying involuntary termination) is best practice; (3) full acceleration of awards granted shortly before a change in control is viewed as a greater windfall; and (4) concerns are greater when there are excessive golden parachute payments (on an absolute basis or as a percentage of transaction equity value), or if recent actions (such as extraordinary equity grants) make packages so attractive so as to influence merger agreements.¹²⁸

Glass Lewis has historically taken a hard line regarding gross-ups of the Section 280G excise tax (described in more detail in Chapter VII of this Guide), with its 2025 Benchmark Policy Guidelines providing that depending on the circumstances, the addition of new gross-ups around the Section 280G excise tax may lead to negative recommendations for a company's say-on-pay proposal, the chair of the compensation committee, or the entire committee.¹²⁹ However, in its 2026 voting guidelines, Glass Lewis did not include the foregoing stance, and only indicated that Glass Lewis will typically recommend supporting proposals requesting that a compensation committee adopt a policy against tax gross-up payments, except those applicable to

¹²⁷ Note that the rules applicable to annual proxy disclosure of termination and change in control arrangements, unlike the golden parachute say on pay rules, do not prescribe a mandatory tabular disclosure format.

¹²⁸ See *ISS United States Proxy Voting Guidelines*, at 50 (Published Dec. 9, 2025), available [here](#).

¹²⁹ See Glass Lewis, 2025 Benchmark Policy Guidelines – United States, available [here](#).

management employees of the company generally, such as relocation or expatriate tax equalization policies.¹³⁰

Against this backdrop, and despite the recent lack of clarity from Glass Lewis, target companies should be aware of the possibility of an ISS or Glass Lewis recommendation against the say on golden parachute vote in circumstances where transaction-based compensation arrangements implicate the items covered by the ISS and Glass Lewis guidelines as summarized above. Importantly, however, even if the negative recommendation leads to a failed say on golden parachute advisory vote, there does not appear to be any correlation between levels of support on the golden parachute advisory votes and levels of support on approval of the underlying transactions based on vote results from the last several years.

B. Shareholder Proposals

In recent years, shareholder activists have increasingly chosen to push their agendas through shareholder proposals, including compensation-related shareholder proposals from institutional investors such as union pension funds and faith-based investors. Many of the proposals received during the last proxy seasons have been industry-specific and/or had an ESG focus, with more significant proposals relating to climate change, as well as pay equality and diversity. Of the ESG-related proposals made in 2025, 118 were based on social issues, and 70 were based on environmental issues. Of these proposals, 5% of social proposals and 0% of environmental proposals have received more than 50% support.¹³¹

The appropriate course of action with respect to any particular proposal will depend upon the facts and circumstances. In some cases, it may be possible to exclude a proposal under applicable SEC rules. A company and its legal counsel will need to thoughtfully consider the possible impact of excluding compensation-related proposals and weigh the pros and cons of engaging in a dialogue with the proponent to encourage the proponent to withdraw its proposal. In other instances, it may make sense to implement a particular proposal, whether in whole or in part.

In formulating responses to shareholder proposals, companies should recognize that activists and shareholder advisory firms carefully monitor company action in this area and may shine a spotlight on companies that they view as uncooperative. Ultimately, however, executive compensation is a core responsibility of the board, and directors must bear in mind that they are best positioned to establish optimal company-specific compensation programs.

¹³⁰ See Glass Lewis, 2026 Benchmark Policy Guidelines – United States, available [here](#).

¹³¹ See Semler Brossy, *2025 Say on Pay & Proxy Results Report* (January 15, 2026), available [here](#).

C. The Impact of ESG-Related Goals and the Future of Executive Compensation

In the years immediately following the Covid-19 pandemic, investors increasingly focused on environmental, social and governance (“ESG”) issues—notably, climate change, diversity, equity and inclusion (“DEI”), and human capital management—and called on companies to disclose their ESG performance and targets.¹³² As a consequence, company boards found it necessary to become more deeply engaged in the oversight and integration of ESG issues in business strategy and the monitoring of their companies’ progress towards ESG targets. In the early 2020s, companies demonstrated their commitment to ESG goals by tying certain ESG metrics to executive compensation, including short-term and long-term incentives. A survey by FW Cook of the 250 companies in the S&P 500 with the largest market caps found that, in 2023, 75% of these companies disclosed ESG metrics in their incentive plans (up from 74% in 2022).¹³³

However, based on recent survey data, policy shifts are changing how many companies approach ESG issues, and 80% of surveyed executives noted their companies are adjusting ESG strategies in response to the new administration.¹³⁴ Relatedly, recent data from Glass Lewis supports the view that the use of ESG metrics is declining: the number of companies in the S&P 500 using some form of ESG consideration under an incentive plan dropped from 72% in 2024 to 68% in 2025, with a greater decline predicted in the 2026 proxy season.¹³⁵ As the focus on ESG evolves, compensation committees should consider whether and how relevant metrics, thoughtfully implemented, can drive targeted outcomes.

Incorporating ESG into Compensation Programs

Whether and how a company ought to address ESG in its compensation programs should be considered in the context of its broader ESG performance and the policies and processes it has in place to assure investors and other stakeholders of its commitment to carrying out its ESG ambitions, as well as the sector in which it operates, and evolving industry and market practices.

A preliminary analysis of considerations when tying compensation to ESG-related goals may include:

¹³² See, e.g., World Economic Forum, *Toward Common Metrics and Consistent Reporting of Sustainable Value Creation* (Jan. 2020).

¹³³ See FW Cook’s *2023 Use of Environmental, Social, and Governance Metrics in Incentive Plans* (Aug. 2023), available [here](#).

¹³⁴ See The Conference Board, *Survey: 80% of Corporations Are Reworking ESG Strategies Amid Policy Shifts* (May 29, 2025), available [here](#).

¹³⁵ See Glass Lewis, *2026 Proxy Season Preview – United States and Canada*, available [here](#).

- which ESG issues are most relevant to the company, and whether key stakeholders agree on these priorities;
- determining whether the goals should be a stand-alone component of, a percentage of, or a basis to make an adjustment to, performance-based compensation;
- whether ESG metrics should feature in the company’s annual and/or long-term incentive plans;
- how progress on ESG issues will impact the company’s financial bottom line over both the short term and long term (and whether this impact can be measured); and
- educating all constituencies regarding the relevance of the ESG issues and how the achievement of related goals benefits all stakeholders.

D. Shareholder Advisory Firms – Voting Guidelines

Over the last ten years, the influence of shareholder advisory firms on executive compensation practices through their voting recommendations on executive compensation proposals cannot be overstated.¹³⁶ Despite recent headwinds facing proxy advisory firms, including increased regulatory scrutiny (resulting in part from a December 2025 executive order directing the SEC to increase its oversight of proxy advisors)¹³⁷ and available alternatives to standardized proxy advisor frameworks to inform voting policies (including the use of AI), proxy advisors remain highly influential. Below we discuss the influence firms like ISS and Glass Lewis have had and continue to have on say on pay and equity plan proposals.

ISS – In General

The most influential of these firms is ISS. The compensation committee should regularly review updates regarding ISS’s positions on pay practices, as a means of understanding the potential shareholder reaction to, and the best means of explaining, compensation decisions. We describe above in this Chapter VIII some of ISS’s positions on the say when on pay and golden parachute say on pay advisory votes.

The say on pay vote is the primary vehicle, although not the only vehicle, through which ISS will express its view on a company’s pay practices. As in prior years, in 2026 ISS will evaluate, on a case-by-case basis, its recommendation regarding say on pay proposals and compensation committee member elections where a company’s say on pay proposal in the previous year received the support of less

¹³⁶ See Chapter XII of this Guide for a discussion of ISS guidelines regarding non-employee director compensation.

¹³⁷ Exec. Order No. 14366, 90 Fed. Reg. 58503 (Dec. 11, 2025).

than 70% of the votes cast. ISS’s evaluation will be based on the company’s response to the concerns expressed by shareholders in the previous year, including disclosed engagement efforts with major institutional investors and specific actions taken to address the issues that led to the lack of support. ISS has stated that cases where support was less than 50% will “warrant the highest degree of responsiveness.” Given the low threshold of opposition votes triggering the more stringent review, companies may treat a say on pay vote with majority, but less than 70%, support as effectively a lost vote.

The ISS U.S. compensation policy proxy voting guidelines effective for meetings on or after February 1, 2026 are not different in any material respect to the guidelines issued for the prior proxy season.¹³⁸ ISS has advised the following regarding its recommendations:

- *If There is a Say on Pay Proposal on the Ballot.* ISS generally will recommend a vote against the proposal if (1) there is an unmitigated misalignment between CEO pay and company performance; (2) the company maintains significant problematic pay practices; or (3) the board exhibits a significant level of poor communication and responsiveness to shareholders.
- *“Withhold” and “Against” Vote Recommendations on Compensation Committee Members.* In general, ISS will recommend a vote against or withhold from the compensation committee members or potentially the full board if ISS believes (1) there is no “say on pay” on the ballot, and an “against” vote on “say on pay” would otherwise be warranted due to pay-for-performance misalignment, problematic pay practices, or inadequate responsiveness on previously raised compensation issues (or a combination of the foregoing), (2) the board has failed to respond adequately to a previous say on pay proposal that received less than 70% of votes cast; (3) the company has recently practiced or approved problematic pay practices, such as option repricing or option backdating; or (4) “[t]he situation is egregious.”

ISS – Problematic Pay Practices¹³⁹

The list of problematic pay practices has remained relatively constant over the last few years. Pay elements that are not directly based on performance are evaluated on a case-by-case basis, including whether executive perquisites or benefits are a poor use of company assets, which could have a detrimental effect on the company. For this reason, companies should remain aware of, and remain current on, the list of problematic pay practices. That list is long, and includes:

¹³⁸ See *ISS United States Proxy Voting Guidelines* (Published Dec. 9, 2025), available [here](#).

¹³⁹ See *ISS U.S. Executive Compensation Policies Frequently Asked Questions* (Updated Dec. 9, 2025), available [here](#).

- “*egregious*” *employment contracts* – containing multi-year guarantees for salary increases, non-performance-based bonuses and equity compensation;
- “*overly generous*” *new hire package for a CEO* – containing sign-on awards that are excessively large or insufficiently performance-based, problematic termination-related equity vesting provisions or any other “problematic pay practices” listed in ISS’s policy;
- “*abnormally large*” *bonus payouts* – without justifiable performance linkage or proper disclosure (e.g., performance metrics that are changed, canceled or replaced during the performance period without adequate explanation of the action and the link to performance, or payouts made despite failure to achieve pre-established threshold performance criteria);
- “*egregious*” *pension or supplemental executive retirement plan payouts* – inclusion of additional years of service not worked that result in significant benefits provided in new arrangements, and inclusion of performance-based equity or other long-term awards in the pension calculation;
- “*excessive*” *perquisites* – perquisites for former and/or retired executives, such as lifetime benefits, car allowances, personal use of corporate aircraft or other “inappropriate” arrangements, extraordinary relocation benefits, including home loss buyouts or “excessive” amounts of perquisites compensation;
- “*problematic*” *severance and/or change in control provisions* – (1) change in control cash payments exceeding three times base salary plus target/average/most recent bonus¹⁴⁰ or that include equity gains or other pay elements in the calculation; (2) new or materially modified arrangements that provide for CIC severance payments without loss of job or substantial diminution of job duties, including upon certain voluntary terminations; (3) new or materially modified arrangements that provide for an excise tax gross-up; (4) “excessive” payments upon an executive’s termination in connection with performance failure or payments in connection with apparent voluntary resignation or retirement; (5) liberal definition of “change in control” where no actual change in control has occurred; and (6) a “problematic” definition of “good reason” that presents windfall risks (such as definitions triggered by potential performance failures);
- *tax reimbursements* – excessive reimbursement of income taxes on executive perquisites or other payments (e.g., related to personal use of corporate aircraft, executive life insurance, bonus, restricted stock vesting, secular trusts, etc.);

¹⁴⁰ Note, the 2025 ISS Executive Compensation Policies FAQs bracket the inclusion of “base salary plus target/average/most recent bonus” here and in the description of the most problematic pay practices. It is not clear what the brackets are intended to signify.

