
Original Article

Are all audit committee financial experts created equally?

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ABSTRACT There is little extant empirical research that classifies audit committee members based on expertise and independence simultaneously. Additionally, there is little empirical research where different types of gray audit committee members are considered separately. We find disclosure quality (as perceived by financial analysts) is positively related to the percentage of audit committee members who are affiliated with companies providing services to the firm and who are financial experts and negatively related to the percentage of audit committee members who are related to firm executives and who are financial experts. We also find that adding independent audit committee financial experts predates improvements in disclosure quality. As regulators around the world consider implementing audit committee requirements mandated in the United States, our results call into question disqualifying all gray directors from audit committees.

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Keywords: audit committee; disclosure quality; expertise; independence; Sarbanes – Oxley; regulators

INTRODUCTION

Accounting scandals at companies such as Cendant and Sunbeam led to increased scrutiny of corporate audit committees in the United States. This increased scrutiny arose at least partially because in the words of then chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission

(SEC) Arthur Levitt, '... qualified, committed, independent, and tough-minded audit committees represent the most reliable guardians of the public interest'.¹ In February 1999, the Blue Ribbon Committee (BRC) on Improving the Effectiveness of Corporate Audit Committees issued its report detailing 10 recommendations for improving corporate audit committees. Among other changes, the BRC recommended that all audit committee members be independent of the firm and that at least one member possess accounting or financial management expertise. Although the NYSE and Nasdaq adopted these recommendations, accounting scandals at firms

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