- *dividends or dividend equivalents* – paid on unvested performance shares or units;
- *internal pay disparity* – an “excessive differential” between total pay of the CEO and that of the next-highest paid NEO;
- *option repricing* – repricing or replacing underwater stock options or stock appreciation rights without prior shareholder approval;
- *significant shifts away from performance-based compensation* – to discretionary or fixed pay elements; and
- *other pay practices* – that may be deemed problematic in a given circumstance, but are not covered in the above categories.

In addition, although not identified as a “problematic” pay practice, ISS has said that it is unlikely to support large, front-loaded equity award grants that are intended to cover more than four years (*i.e.*, the grant year plus three future years). ISS’s concern is that such grants may limit the board’s ability to meaningfully adjust future pay opportunities in the event of unforeseen events or changes in either performance or strategic focus. If a front-loaded grant is made, any commitments not to grant new equity awards in the period covered by a front-loaded grant should be firm.

It is also worth noting that there is an ISS FAQ expressly requiring a company to identify in disclosure the type of termination of employment, and the provision by which severance payments were made under the relevant plan or agreement, in lieu of the less clear disclosure that an executive has “stepped down” or that the executive and board “mutually agreed” on a departure.

Note that engagement in a small number of these practices may not, in itself, result in an adverse recommendation from ISS. However, there is a list of pay practices that ISS deems most likely to result in an adverse recommendation. The list of these particularly problematic practices includes:

- repricing (including through cash buyouts) underwater options/stock appreciation rights without prior shareholder approval;
- “extraordinary” perquisites or tax gross-ups, potentially including gross-ups related to restricted stock vesting and home loss buyouts, and any lifetime perquisites;
- new or materially amended agreements that provide for:
 - excessive change in control payments (*i.e.*, that exceed three times salary plus target/average/most recent bonus);

- change in control severance payments that do not require an involuntary job loss or substantial diminution of duties, or in connection with a problematic definition of “good reason”;
 - problematic definition of “good reason” that presents windfall risks, such as a definition triggered by potential performance failures;
 - change in control payments with excise tax gross-ups (including “modified” gross-ups);
 - multi-year guaranteed awards or increases that are not at risk due to rigorous performance conditions; and
 - a liberal change in control definition combined with any single-trigger change in control benefits;
- insufficient executive compensation disclosure by externally-managed issuers such that a reasonable assessment of pay programs and practices applicable to their executives is not possible;
 - severance payments made when the termination is not clearly disclosed as involuntary (*e.g.*, a termination without cause or resignation for good reason); and
 - any other provision or practice deemed egregious that presents a significant risk to investors.

As a reminder, ISS has advised that it will not consider a company’s commitment to eliminate a problematic pay practice in the future as a way of preventing or reversing a negative vote recommendation.

ISS – Misalignment Between Pay and Performance

Given the importance of the pay-for-performance test and the focus by ISS on companies whose say on pay support falls below 70%, compensation committees will be well served by understanding this test, and may wish to consider having a “dry run” of it performed prior to proxy season in order to understand whether the vote might be at risk. Moreover, in the case of such a misalignment that is a result of a problematic equity compensation practice when there is an equity plan on the ballot, ISS may recommend voting against an equity plan proposal if it determines equity grant practices are driving the misalignment.

ISS has provided significant detail about how it runs its pay-for-performance test. If the results of a preliminary quantitative analysis indicate significant misalignment between CEO pay and shareholder returns and fundamental financial performance (both on an absolute basis and relative basis to a group of peers similar

in size and industry), ISS will perform a more in-depth qualitative review of the programs.¹⁴¹

In its executive compensation policies FAQs updated in December 2025, ISS indicated that it will place a greater focus on performance-vesting equity disclosure and design aspects, particularly for companies that exhibit a quantitative pay-for-performance misalignment. A non-exhaustive list of factors that ISS will consider includes: (1) non-disclosure of forward-looking goals, (2) poor disclosure of closing-cycle performance and vesting results, (3) poor disclosure of the rationale for metric changes, metric adjustments or program design, (4) a short-term performance measurement period design, (5) unusually large pay opportunities, including maximum vesting opportunities, (6) non-rigorous goals that do not appear to strongly incentivize for outperformance, and (7) overly complex performance equity structures.¹⁴²

ISS – Equity Plan Proposals¹⁴³

Under the ISS Equity Plan Scorecard (“EPSC”) method of analyzing whether to recommend “For” or “Against” an equity plan proposal, recommendations on equity plan proposals are based on a combination of weighted factors related to:

- plan costs based on a shareholder value transfer measurement;
- plan features, such as share recycling and change in control equity award treatment; and
- company grant practices, including a three-year average burn rate relative to industry and peers, the proportion of CEO’s equity awards subject to performance conditions, as well as clawback and holding requirements, with weighting by categories of companies.

A score of 59 or higher (out of 100 points) for an S&P 500 company, 57 or higher for a Russell 3000 company, 55 or higher for the Non-Russell 3000 model, and 53 or higher for other companies is required to receive a favorable recommendation. In order for a company to receive points for a clawback policy, the policy should authorize recovery upon a financial restatement and cover all or most equity-based compensation for all NEOs (including both time- and performance-vesting equity awards). A company will not receive credit if the policy contains only the minimum

¹⁴¹ See *ISS U.S. Executive Compensation Policies Frequently Asked Questions* (Updated Dec. 9, 2025), available [here](#) and *Pay-for-Performance Mechanics ISS’ Quantitative and Qualitative Approach* (Updated Dec. 9, 2025), available [here](#).

¹⁴² See *id.*

¹⁴³ See *ISS U.S. Equity Compensation Plans Frequently Asked Questions* (Updated Dec. 17, 2025), available [here](#).

requirements of the final rules under the Dodd-Frank Act (because time-vesting equity awards are not covered by such rules).

The current ISS list of “egregious” features that may result in an “Against” recommendation on any equity plan proposal, regardless of any EPSC score, is composed of the following items:

- *liberal change in control definition* – that could result in vesting of equity awards by any trigger other than a full double-trigger;
- *option repricing* – repricing or cash (or stock award) buyouts of underwater options or SARs without shareholder approval;
- *vehicle for problematic pay practices* – the plan is a vehicle for problematic pay practices or pay-for-performance misalignment;
- *evergreen* – the plan contains an automatic share replenishment feature;
- *insufficient Plan Features pillar score* – the plan lacks a sufficient Plan Features pillar score (for S&P 500, Russell 3000 and Non-Russell 3000 models only);
- *excessively dilutive* – the plan is estimated to be excessively dilutive to shareholders’ holdings (*i.e.*, the company’s equity compensation program is estimated to dilute shareholders’ holdings by more than 20% (for S&P 500 companies) or 25% (for Russell 3000 companies)); and
- *other detrimental features* – any other plan features or practices that are deemed detrimental to shareholders (*e.g.*, tax gross-ups on equity awards; reload options; or transferability of stock options to a third-party financial institution without shareholder approval).

ISS – Director Equity Compensation Plans¹⁴⁴

In response to the increased scrutiny of director compensation arrangements in recent years, ISS has added guidance regarding evaluations of director equity plans. Initially, ISS had clarified that stand-alone director equity compensation plans would not be evaluated under the EPSC or taken into account for purposes of determining the company’s three-year burn rate for its employee equity compensation plans, unless the amount of director equity grants is larger than employee equity grants.

¹⁴⁴ See *ISS U.S. Executive Compensation Policies Frequently Asked Questions* (Updated Dec. 9, 2025), available [here](#) and *ISS U.S. Equity Compensation Plans Frequently Asked Questions* (Updated Dec. 17, 2025), available [here](#). See also Chapter XII.A.3 of this Guide for more detailed information regarding shareholder advisory firms’ guidance on director compensation.

The current guidance regarding factors considered in ISS’s qualitative review of director equity plan approval, when a stand-alone director equity plan exceeds the plan cost or burn rate benchmark, provides that in its review, ISS will examine:

- the relative magnitude of director compensation as compared to companies with a similar profile;
- the presence of problematic pay practices relating to director compensation;
- the director stock ownership guidelines and holding requirements;
- the equity award vesting schedules;
- the mix of cash and equity-based compensation;
- the meaningful limits on director compensation;
- the availability of retirement benefits or perquisites; and
- the quality of disclosure surrounding director compensation.

ISS has also modified its policy regarding advisory shareholder votes to ratify non-employee director compensation to eliminate the specific list of factors it reviews (although they were similar to the factors used to review a stand-alone director equity plan, above). Instead, in evaluating director pay plans, ISS will consider pay composition, magnitude and other qualitative features, such as “meaningful” director stock ownership requirements (*i.e.*, at least four times annual cash retainer). ISS also views performance-vesting equity awards, retirement benefits and other unusual perquisites as problematic pay practices for non-employee directors. Moreover, ISS views a “meaningful limit” on annual director pay as a “positive” feature.

Glass Lewis

Glass Lewis continues to apply a “highly nuanced approach” in analyzing say on pay advisory votes, reviewing such vote proposals on a case-by-case basis, both on a qualitative and quantitative basis, and may recommend against a say on pay vote if, generally, the company fails to demonstrably link compensation with performance (*i.e.*, if there are deficiencies in a company’s compensation program’s design, implementation or management).¹⁴⁵ Beginning with the 2026 Benchmark Policy Guidelines, Glass Lewis replaced its prior pay-for-performance system (based on a school letter system (A, B, C, D or F), noting that a “C” in the Glass Lewis system indicates that the “company’s percentile rank for pay is

¹⁴⁵ See Glass Lewis, 2026 Benchmark Policy Guidelines – United States, available [here](#).

approximately aligned with its percentile rank for performance”) with a numerical scorecard approach, described in more detail below.

Although not an exhaustive list, Glass Lewis may recommend voting “Against” a say on pay vote when the following issues are weighted together (which remain the same in 2026 as in prior years):

- inappropriate or outsized self-selected peer group and/or benchmarking issues, such as compensation targets set well above the median without adequate justification;
- “egregious or excessive” bonuses, equity awards, perquisites or severance payments, including golden handshakes and golden parachutes;
- insufficient response to low shareholder support;
- problematic contractual payments, such as guaranteed bonuses;
- adjustments to performance results that lead to problematic pay outcomes;
- insufficiently challenging performance targets and/or high potential payout opportunities;
- performance targets lowered without justification;
- discretionary bonuses paid when short-term or long-term incentive plan targets were not met;
- executive pay that is high relative to peers and not justified by outstanding company performance; and
- “inappropriate” terms of the long-term incentive plans (as described in more detail in the voting guidelines).¹⁴⁶

Additionally, Glass Lewis has noted that the following may “help to drive” a negative recommendation on a company’s say on pay:

- excessively broad change in control triggers;
- inappropriate severance entitlements;
- inadequately explained or excessive sign-on arrangements;
- guaranteed bonuses (especially as a multiyear occurrence); and

¹⁴⁶ *Id.*

- failure to address any concerning practices in amended employment agreements.

Under the 2026 Benchmark Policy Guidelines, Glass Lewis indicates that at least half of long-term incentive grants should consist of performance-based awards, although LTI programs that do not meet this criterion are unlikely to result in negative recommendations in the absence of other significant issues with program design or operation.

If a company receives 20% or greater shareholder opposition to a say on pay vote, Glass Lewis expects the board of directors to engage with its shareholders actively and respond to shareholder concerns, which may include implementing changes to its executive compensation program that directly address those concerns. In the absence of any evidence that the board is actively engaging shareholders on these issues and responding accordingly, Glass Lewis may recommend “holding compensation committee members accountable” for the failure to so respond, subject to the level of shareholder objection, severity and history of the company’s compensation program.

Finally, in reviewing equity plan proposals, Glass Lewis utilizes a quantitative analysis to assess the plan’s cost and the company’s pace of granting equity awards, comparing plan limits relative to the peer group as chosen by Glass Lewis and taking into account dilution and projected annual cost relative to the company’s financial performance and plans of peer companies, as well as comparing the plan cost against the company’s operating metrics to determine whether the plan is excessive in light of company performance. Glass Lewis also utilizes a qualitative analysis, including plan and grant features and terms, and performance metrics, with a list of elements evaluated that are similar to those listed by ISS. Note also that Glass Lewis does not consider the CEO pay ratio a determinative factor in its voting recommendations. In regard to the accelerated vesting of equity awards in connection with a change in control, Glass Lewis, like ISS, considers double-trigger vesting (*i.e.*, requiring change in control and a qualifying termination) to be best practice. In its most recent policy guidelines for 2026, Glass Lewis indicated that companies that allow for committee discretion over the treatment of unvested equity awards should provide a clear rationale for the committee’s ultimate decision as to how such awards should be treated in the event a change in control occurs.

Glass Lewis, like ISS, has also included a policy statement regarding director compensation, indicating that while it is generally supportive of competitive fees, excessive fees potentially compromise the independence of non-employee directors, and performance-based equity grants should not be granted to directors.

Glass Lewis Shifts to a Scorecard-Based Approach in 2026

Glass Lewis’s policy guidelines for 2026 reflect a shift away from using a single letter grade of “A” through “F” to assess pay-for-performance alignment. Beginning in 2026, the model uses a scorecard-based approach, consisting of up to

six tests, which will be aggregated on a weighted basis to determine an overall score ranging from 0 to 100. Companies that demonstrate a “weaker link” (an overall rating of “Severe Concern” (0 to 20 points) or “High Concern” (21 to 40 points)) are more likely to receive a negative recommendation under the Benchmark Policy, although Glass Lewis considers other qualitative factors and continues to review each company on a case-by-case basis.

Regulatory Scrutiny Facing Proxy Advisors

In a December 2025 executive order,¹⁴⁷ the White House directed the SEC to increase its oversight of proxy advisors, including, among other things, to consider whether to require proxy advisors to register as investment advisors and to provide increased transparency on their recommendations, methodology and conflicts of interest. The executive order appears to target the perceived support of proxy advisors for shareholder proposals focused on DEI and ESG initiatives. However, despite the assertion in the executive order that “proxy advisors regularly use their substantial power to advance and prioritize radical politically-motivated agenda,” recent data show that large asset managers have been increasing their support for management in recent years, with average support for management resolutions at companies in the Morningstar US Large-Mid Cap Index rising to 95.6% in 2025 from 95.1% in 2023, while average support for environmental and social resolutions fell from 18.8% in 2023 to 11.6% in 2025.¹⁴⁸ The executive order also directed the FTC to scrutinize proxy advisors and instructed the DOL to consider whether proxy advisors should be treated as ERISA fiduciaries. It remains to be seen what the long-term impact will be on the proxy advisors of this increased regulatory scrutiny.

Conclusion

We recommend that compensation committees remain cognizant of the advisory firms’ current policies and take them into account in structuring pay programs. However, because compensation committee objectives do not always align with standardized proxy advisor guidelines, a compensation committee should prioritize compensation structures that support the company’s individual circumstances and needs.

E. The Rise of Institutional Investor Voting Guidelines

In recent years, we have seen institutional investors themselves issuing proxy voting guidelines, in response to both criticism of over-reliance on shareholder advisory firms and a shift to more targeted purpose-driven investing. Below is a brief description of the topics covered by a few of the largest asset managers active in the U.S. market. Recently, there has been a divergence between the voting

¹⁴⁷ Exec. Order No. 14366, 90 Fed. Reg. 58503 (Dec. 11, 2025).

¹⁴⁸ Lindsey Stewart, Morningstar, US Proxy-Voting Trends: 2025 in Review (Jan. 2026), available [here](#).

patterns of the top ten U.S. managers of equity and allocation fund assets (including the “Big Three”: BlackRock, State Street Global Advisors (“State Street”) and Vanguard), which have shown above-market-average support for management resolutions and below-market-average support for shareholder resolutions each year from 2023 to 2025, whereas the reverse was true for the next 40 U.S. index manager firms from 2023 to 2025.¹⁴⁹

BlackRock Investment Stewardship Proxy Voting Guidelines¹⁵⁰

BlackRock’s stewardship team has been split into BlackRock Investment Stewardship (“BIS”) and BlackRock Active Investment Stewardship (“BAIS”). BlackRock has published separate sets of voting guidelines for BIS and BAIS. BIS is responsible for stewardship activities in relation to assets invested in index equity strategies, with approximately 90% of BlackRock clients’ public equity assets under management held in index equity strategies as of December 31, 2025.¹⁵¹

The 2026 BIS guidelines for U.S. companies are substantially consistent with those for prior years and identify, among other things, how BlackRock evaluates executive compensation arrangements when considering a say on pay vote, covering topics and positions similar to those of ISS. BlackRock’s commentary on executive compensation leans heavily towards early and often engagement by a company’s compensation committee. Note that BlackRock may choose to vote against members of a compensation committee if any of the following determinations are made (among others):

- there is a misalignment between pay and performance, or the company has poor compensation practices and/or structures (BlackRock finds it “helpful” when companies ensure that their compensation plans incorporate appropriate and rigorous performance metrics, consistent with corporate strategy and market practice);
- the company has not persuasively demonstrated the connection between strategy, long-term shareholder value creation and incentive plan design;
- there is a lack of board responsiveness to significant investor concerns on executive compensation issues;
- executive compensation appears excessive relative to the company’s performance and compensation paid by peers, or an equity compensation plan is not aligned with shareholders’ interests;

¹⁴⁹ *Id.*

¹⁵⁰ See *BlackRock Investment Stewardship, Proxy voting guidelines for Benchmark Policies – U.S. securities* (Jan. 2026), available [here](#), and *Blackrock Active Investment Stewardship, Global Engagement and Voting Guidelines* (Jan. 2026), available [here](#).

¹⁵¹ See Blackrock, *BlackRock Investment Stewardship 4Q 2025 Statistics*, available [here](#).

- BlackRock has concerns about the structure or design of the company’s equity compensation plan or the company’s equity grant practices and the imprudent use of equity (BlackRock finds it “helpful” when companies submit equity plans for shareholder approval more frequently than required by listing exchange standards);
- the company does not conduct a “Say on Pay” advisory vote within the frequency period that received the most support from shareholders, or a “Say on Pay” resolution is omitted without explanation; and/or
- a board of directors implements or approves a repricing or option exchange without shareholder approval (where such repricing or option exchange includes NEOs, BlackRock may also vote against the company’s annual advisory vote on executive compensation).

While the 2026 BAIS guidelines contain less specific directives on executive compensation, the BAIS guidelines indicate that determinations of whether to support a company’s approach to executive compensation are made on a case-by-case basis, and features that BAIS “look[s] for in compensation arrangements” include similar considerations as described above (*e.g.*, “appropriate” fixed pay components; performance-based variable pay and long-term incentives; a balance between fixed and variable pay; and board discretion that is used sparingly and transparently, among other aspects). The BAIS guidelines indicate that where there have been multi-year issues with compensation misaligned with performance, BlackRock may vote against the election of the chair of the responsible committee, or the most senior independent director.

Vanguard¹⁵²

As noted above, effective in 2026, Vanguard divided its stewardship arms into Vanguard Capital management (VCM) and Vanguard Portfolio Management (VPM). VCM and VPM each published a set of U.S. proxy voting policies for 2026, although the policies are identical other than with respect to the covered funds.

Vanguard takes a principles-based approach to evaluating its portfolio of investments, with one of its four “Pillars” being its perspective on executive pay, which is as follows:

Compensation policies linked to long-term relative performance are fundamental drivers of sustainable, long-term investment returns for a company’s investors. Providing effective disclosure of compensation policies, their alignment with company performance, and their outcomes is crucial to giving shareholders confidence in the

¹⁵² See *Vanguard Proxy voting policy for U.S. portfolio companies* (Vanguard Portfolio Management) (Effective Jan. 2026), available [here](#), and *Vanguard Proxy voting policy for U.S. portfolio companies* (Vanguard Capital Management) (Effective Jan. 2026), available [here](#).

link between executives' incentives and rewards and the long-term returns for shareholders.¹⁵³

Vanguard also advises that it does not take a “one size fits all” approach to executive compensation, but does identify the following “red flags” when evaluating a say on pay proposal:

- pay outcomes are significantly higher than those of peers but total shareholder return is well below that of peers;
- the long-term plan makes up less than 50% of total pay;
- the long-term plan has a performance period of less than three years;
- plan targets are reset, retested, or not rigorous; and
- the target for total pay is set above the peer-group median.

A Vanguard fund will also generally vote against equity compensation plan proposals where:

- total potential dilution (including all stock-based plans) exceeds 20% of shares outstanding;
- annual equity grants have exceeded 4% of shares outstanding;
- the plan permits repricing or replacement of options without shareholder approval or the issuance of reload options; or
- the plan contains an “evergreen” feature.

State Street Global Advisors¹⁵⁴

As of the time of publication of this Guide, State Street has not yet published updated voting guidelines for 2026. Under its 2025 proxy voting guidelines, State Street indicates a “simple underlying philosophy” that guides its analysis executive compensation: “[W]e believe that there should be a direct relationship between executive compensation and company performance over the long term.” When assessing a compensation program, criteria State Street may consider include the following:

- overall quantum relative to company performance;

¹⁵³ *Id.*

¹⁵⁴ See State Street Global Advisors, *Global Proxy Voting and Engagement Policy* (Mar. 2025), available [here](#).

- vesting periods and length of performance targets;
- mix of performance, time and options-based stock units;
- use of special grants and one-time awards;
- retesting and repricing features; and
- disclosure and transparency.

Fidelity¹⁵⁵

As of the time of publication of this Guide, Fidelity has not yet published updated voting guidelines for 2026. Under its 2025 proxy voting guidelines, Fidelity has advised that it will generally support say on pay votes, *unless* the compensation appears misaligned with shareholder interests or is otherwise problematic, taking into account the following:

- the actions taken by the board or compensation committee in the previous year, including whether the company re-priced or exchanged outstanding stock options without shareholder approval; adopted or extended a “golden parachute”¹⁵⁶ without shareholder approval; or adequately addressed concerns communicated by Fidelity in the process of discussing executive compensation;
- the alignment of executive compensation and company performance relative to peers; and
- the structure of the compensation program, including factors such as whether incentive plan metrics are appropriate, rigorous and transparent; whether the long-term element of the compensation program is evaluated over at least a three-year period; the sensitivity of pay to below median performance; the amount and nature of non-performance-based compensation; the justification and rationale behind paying discretionary bonuses; the use of stock ownership guidelines and amount of executive stock ownership; and how well elements of compensation are disclosed.

Fidelity will also oppose the election of directors on the compensation committees if: (a) compensation appears misaligned with shareholder interests or is “otherwise problematic” and results in concerns with (i) alignment of executive compensation and company performance relative to its peers, or (ii) the structure of the compensation program; (b) the company has not adequately addressed concerns communicated by Fidelity in the process of discussing executive compensation; or (c) within the last year, and without shareholder approval, a company’s board of

¹⁵⁵ See *Fidelity Investments Proxy Voting Guidelines* (Mar. 2025), available [here](#).

¹⁵⁶ Note that Fidelity defines a “golden parachute” as “executive severance compensation and benefit arrangements resulting from a termination following a change in control.”

directors or compensation committee has either: (1) repriced outstanding options, exchanged outstanding options for equity, or tendered cash for outstanding options, or (2) adopted or extended a golden parachute. Fidelity generally will oppose proposals to ratify golden parachutes where the arrangement includes an excise tax gross-up provision; single trigger for cash incentives; or may result in a lump sum payment of cash and acceleration of equity that may total more than three times annual compensation (salary and bonus) in the event of a termination following a change in control.

Conclusion

The principles and concerns stated in the foregoing asset management proxy voting guidelines are generally consistent with the guidelines issued by other large institutional investors. Compensation committees may be well-served by having an understanding of the proxy voting guidelines regarding say on pay and other compensation-related proposals of their top 10 institutional investors, if available, when considering actions to be taken on such topics, as these guidelines represent long-term investors' views on how executive compensation programs should be structured to encourage and support long-term value creation at the companies in which they invest.

CHAPTER IX

COMPENSATION CLAWBACK RULES

- A. Background
- B. SEC and Stock Exchange Requirements
- C. Considerations for Adopting Clawback Policies
- D. Enforcement of Clawback Policies

A. Background

The 2010 Dodd-Frank Act charged the SEC with promulgating rules requiring NYSE- and Nasdaq-listed companies to adopt a policy mandating clawbacks of incentive compensation that was paid to a current or former executive officer during the three-year period preceding the date on which the company is required to prepare an accounting restatement as a result of material noncompliance with the securities laws, if the compensation is determined to have been based on erroneous data. The SEC was further required to direct the securities exchanges to prohibit the listing of companies that do not comply with those rules. After years of delay, proposed regulations, and discussion, the SEC in 2022 adopted final rules,¹⁵⁷ and in 2023 approved NYSE and Nasdaq listing standards implementing the rules,¹⁵⁸ which took effect on October 2, 2023, and required listed companies to adopt a policy no later than December 1, 2023. Accordingly, most public companies adopted new clawback policies in 2023. In April 2025, the SEC published six Compliance and Disclosure Interpretations, clarifying the disclosures associated with clawbacks.¹⁵⁹

The listing standards implementing the Dodd-Frank Act compensation clawback rules are, as was required by the Dodd-Frank Act, much broader than the pre-Dodd-Frank statutory clawback rule set forth in Section 304 of Sarbanes-Oxley. Most significantly, the new listing standards: (1) require each listed company to adopt a written recovery policy, whereas the Sarbanes-Oxley clawback operates on its own as a matter of law; (2) do not require any misconduct for compensation to be subject to clawback, as does Sarbanes-Oxley; and (3) cover all current and former executive officers of a listed company, whereas Sarbanes-Oxley only covers the CEO and CFO.

B. SEC and Stock Exchange Requirements

Generally, the final SEC rules and the NYSE and Nasdaq listing standards address the key questions that should be considered when implementing a clawback policy:

- *Which companies are covered?* With limited exceptions, the SEC rules apply broadly to all companies with listed securities, including foreign private issuers, emerging growth companies, smaller reporting companies, controlled companies and issuers of listed debt whose stock is not also listed.

¹⁵⁷ See Listing standards relating to recovery of erroneously awarded compensation, 17 C.F.R. § 240.10D-1. See also Listing Standards for Recovery of Erroneously Awarded Compensation, Exchange Act Release Nos. 33-11126, 34-96159, IC-34732, File No. S7-12-15, 87 Fed. Reg. 73,076 (Nov. 28, 2022).

¹⁵⁸ See NYSE Listed Company Manual, Rule 303A.14; Nasdaq Listing Rules 5608.

¹⁵⁹ See U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, *Compliance and Disclosure Interpretations: Update* (Apr. 11, 2025), available [here](#).

- *Which individuals are covered?* The recovery policy must apply to a company's current and former executive officers who served in that capacity at any time during the applicable look-back period. The term "executive officer" is defined expansively to include the company's president, principal financial officer, principal accounting officer, any vice president in charge of a principal business unit, division or function and any other person (including executive officers of a parent or subsidiary) who performs similar policy-making functions for the company.
- *What types of restatements trigger application of the recovery policy?* A restatement due to material noncompliance with any financial reporting requirement under the securities laws triggers application of the recovery policy. The determination regarding materiality is based on facts and circumstances and existing judicial and administrative interpretations.
- *How is the applicable look-back period determined?* Incentive-based compensation *received* during the three completed fiscal years immediately preceding the date that a restatement is required to correct a material error is subject to the recovery policy. Incentive-based compensation is deemed *received* in the fiscal period during which the financial reporting measure specified in the incentive-based compensation award is attained, even if the payment or grant occurs before or after that period.
- *What types of incentive-based compensation are covered?* Under the final rules and the listing standards, "incentive-based compensation" means any compensation that is granted, earned or vested based wholly or in part upon the attainment of any financial reporting measure. "Financial reporting measures" include measures that are determined and presented in accordance with the accounting principles used in a company's financial statements, as well as a company's stock price and total shareholder return. Importantly, stock options and other equity awards that vest exclusively on the basis of service, without any performance condition, and bonus awards that are discretionary or based on subjective goals or goals unrelated to financial reporting measures, do *not* constitute incentive-based compensation. Issuers should be mindful that board materials and proxy disclosures regarding pay programs could impact whether or not the applicable compensation is treated as incentive-based compensation for purposes of the final rules.
- *How is the recovery amount determined?* The recovery amount equals the amount, calculated on a *pre-tax* basis, of incentive-based compensation received in excess of what would have been paid to the executive officer upon a recalculation of such compensation based on the accounting restatement. For incentive-based compensation based on stock price or total shareholder return, where the amount of erroneously awarded compensation is not subject to mathematical recalculation directly from the information in an accounting restatement, the recoverable amount must be determined based on a reasonable,

documented estimate of the effect of the accounting restatement on the applicable measure.

For equity awards that are incentive-based compensation, if the shares or options are still held at the time of recovery, then the recoverable amount is the number of shares or options received in excess of the number that should have been received after applying the restated financial reporting measure. If options have been exercised, but the underlying shares have not been sold, then the recoverable amount is the number of shares underlying the excess options applying the restated financial measure. If shares have been sold, then the recoverable amount is the sale proceeds received by the executive officer with respect to the excess number of shares.

- *Does the board have discretion over whether to seek recovery?* Board discretion is limited. A company is required to recover compensation in compliance with its recovery policy, *except* to the extent that pursuit of recovery would be impracticable because it would (1) impose undue costs on the company, (2) violate home country law based on an opinion of counsel or (3) cause a broad-based retirement plan to fail to meet the tax-qualification requirements. Before concluding that pursuit is not feasible, the company must first make a reasonable attempt to recover the incentive-based compensation. Finally, a board is required to apply any recovery policy consistently to executive officers, and a company is prohibited from indemnifying any current or former executive officer for recovered compensation.
- *What additional disclosure requirements do the SEC rules impose?* A listed U.S. company is required to file its recovery policy as an exhibit to its Form 10-K. In addition, the final rules require disclosure in the company's annual proxy statement of the following items, among others, if, during the prior fiscal year, either a triggering restatement occurred or any balance of erroneously awarded incentive-based compensation was outstanding: (1) for each current and former NEO and all other current and former executive officers as a group, the amount of recovery forgone and a brief description of the reason the company decided in each case not to pursue recovery, and (2) for each current and former NEO from whom, as of the end of the last completed fiscal year, erroneously awarded compensation had been outstanding for 180 days or longer, the dollar amount of outstanding erroneously awarded compensation due from each such individual.¹⁶⁰

C. Considerations for Adopting Clawback Policies

Because most large public companies already maintained clawback policies prior to finalization of the listing standards, many companies faced a decision as to whether to preserve such policies in addition to the newly required policy. While some companies superseded their existing policies with a new policy closely

¹⁶⁰ See Item 402(w) of Regulation S-K, 17 C.F.R. § 229.402(w).

hewing to the new requirements, many companies have decided to maintain their existing policies in addition to adopting a new policy that complies with the new rules, or have integrated features of the old policies that are not required by law into the new policies.

Companies that have chosen not merely to track the new requirements have generally desired the ability to impose clawbacks under circumstances that are broader than those covered by the new listing standards; common examples include a desire to be able to recoup compensation paid prior to the effective date of the new rules, to cover executives below the executive officer level, to be able to recoup service-vesting awards (which generally are not incentive-based under the new rules) or to be able to recoup compensation upon a termination for cause. Companies that elect to broaden the scope of their policies beyond the four corners of the listing standards may wish to provide that enforcement is discretionary in such cases, in order to preserve flexibility for the compensation committee or other administrator to exercise judgment.

Notably, ISS and Glass Lewis have both expressed support for policies that go beyond the new listing standards. In particular, the ISS equity compensation policies FAQ for 2026 notes that, in order to receive credit for a “robust” clawback policy in its research report, a company’s clawback policy must extend beyond minimum Dodd-Frank requirements and explicitly cover all time-vesting equity awards.¹⁶¹ Similarly, the Glass Lewis 2026 Benchmark Policy Guidelines – United States state that “recoupment policies should provide companies with the ability to claw back variable incentive payments (whether time-based or performance-based) when there is evidence of problematic decisions or actions, such as material misconduct, a material reputational failure, material risk management failure, or a material operational failure, the consequences of which have not already been reflected in incentive payments and where recovery is warranted.”¹⁶²

A recent survey by FW Cook of 45 companies with market capitalization greater than \$10 billion found that 80% of the sampled companies maintained an expanded clawback policy that goes beyond the SEC and stock exchange requirements, common features of which include covering a broader population (66%), including broader types of compensation, such as all cash and equity incentives (67%), and expanding clawback triggers such as fraud or misconduct, whether or not a restatement is required (64%), reputational, financial and other harm to the company (31%) and violation of company policy/code of conduct (25%). The survey found that expanded clawback provisions typically provide for discretionary application. Among the 20% of sampled companies that only maintained a clawback policy meeting SEC and stock exchange requirements, one-third indicated an intention to review their policies soon and were considering adoption

¹⁶¹ See *ISS U.S. Executive Compensation Policies Frequently Asked Questions* (Updated Dec. 9, 2025), available [here](#).

¹⁶² See *Glass Lewis 2026 Benchmark Policy Guidelines (United States)*, available [here](#).

of an expanded policy.¹⁶³ While these observations may be helpful indications of early trends, as the new policies mature, we expect that companies will continue to evaluate and re-assess whether to include features beyond the legally required terms, and time will tell which approaches gain favor as companies adapt to the new rules.

D. Enforcement of Clawback Policies

Companies should take care to consider mechanisms for enforcing their clawback policies. Many companies require executives to acknowledge and consent to the terms of their clawback policy. A 2023 federal court decision against the Hertz Corporation illustrated the risks of not obtaining such a consent, as the court held that general employment agreement provisions about compliance with company policies were insufficient to bind the executive to the clawback policy's punitive scheme.¹⁶⁴ Companies should carefully ensure that they establish a contractual basis with covered executives for enforcement.

Clawbacks may provide a number of benefits to a company, including enhancing shareholder confidence in executive accountability, promoting the accuracy of financial statements and aligning risks and rewards. At the same time, there are also countervailing considerations and risks. If inappropriately designed, clawback policies can result in unfair treatment of executives and require, or put pressure on, compensation committee members to enforce the policies, even where directors do not believe that it is appropriate to do so.

¹⁶³ See FW Cook's *Clawback Provisions that Go Beyond SEC Requirements are Prevalent Among Large-Cap Companies* (July 2024), available [here](#).

¹⁶⁴ *The Hertz Corp. v. Frissora*, 2023 WL 4173031, at *21–22 (D. N.J. June 26, 2023).

CHAPTER X

COMPENSATION COMMITTEE MEETINGS

- A. Meetings and Agenda
- B. Quorum Requirements
- C. Minutes
- D. Shareholder Right of Inspection and Litigation
- E. Access to Outside Advisors
- F. Compensation Committee Chairperson

A. Meetings and Agenda

Meetings

A compensation committee must meet with sufficient frequency to perform its duties and should devote adequate time for planning the timing, agenda and attendees at its meetings. A compensation committee should schedule at least one meeting before the company's annual report and proxy statement are filed to review and discuss the proposed CD&A and other compensation-related disclosures. The number of meetings a compensation committee should hold per year depends upon various factors, including the scope of its responsibilities, the size and business of the company, and the nature of the compensation arrangements implemented (or to be implemented) by the company. The SEC requires that companies disclose the number of compensation committee meetings held during the prior fiscal year in their annual proxy statements.

Compensation committee meetings, like board of director meetings, should be sufficiently long to allot adequate time to carry out the duties of the compensation committee. Compensation committees should consider scheduling their meetings for the day before full board of director meetings to permit adequate time to consider and discuss agenda items.

A compensation committee should set aside sufficient time, without the presence of the CEO or other executive officers, to deliberate and determine the officers' compensation levels. For Nasdaq companies, the CEO may not be present during discussions of his or her compensation, but a similar requirement is not imposed for other executive officers. A compensation committee should have access to management as it deems appropriate.

Agenda

A compensation committee should be active in setting its agendas for the year as well as for each compensation committee meeting. While management sets the strategic and business agendas for the company (including regulatory and compliance goals), directors should determine the bounds of their oversight and responsibilities. The compensation committee meetings and annual agendas should reflect an appropriate division of labor and should be distributed to the compensation committee members in advance. In light of the increased lawsuits regarding compensation matters, compensation committees should also ensure that they receive materials regarding proposed compensation action in advance of their meetings to provide the committee members sufficient time to review the materials.

B. Quorum Requirements

For a compensation committee to conduct official business at a compensation committee meeting, a quorum of its members must be legally present. Unless otherwise restricted by a company's charter, most states consider a director who participates via telephone or video conference to be legally present (as long as those

present at the compensation meeting can hear and speak to each other). A company's bylaws or a board of directors' resolution should set the minimum number of compensation committee members necessary to establish a quorum. If no minimum number is set by a company, then, absent a state law to the contrary, the default minimum quorum requirement for a compensation committee is a majority of its members. Similarly, the default quorum of the entire board of directors generally is a majority of its members. These principles flow from the general default rule that a committee of the board of directors is subject to the same corporate process requirements applicable to the entire board of directors.¹⁶⁵

Neither the SEC nor the major securities exchanges have specific guidelines in this regard, although the SEC does require that the proxy statement disclose the number of compensation committee meetings held during the prior fiscal year, as well as the name of any director who attended fewer than 75% of the aggregate number of meetings of the full board of directors and the committees on which such director served.

Actions undertaken by a compensation committee in the absence of a quorum are voidable. Thus, the minutes should clearly reflect the presence of a quorum to protect valid decisions from attack. To help ensure that a quorum is present: (1) compensation committee meeting notices should be sent sufficiently in advance of a compensation committee meeting and responses promptly reviewed, and (2) the chairperson of the compensation committee should consult with the corporate secretary in advance of the compensation committee meeting. If a compensation committee meeting takes place without a quorum, it should be noted in the minutes.

C. Minutes

Typically, minutes are prepared for compensation committee meetings, but not for a compensation committee's executive sessions. It is common and prudent practice for such minutes to identify the topics discussed at compensation committee meetings rather than attempt to include detailed summaries. Enough information should be recorded, however, to establish that the compensation committee sought the information it deemed relevant, reviewed the information it received, understood each element of the compensation or other arrangements presented and otherwise engaged in whatever actions and discussions it deemed appropriate in light of the then-known facts and circumstances. The minutes also should indicate which directors attended, whether they attended in person or via telephone or video conference and whether individuals other than the compensation committee members were present.

A compensation committee should approve the minutes at the next compensation committee meeting following the meeting for which the minutes were prepared. The minutes should be attached to the agenda for such meeting and circulated in

¹⁶⁵ See, e.g., § 8.25(c) of the Model Business Corporation Act (2016 Revision), available [here](#).

advance so that the compensation committee members have time to review them before they are approved. If the minutes have not been attached and adequately reviewed before the next compensation committee meeting, it may be advisable for the corporate secretary to read the minutes to the committee members before approval to ensure that they are aware of the actions that were taken at the last compensation committee meeting and approve of their characterization in the minutes. Unless otherwise required by state statute or a company's charter or bylaws, it is neither necessary for the minutes to identify the director presenting a motion or resolution nor to separately identify the directors voting for or against a motion or resolution. However, a dissenting or abstaining director should be identified if he or she so requests.

A compensation committee should consider providing a report or a copy of the minutes of each compensation committee meeting to the full board of directors. Directors who do not serve on the compensation committee should have the opportunity to ask the compensation committee questions relating to the compensation committee's charter or the topics covered at the compensation committee meetings.

D. Shareholder Right of Inspection and Litigation

Shareholders' Right of Inspection

Careful drafting of minutes is especially important because shareholders may inspect the books and records of the company, including committee meeting minutes. In Delaware, for instance, any shareholder may inspect certain defined "books and records"—including director and officer questionnaires and board of director and committee minutes—upon making a written demand under oath and stating a "proper purpose" for making the request. While the proper purpose requirement ensures that shareholders do not have *carte blanche*, activist shareholders are increasingly using this right, and a court's willingness to entertain such a demand cannot be foreclosed.¹⁶⁶ The Delaware Court of Chancery opinion in *Amalgamated Bank v. Yahoo! Inc.*,¹⁶⁷ discussed above in Chapter III of this

¹⁶⁶ At least one Delaware Court of Chancery decision, *Polygon Global Opportunities Master Fund v. West Corp.*, 2006 WL 2947486 (Del. Ch. Oct. 12, 2006), did announce several important limitations on the use of this tool in the transactional context and possibly beyond. In *West Corp.*, an activist hedge fund (Polygon Global Opportunities Master Fund) demanded access to West Corporation's books and records after West Corporation announced its intention to undertake a going-private transaction. In denying Polygon Global Opportunities Master Fund's demand, the court held that, in certain circumstances, public information may be sufficient for the shareholder's stated purpose, the books-and-records statute "is not intended to supplant or circumvent discovery proceedings, nor should it be used to obtain that discovery in advance of the appraisal action itself" and Polygon Global Opportunities Master Fund's desire to investigate alleged board of director misconduct cannot be a proper purpose because Polygon Global Opportunities Master Fund would not have standing to pursue any claims (given that it purchased shares in West Corp. only after the announcement of the transaction). *Id.* at 16–17.

¹⁶⁷ *Amalgamated Bank, Trustee for the Longview LargeCap 500 Index Fund and the LongView LargeCap 500 Index VEBA Fund v. YAHOO! Inc.*, 132 A.3d 752, 795 (Del. Ch. 2016) (requiring

Guide, demonstrates the utility of books and records demands in compensation-related claims.

A 2005 Delaware Supreme Court order,¹⁶⁸ remanding a lower court decision allowing a company to demand confidential treatment before divulging sensitive information to dissident shareholders, illustrates the scrutiny companies may face when attempting to prevent public disclosure of even ostensibly confidential information. In its order, the Delaware Supreme Court held that the Court of Chancery must balance a company's interest in confidentiality against a shareholder's communication interest and establish that the confidentiality interest "outweigh[s]" the shareholder's interest.

Litigation

In litigation, minutes carry added significance, given that both Delaware and New York accord corporate minutes a presumption of accuracy. Minutes have been cited in a number of high-profile cases as evidence of directors' alleged lack of care and/or good faith in exercising their fiduciary duties. It is especially important that minutes are carefully and thoughtfully drafted so that an ambiguous litigation record is not created. Courts and regulators reviewing a committee's actions often regard minutes as the most reliable contemporaneous evidence of what transpired at a meeting. In litigation concerning director-level conduct and decision-making, board and committee minutes are regularly used as evidence and can provide a guide to opposing counsel as to which directors to depose and what topics to cover in such depositions. It is therefore of vital importance that minutes be thoughtfully drafted to reflect the topics discussed at meetings and the substance of the committee's discussion.¹⁶⁹

E. Access to Outside Advisors

As discussed in more detail in Chapter II of this Guide, under stock exchange listing standards established pursuant to the Dodd-Frank Act, the compensation committee may, in its sole discretion, retain or obtain the advice of a compensation consultant, independent legal counsel or other advisor. The rules require compensation committees to be directly responsible for the appointment, compensation and oversight of the advisors they retain and the company to provide for appropriate funding, as determined by the compensation committee, for payment of reasonable compensation to the advisors. Additionally, the charter of a compensation committee must address these rights and responsibilities. Disclosure requirements

Yahoo to produce documents, including emails, from the Company's CEO and board of directors relating to an executive's hiring and subsequent termination).

¹⁶⁸ *Disney v. Walt Disney Co.*, No. 380, 2004 (Del. Mar. 31, 2005) (Order), available [here](#).

¹⁶⁹ Documenting board actions formally and with care will allow corporations to resist requests for more searching inspection in Delaware. The 2025 amendments to the Delaware General Corporation Law limit the definition of "books and records" to formal board materials but nevertheless will allow broader inspection if the corporation does not maintain formal minutes. *See* 8 *Del. C.* § 220(f).

mandate detailed disclosure of fees and services in respect of consultants who are not independent.

Notwithstanding this heavy emphasis on consultant independence, retention of separate advisors for each of the compensation committee and management when considering issues of executive compensation may not always serve the company's best interests. Such an approach can give rise to inefficiencies in compensation discussions, put a board of directors in the awkward position of receiving conflicting advice, and, perhaps most importantly, create an adversarial relationship between management and the board of directors. While directors should have full access to any consultants that are ultimately retained by the company and have the ability and time to ask focused questions of them, the use of consultants is not legally required, and a consultant's judgment should not be viewed as a substitute for a board of directors' exercise of judgment after careful and informed deliberation. As a matter of good corporate governance, a compensation committee should understand the nature and scope of services that consulting firms and their affiliates provide to the company to evaluate any actual or perceived conflicts of interest.

F. Compensation Committee Chairperson

While each member of a compensation committee contributes to its effectiveness, the compensation committee chairperson has a unique role. The chairperson is responsible for ensuring that compensation committee meetings run efficiently and that each agenda item receives the appropriate level of attention. The compensation committee chairperson also often serves as the key contact between the compensation committee and other directors and senior management.

Consequently, in choosing the compensation committee chairperson, a board of directors should seek to select a director with leadership skills, including the ability to forge productive working relationships among compensation committee members and with other directors and senior management. No matter who is appointed compensation committee chairperson, as part of the annual review of the compensation committee, the compensation committee and the board of directors should review the combination of talent, knowledge and experience of the compensation committee members to ensure that the compensation committee has the right mix of people.

The time commitment resulting from the current regulatory and shareholder activist environment may require additional compensation for directors, and this pressure is especially acute with respect to service on a compensation committee. Although some companies would prefer not to discriminate in compensation among directors, reasonable additional fees for compensation committee members are legal and may be appropriate. Additional compensation for committee chairs is another way to give fair compensation to those members most burdened with responsibilities.

CHAPTER XI

COMPENSATION COMMITTEE CHARTERS

- A. General
- B. NYSE-Listed Company Charter Requirements
- C. Nasdaq-Listed Company Charter Requirements
- D. Other Potential Items for Inclusion in Compensation Committee Charters

A. General

Under the SEC's executive compensation disclosure rules, a public company must disclose whether or not it has adopted a compensation committee charter, and any such charter must be made publicly available on the company's website or attached to the proxy or information statement at least once every three years. In addition, as described below, the NYSE and Nasdaq require a listed company to adopt a compensation committee charter that must include specified provisions. In light of these requirements, the compensation committee of a publicly held company should have a charter that complies with applicable rules, regulations and stock exchange requirements.

In addition, it has become common in recent years to add to compensation committee charters the responsibility for company-wide oversight of human capital management generally, thereby expanding the core responsibilities of the compensation committee beyond the traditional role of executive pay, and in some cases companies have changed the name of the committee to reflect this expanded role (e.g., Human Capital Committee; People & Compensation Committee).¹⁷⁰ That said, the charter should not over-engineer the operation of the compensation committee. If a compensation committee charter requires review or other action and the compensation committee has not taken that action, the failure may be considered evidence of lack of due care. To avoid inadvertent charter violations, companies should be thoughtful about the obligations specified in the charter and ensure that all such obligations are covered when preparing the annual meeting calendar and agendas. The creation of compensation committee charters is an art that requires experience and careful thought; it is a mistake to copy blindly the published models.

Each company should tailor its compensation committee charter to address the company's particular needs and circumstances, limiting the charter to what is truly necessary and what is feasible to accomplish in actual practice. To be state of the art, it is not necessary that a company have everything other companies have. A compensation committee charter should carefully be reviewed annually to prune unnecessary items and to add only those items that will, in fact, help the compensation committee members in discharging their duties.

Exhibit A to this Guide is a model compensation committee charter. This compensation committee charter is only intended to reflect required and recommended provisions for a compensation committee charter. Companies should customize their charter to address their particular needs and circumstances.

¹⁷⁰ Blair Jones and Todd Sirras, Semler Brossy, *The Expanding Compensation Committee Mandate*, Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance (Jul. 6, 2025), available [here](#).

B. NYSE-Listed Company Charter Requirements

The compensation committee of a company listed on the NYSE must have a written compensation committee charter that, at a minimum, contains the required provisions specified by the NYSE listing standards.¹⁷¹ The compensation committee charter must be approved and adopted by the board of directors and should provide for the following:

- **Purpose** – A description of the compensation committee’s purpose and responsibilities. In this regard, the compensation committee charter should indicate that the compensation committee is appointed by the board of directors to discharge the responsibilities of the board of directors relating to compensation of the company’s CEO, as well as the other executive officers (including making recommendations to the board of directors regarding such compensation). In addition, as applicable, it should indicate that the compensation committee is charged with overall responsibility for approving and evaluating all compensation plans, policies and programs of the company as they affect the CEO and other executive officers.
- **CEO Compensation** – The compensation committee annually will review and approve corporate goals and objectives relevant to CEO compensation, evaluate CEO performance in light of those goals and objectives and (either as a committee or together with the company’s other independent directors, as may be specified in the compensation committee charter) determine and approve the CEO’s overall compensation levels based on this evaluation. It also should be noted that, in determining the long-term incentive component of CEO compensation, the compensation committee will consider the company’s performance and relative shareholder return, the value of similar incentive awards to CEOs at comparable companies and the awards given to the CEO in past years.
- **CD&A** – The compensation committee will review and discuss with management the CD&A and, based on this review and analysis, determine whether or not to recommend to the board of directors the CD&A’s inclusion in the company’s proxy statement and annual report on Form 10-K.
- **Compensation Committee Report** – The compensation committee shall furnish the compensation committee report required by the SEC.
- **Advisors** – The compensation committee may, in its sole discretion, retain advisors only after taking into consideration all factors relevant to advisor independence, including the six factors set forth in Section 303A.05(c) of the NYSE Listed Company Manual, and will be directly responsible for the

¹⁷¹ See NYSE Listed Company Manual Section 303A.05. A listed company of which more than 50% of the voting power is held by an individual, a group or another company is exempt from these requirements.

appointment, compensation and oversight of the advisor. The company must provide for appropriate funding, as determined by the compensation committee, for payment of reasonable compensation to any advisors retained by the compensation committee.

- **Membership** – The compensation committee’s membership requirements, including the need for member independence, and how compensation committee members are appointed and removed.
- **Procedures** – The compensation committee’s structure and operations, including authority to delegate to subcommittees, and the procedures for compensation committee reporting to the board of directors.
- **Self-Evaluation** – The compensation committee will perform an annual self-evaluation of its performance.

C. Nasdaq-Listed Company Charter Requirements

Nasdaq rules require the compensation committee of a Nasdaq-listed company to have a formal written charter.¹⁷² On an annual basis, the compensation committee must review and reassess the adequacy of the charter. The charter must specify the following:

- **Scope** – The scope of the compensation committee’s authority and responsibilities, and how it carries out those responsibilities, including structure, process and membership requirements.
- **Executive Compensation** – The compensation committee’s responsibility for determining, or recommending to the board of directors for approval, the compensation of the CEO and all other executive officers. The CEO may not be present during voting or deliberations on his or her compensation.
- **Advisors** – The compensation committee may, in its sole discretion, retain advisors only after taking into consideration factors relevant to advisor independence set forth in Nasdaq Listing Rule 5605(d)(3) and will be directly responsible for the appointment, compensation and oversight of the advisor. The company must provide for appropriate funding, as determined by the compensation committee, for payment of reasonable compensation to any advisors retained by the committee.

¹⁷² See Nasdaq Listed Company Manual Section 5605(d)(1).

D. Other Potential Items for Inclusion in Compensation Committee Charters

In addition to the provisions required by the NYSE and Nasdaq rules to be included in the compensation committee charter, it may also be advisable for the charter to provide:

- That the compensation committee will, at least annually, review and approve the annual base salaries and annual incentive opportunities of the CEO and other executive officers;
- That compensation committee will review and approve the following, as they affect the CEO and other executive officers:
 - all non-annual incentive awards and opportunities, including both cash-based and equity-based awards and opportunities;
 - any employment agreements and severance arrangements;
 - any change in control agreements and change in control provisions affecting any elements of compensation and benefits; and
 - any special or supplemental compensation or benefits, including supplemental retirement benefits and perquisites provided during and after employment; and
- That the compensation committee will review and reassess the adequacy of the compensation committee charter annually and recommend any proposed changes to the board of directors for approval.

However, because every company is different, a board of directors, in conjunction with the compensation committee, should carefully consider whether inclusion of any particular provision is helpful in furthering the performance of the compensation committee's duties.

CHAPTER XII

DIRECTOR COMPENSATION, INDEMNIFICATION AND DIRECTORS AND OFFICERS INSURANCE

- A. Director Compensation
 - 1. Responsibility for Determining Director Compensation
 - 2. Considerations for Determining Director Compensation
 - 3. Shareholder Advisory Firm Guidance
- B. Director Compensation Litigation
- C. Indemnification and Directors and Officers Insurance

A. Director Compensation

Director compensation is one of the more difficult issues on the corporate governance agenda and has been the subject of increased attention in recent years. On the one hand, more is expected of directors today in terms of time commitment, responsibility, exposure to public scrutiny and potential liability. On the other hand, the higher a director's pay, the greater the likelihood that such pay can be used against the director as evidence of a lack of true independence, or can be used to make claims of excessive director compensation.

1. Responsibility for Determining Director Compensation

The NYSE and Nasdaq rules do not specify that responsibility for director compensation must be assigned to any particular committee. However, it should be made the responsibility of either a committee of the board of directors or the full board of directors. Since director compensation is typically determined by either the Compensation Committee or the Nominating and Governance Committee, we have included in this Chapter XII a discussion of the issues of director compensation at public companies generally.

As discussed in Chapter II of this Guide, when directors who would directly benefit from a proposed plan are delegated the responsibility of approving such a plan, a court will refuse the protection of the business judgment rule and scrutinize the overall fairness of the plan as it relates to the company's shareholders.¹⁷³ Care also should be taken that, under normal circumstances, the compensation and benefits of management are not increased at the same time as that of directors, lest doubt be cast on the validity of both actions.¹⁷⁴

2. Considerations for Determining Director Compensation

In General

While directors are not employees and compensation is not the main motivating factor for public company directors, given the importance of board composition and the competition for the best candidates, it is important to evaluate whether director compensation programs are appropriate for the company's needs. Accordingly, as boards go through their self-evaluations, it is worthwhile to evaluate whether such programs are adequate to secure and retain best-in-class directors, or whether the programs need adjustment consistent with the increased demands of board service.

¹⁷³ See, e.g., *Tate & Lyle PLC v. Staley Continental, Inc.*, 1988 Del. Ch. LEXIS 61, at *20–22 (Del. Ch. May 9, 1988) (invalidating rabbi trust covering both inside and outside directors because of conflict of interest).

¹⁷⁴ See *id.*

Meeting Fees and Retainers

Companies should give careful thought to the mix between individual meeting fees and retainers. Business and regulatory demands have deepened director involvement and technology has changed the way directors meet. In view of these developments, many companies have de-emphasized per-meeting fees and instead increased retainers. Such an approach offers the dual benefits of simplifying director pay and avoiding issues that arise from electronic forms of communication and frequent, short telephonic meetings.

Additional Director Responsibilities

Companies should consider whether additional pay is appropriate for directors serving on committees that impose substantial extra demands. It is both legal and appropriate for basic directors' fees to be supplemented by additional amounts to chairs of committees and to members of committees that meet more frequently or for longer periods of time. It is also appropriate to consider the level of time commitment required outside of meetings, including for members of audit and compensation committees who must frequently review substantial written material to be properly prepared for their meetings.

The increased responsibility imposed on directors generally is especially pronounced for non-executive board chairs, lead directors and committee chairs. Accordingly, particular attention should be paid to whether these individuals are being fairly compensated for their efforts and contributions. We expect the pay of non-executive board chairs and lead directors to increase as pay practices catch up to the demands of the responsibilities of these positions.

Determining Compensation

The board of directors, a compensation committee, a nominating committee or other responsible board of director committee, as applicable, should determine the form and amount of director compensation to be paid, with appropriate benchmarking of such compensation against that of peer companies. Additionally, as with executive officers, any perquisites or other forms of compensation that may be provided to directors should be carefully considered, especially in light of the positions taken by shareholder advisory firms, such as ISS, in certain circumstances.¹⁷⁵ Boards of directors may also wish to consider including within the applicable equity incentive plan an annual limit on non-employee director equity-based awards and/or total compensation, to help avoid and defend against nuisance litigations that we have seen arise in the last few years (*see* Section B below for more details).

¹⁷⁵ See Chapter VIII of this Guide for a discussion of ISS views on director equity compensation plans.

In our experience, most compensation consultants can provide assistance in such benchmarking exercises, as well as in the design of director compensation programs. Survey data will prove useful in considering appropriate director compensation, and in light of ISS guidelines regarding how it determines “excessive” director compensation, has almost become an imperative when setting director compensation.¹⁷⁶

Finally, the committee tasked with determining director compensation should also consider the stock ownership guidelines applicable to the directors, both in terms of the number of shares and the period of time over which a new director is required to serve in order to achieve the guideline requirement. Compensation consultants can also be useful in providing survey data as to ownership requirements—both as to level, type and period of time required to meet these requirements—at peer companies.

In all instances, the importance of collegiality to the proper functioning of a board of directors must be kept in mind; director compensation should not promote factionalism on the board. Differences in compensation among directors should be fair and reasonable and reflect real differences in demands placed on particular directors.

Note on Disclosure

As discussed in Chapter IV of this Guide, the SEC’s compensation disclosure rules require tabular and narrative disclosure of all director compensation. The required tabular disclosure is comparable to the extensive disclosure that is required for executive officer compensation, except that only information concerning the last fiscal year needs to be disclosed. The narrative disclosure requires a description of the company’s processes and procedures for the consideration and determination of director compensation.

3. Shareholder Advisory Firm Guidance

ISS and Glass Lewis have issued guidance regarding director compensation, as discussed below.

ISS

- ***Excessive Director Pay*** – ISS may issue an adverse vote recommendation for board members approving non-employee director pay if there is a “recurring pattern of excessive non-employee director pay magnitude without disclosure of compelling rationale,” where the pattern is identified in two or more consecutive years, or without other “mitigating factors,” or in the first year if the case is particularly egregious.

¹⁷⁶ For a recent survey of director compensation arrangements, see *FW Cook 2025 Director Compensation Report* (Sept. 2025), available [here](#).

ISS has indicated that it may consider director pay an “outlier” if it exceeds pay received by the top 2% of all comparable directors within the same index and sector, recognizing that board chair and lead independent director pay is often at a premium and should be compared as a separate category.¹⁷⁷

In addition, beginning with February 1, 2026 meetings, for the S&P 500 and Russell 3000 models, a new scored factor under the Plan Features pillar assesses whether an equity plan discloses a cash-denominated award limit for non-employee directors.¹⁷⁸

- **Mitigating Factors** – ISS has indicated that it would view any of the following circumstances, if within reason and adequately explained, as mitigating an excessive pay concern:
 - one-time onboarding grants that are clearly identified as such;
 - payments related to corporate transactions or special circumstances (*e.g.*, special committees service, requirements related to extraordinary need, or transition payments to a former executive for a limited period); and
 - payments made in consideration of specialized scientific expertise.

High non-employee director pay that arises from general performance of duties, consulting agreements with an indefinite term, and problematic payments (*e.g.*, performance-based awards, perquisites and retirement benefits) will generally not qualify as pay that arises from mitigating circumstances.

Glass Lewis

Glass Lewis’s guidance regarding non-employee director compensation is less specific than ISS’s, providing generally that it will be supportive of fees that are competitive and that reasonably compensate directors for their time and effort without imposing an excessive financial cost on the company.¹⁷⁹

However, Glass Lewis believes that, for directors to serve as a check on imprudent risk-taking in executive compensation, directors should not be compensated in the same manner as executives and that directors should not be granted performance-based equity awards.

¹⁷⁷ See *ISS U.S. Procedures & Policies (Non-Compensation) Frequently Asked Questions*, Nos. 84–85 (Updated Dec. 23, 2025), available [here](#).

¹⁷⁸ See *ISS U.S. Equity Compensation Plans Frequently Asked Questions*, Nos. 29, 49 (Updated Dec. 17, 2025), available [here](#).

¹⁷⁹ See *Glass Lewis, 2026 Benchmark Policy Guidelines – United States*, at 69, available [here](#).

B. Director Compensation Litigation

In recent years, plaintiffs have focused on director compensation arrangements, and have achieved some limited successes in the Delaware courts. However, it remains the case that properly designed director compensation arrangements approved after appropriate consideration should not prove vulnerable to challenge. But the relatively recent decisions summarized below provide a strong reminder of the need for directors to apply the highest level of care when setting their own compensation.

Calma v. Templeton

In April 2015, the Delaware Chancery Court in *Calma v. Templeton* allowed a claim that Citrix Systems' board of directors had breached its fiduciary duties in awarding compensation to its outside directors under a compensation plan that had been approved by shareholders to proceed.¹⁸⁰ The suit challenged awards under the existing equity incentive plan, which had been approved by a majority of shareholders a few years earlier. Potential participants in the shareholder-approved plan included all employees, directors, and officers of Citrix; the plan contained a general limit of 1,000,000 shares per participant per year (worth over \$55 million at the time of the litigation), but no sublimit for directors (or for any other plan participant).

The Court determined that the entire fairness standard of review (less deferential than the usual business judgment standard) was applicable because the awards to the outside directors were made by the recipient directors themselves: “[D]irector self-compensation decisions are conflicted transactions that ‘lie outside the business judgment rule’s presumptive protection.’”¹⁸¹ The directors’ primary defense was that the equity plan had been ratified by shareholders; however, in light of the lack of meaningful limits or specific guidelines for awards to non-employee directors, the Court held that shareholder approval of the plan as a whole did not constitute approval of the specific decision of the board to make the grants in question.¹⁸²

The *Calma* decision built on a 2012 Delaware Chancery Court decision, *Seinfeld v. Slager*,¹⁸³ involving director equity awards under a plan with an individual share limit (where the maximum annual award based on the share limit and stock price would have been approximately \$30 million at the time of the litigation). The *Seinfeld* Court held that “there must be some *meaningful* limit imposed by the stockholders on the Board for the plan to . . . receive the blessing of the business

¹⁸⁰ *Calma v. Templeton*, 114 A.3d 563, 569 (Del. Ch. 2015).

¹⁸¹ *Id.* at 578 n.54 (citation omitted).

¹⁸² *Id.* at 587–89.

¹⁸³ 2012 Del. Ch. LEXIS 139 (Del. Ch. June 29, 2012).

judgment rule. . . . A stockholder-approved *carte blanche* to the directors is insufficient.”¹⁸⁴

Facebook

In 2016, Facebook settled a shareholder derivative complaint¹⁸⁵ alleging breach of fiduciary duty, waste and unjust enrichment in connection with the board’s approval of an annual cash and equity compensation program for non-employee directors in 2013 by committing to several governance reforms that it would maintain for five years, most notably an agreement to submit various elements of its director compensation program to a shareholder vote that would not otherwise be required, and by agreeing to pay the plaintiff’s legal fees reported to be \$525,000.¹⁸⁶

Most practitioners are of the view that the Facebook plaintiffs would not have succeeded on the merits, and presume that Facebook settled to avoid the cost and distraction of litigation. Nonetheless, the case serves as a cautionary example of the desirability of taking steps to decrease the likelihood of attracting claims related to director compensation, particularly because the size of the attorney’s fees may inspire further such claims.

Investors Bancorp

In late 2017, the Delaware Supreme Court overruled a lower court regarding the standard of review that is required when a challenge is made to director compensation awards granted under shareholder-approved equity incentive plans.¹⁸⁷ In *Investors Bancorp*, the Delaware Court of Chancery concluded that because the company’s shareholder-approved equity incentive plan contained a “meaningful limit” on the number of shares that could be granted to directors, though the grants that the company’s directors made to themselves were large they fell within these plan limits, and, therefore, the company could properly invoke a defense that the shareholders had effectively ratified these grants.¹⁸⁸ The Delaware Supreme Court reversed this decision, holding that the grants were subject to an “entire fairness” standard of review, which is a higher standard than the typical “business judgment” standard of review that applies to most director actions. The Delaware Supreme Court held that although the director awards were granted under a stockholder-approved plan, the stockholders did not ratify the specific awards

¹⁸⁴ *Id.* at *41.

¹⁸⁵ *Espinoza v. Zuckerberg*, 124 A.3d 47, 49 (Del. Ch. 2015) (holding that the entire fairness standard of review governed the approval of the 2013 non-employee director compensation, and that stockholder ratification of a self-dealing transaction must be accomplished formally by a vote at a stockholder meeting or by written consent in order to shift the standard of review).

¹⁸⁶ See Stipulation of Compromise and Settlement, *Espinoza v. Zuckerberg*, C.A. No. 9745-CB (Del. Ch. Jan. 25, 2016).

¹⁸⁷ *In re Investors Bancorp, Inc. Stockholder Litig.*, 177 A. 3d 1208 (Del. 2017).

¹⁸⁸ *Id.* at 1211 (discussing the Court of Chancery’s decision).

under the plan and therefore the stockholder ratification defense to application of the entire fairness standard did not apply.¹⁸⁹

Stein v. Blankfein et al.

In 2019, the Delaware Court of Chancery allowed a challenge to director compensation at Goldman Sachs to proceed under the entire fairness standard.¹⁹⁰ While casting doubt on the merits of the plaintiffs' allegations, the court rejected the company's position that an equity plan provision that by its terms provided that directors could not be found liable for actions taken in good faith obviated the need for application of entire fairness review.

Takeaways

Directors and executives of Delaware corporations may wish to consider including, in new or amended equity incentive plans otherwise being put to a shareholder vote, realistic limits on director awards, specifying the amount and form of individual grants to directors or a meaningful and reasonable director-specific individual award limit, and also consider including overall limits on director compensation (including, in light of ISS guidance for 2026, a cash-denominated award limit). While these limits are not required under any rule, and while some commentators have questioned their value in defense litigation in light of *Stein*, we continue to believe that they may help to deter, or bolster a defense against, claims challenging the amount or form of director compensation.

Moreover, in light of recent proxy advisory firm guidance and continued litigation pressures, it is as prudent as ever for a board to rely on a compensation consultant to assist in constructing the appropriate peer group for benchmarks and to advise on the amount and design of any proposed director compensation, as this may also assist in the protection against claims attacking director compensation.

C. Indemnification and Directors and Officers Insurance

Companies should be urged to consider adopting exculpation provisions, such as those permitted by Delaware's DGCL §102(b)(7), which have the effect of exculpating directors from personal liability for breaches of the duty of care. To the extent not exculpated, directors should be fully indemnified by the company to the fullest extent permitted by law. Charters and bylaws should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that they provide the fullest coverage permitted by law. Separate indemnification agreements could also be useful belts and suspenders to supplement exculpation and indemnification provisions contained in a company's organization documents.

¹⁸⁹ *Id.* at 1226.

¹⁹⁰ *Stein v. Blankfein et al.*, C.A. No. 2017-0354-SG, 2019 WL 2323790, at *5-6 (Del. Ch. May 31, 2019).

In addition, Directors and Officers (“D&O”) insurance coverage provides a key protection to directors. Directors should ensure that companies purchase a reasonable amount of D&O coverage and that the terms of the D&O coverage — in particular, retentions (*i.e.*, deductibles), exclusions, scope of coverage, and severability of knowledge/wrongful acts — are carefully negotiated. D&O policies should also include appropriate “Side A” coverage, which is coverage that protects directors against personal liability in the event a claim is not indemnifiable (or is not indemnified). Side A coverage can also be critical in the event of a bankruptcy—unlike other types of D&O coverage, where there may be a dispute with respect to whether the relevant coverage amounts are an asset of an individual director or the property of the bankrupt estate, Side A coverage is typically viewed as bankruptcy-remote and available to individual directors, even in a bankruptcy context.

* * * * *

This Guide is not intended as legal advice, cannot take into account particular facts and circumstances (including the extent to which certain federal fiduciary laws may apply to a given compensation committee), and generally does not address individual state or non-U.S. corporate laws. Applicability of the information contained herein to specific situations should be determined through consultation with legal, tax and accounting advisors.

EXHIBIT A

COMPENSATION [AND MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT] COMMITTEE CHARTER

Purposes

The primary purposes of the Compensation [and Management Development]¹⁹¹ Committee (the “Committee”) of the Board of Directors (the “Board”) of [Name of Company] (the “Company”) are to:

- discharge the Board’s responsibilities relating to the compensation of the Company’s Chief Executive Officer (the “CEO”) and other officers subject to Section 16 of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, as amended (the “Exchange Act”) (collectively, including the CEO, the “Executive Officers”);
- provide oversight of the Company’s executive compensation plans, policies and programs as they affect the Executive Officers;
- [review, assess, and make reports and recommendations to the Board as appropriate on succession planning with respect to the Executive Officers;]¹⁹² and
- [assist with Board oversight of the Company’s culture and strategies relating to human capital management.]¹⁹³

This charter (this “Charter”) sets forth the authority and responsibilities of the Committee in fulfilling its purpose.

Membership

The Committee will consist of no fewer than [two]¹⁹⁴ members, with the exact number determined by the Board.

The members of the Committee will be appointed annually by the Board [on the recommendation of the Nominating & Governance Committee] and will serve at the

¹⁹¹ Consider the Committee’s name and desired scope of responsibilities.

¹⁹² It is not unusual for succession planning to be under the purview of the Nominating and Corporate Governance Committee rather than the Compensation Committee. Consider the desired division and scope of responsibilities relating to succession planning.

¹⁹³ It is not unusual for responsibility for human capital management to be under the purview of either the Compensation Committee or the Nominating and Corporate Governance Committee. Consider the desired division and scope of responsibilities relating to human capital management.

¹⁹⁴ Nasdaq requires a minimum of two members on the Compensation Committee, or a minimum of three members if one of those members is not an independent director. NYSE requires that all members of the Compensation Committee be independent but does not specify a required number of members.

Board’s discretion. Committee members may be replaced or removed from the Committee by the Board at any time, with or without cause, and any vacancies will be filled through appointment by the Board on the recommendation of the Nominating & Governance Committee. Resignation or removal of a director from the Board will automatically constitute resignation or removal, as applicable, of such director from the Committee.

The Board will appoint one member of the Committee as its Chairperson (the “Committee Chair”).

All members of the Committee will meet the independence requirements of the listing standards of the securities exchange on which the Company’s securities are listed and any other applicable laws, rules or regulations (including the rules and regulations of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission) or other qualifications as are established by the Board from time to time. At least two members of the Committee will also qualify as a “non-employee” director within the meaning of Rule 16b-3 under the Exchange Act.¹⁹⁵

[Notwithstanding the foregoing, the Company may avail itself of any phase-in rules and interpretations applicable to newly listed companies in connection with an initial public offering.]¹⁹⁶

Meetings and Actions Without a Meeting

The Committee will meet as often as it determines necessary to carry out its responsibilities. The Committee Chair will preside at each meeting. If the Committee Chair is not present at a meeting, the Committee members present at that meeting will designate one of its members as the acting chair of such meeting. The Committee may also act by unanimous written consent in lieu of a meeting in accordance with the Company’s Bylaws.

Authority and Responsibilities

The principal responsibilities of the Committee are set forth below. The Committee may perform such other functions as are consistent with its purpose and applicable laws, rules and regulations and as the Board may request or as the Committee deems necessary or appropriate consistent with its purpose.

¹⁹⁵ If the compensation committee will have one or more members that do not meet the definition of “non-employee” director under Rule 16b-3, then, in order for the grant of equity awards to Section 16 officers and directors to be exempt under Rule 16b-3, the committee will need to establish a subcommittee comprised solely of two or more “non-employee directors” (within the meaning of Rule 16b-3) to approve equity grants to officers and directors (or, alternatively, such grants must be approved by the full board).

¹⁹⁶ If applicable.

The Committee will:

Compensation and Benefit Programs

1. Periodically review and approve the Company's compensation strategy and practices with respect to the Executive Officers.
2. Annually review and approve corporate goals and objectives relevant to the CEO's compensation, evaluate the CEO's performance in light of those goals and objectives and determine and approve the CEO's overall compensation levels based on this evaluation. [In determining the long-term incentive component of the CEO's compensation, the Committee may consider any number of factors, including the Company's performance and relative shareholder return, the value of similar incentive awards to CEOs at comparable companies, and the awards given to the CEO in past years.]¹⁹⁷ [The CEO may not be present during voting or deliberations on his or her own compensation.]¹⁹⁸
3. At least annually review and approve (and, if desired, make recommendations to the Board for approval of) the compensation of the Executive Officers, including annual base salaries, short- and long-term (including cash-based and equity-based) incentive awards and opportunities, and perquisites or other personal benefits, except to the extent such benefit policies or programs apply to Company employees generally.
4. Periodically and as and when appropriate, review and approve the following as they affect the Executive Officers:
 - (a) any employment and severance arrangements;
 - (b) any change in control agreements and change in control provisions affecting any elements of compensation and benefits; and
 - (c) any special or supplemental compensation and benefits for the Executive Officers and individuals who formerly served as Executive Officers, including supplemental retirement benefits and the perquisites provided to them during and after employment.
5. Perform such duties and responsibilities as may be assigned to the Committee under the terms of any equity-based plan or other compensation plan, including where appropriate or required, to administer the Company's

¹⁹⁷ Bracketed language lists considerations that the NYSE Listed Company Manual states the Committee should consider when determining the long-term incentive component of CEO compensation.

¹⁹⁸ This statement is required for Nasdaq-listed companies.

incentive compensation plans and equity-based plans and to recommend such plans for approval by the stockholders of the Company.

Compliance and Governance

6. Review and discuss with management the Compensation Discussion and Analysis required to be included in the Company's proxy statement and annual report on Form 10-K and prepare the annual Compensation Committee Report for inclusion in the Company's proxy statement.
7. Consider the results of advisory votes on executive compensation and the frequency of such votes.
8. Receive periodic reports on the Company's compensation programs as they affect all employees and consider related risks.

Management Development and Culture¹⁹⁹

9. [Review annually with the Board an evaluation of the performance of the CEO and other Executive Officers.]
10. [Periodically review and discuss with the Board and, as the Committee deems appropriate, the Nominating and Corporate Governance Committee, the corporate succession plan for Executive Officers.] [Periodically review [and approve] a written talent management program that provides for development, recruitment, and succession of Executive Officers, review diversity programs, and make recommendations to the Board regarding Executive Officers.]²⁰⁰
11. [Review and assess reports from management and make reports and recommendations to the Board as appropriate, on the Company's culture and strategies relating to human capital management, including talent development, performance against talent and diversity goals, significant conduct issues, and any related employee actions (including, but not limited to, compensation actions), in each case, at the highest management levels.]

Assessment

12. [At least annually, review and evaluate the performance of the Committee.]²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Consider including Items 9–11 if the Committee will have broad authority for management development and culture generally.

²⁰⁰ Succession planning is often primarily allocated to the Nominating and Corporate Governance Committee. Consider the desired division and scope of responsibilities relating to succession planning.

²⁰¹ An annual performance evaluation is required by the NYSE.

13. [Annually review and reassess the adequacy of this Charter and recommend any proposed changes to the Board for approval.]²⁰²

Advisors

The Committee may, in its sole discretion, retain or obtain the advice of compensation consultants, outside legal counsel, or other advisors. The Committee will have sole authority to approve the advisor's fees (the expense of which will be borne by the Company) and other terms and conditions of the advisor's retention.

To the extent required by the rules of the securities exchange on which the Company's securities are listed, prior to selecting or receiving advice from an advisor, the Committee will conduct an independence assessment, taking into consideration the factors set forth in such rules and any other factors the Committee deems relevant to the advisor's independence from management.

Meetings and Reports

The Committee will maintain written minutes of its meetings and copies of its actions by written consent, and will file such minutes and copies of written consents with the minutes of the meetings of the Board.

The Committee will report periodically to the Board, generally at the next regularly scheduled Board meeting following a Committee meeting, on actions taken and significant matters reviewed by the Committee.

Delegation of Authority

The Committee may, as it deems appropriate from time to time and to the extent permitted by applicable laws, rules and regulations, form and delegate authority to subcommittees consisting of one or more members.

* * *

²⁰² The Nasdaq rules require the charter to be reviewed annually.