

For Disabled Canadians, Education, Not Quotas, is Key to Unlocking Corporate Board Appointments

According to a 2020 report on diversity disclosure practices from Osler, Hoskin and Harcourt LLP, only six TSX-listed and Canada Business Corporations Act (CBCA) companies reported having a board member who identified as a person with a disability.

To put this into perspective, Statistics Canada (StatsCan) reports that 22 per cent of Canadians aged 15 and over, or about 6.2 million people, have one or more disabilities. That's more than one in five Canadians. Thus, it is abundantly clear that people with disabilities are underrepresented on our country's corporate boards. The Canadian Foundation for Physically Disabled Persons (CFPDP) is working diligently to change this.

While there is currently an increased focus on equity, diversity and inclusion, for a long time, this has meant promoting gender equality. It has moved slowly and taken over a generation to reach 19 per cent. This is slow progress towards reaching gender parity and there is clearly still a long way to go.

This push, however, has paved a path for other diversity groups to move forward.

In some jurisdictions, diversity quotas have been established for corporate boards. On September 30, 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed a bill into law requiring public companies headquartered in the state to include people from underrepresented communities on their boards of directors. This follows on the heels of similar legislation mandating that public companies headquartered in California have at least one female board member by the end of 2019. There are also provisions to increase the number of women who are directors depending on board size. Many other jurisdictions around the world have similar gender quotas and some are considering expanding their diversity legislation as California is now doing.

CFPDP, however, does not believe quotas are the best path forward. You simply cannot legislate that every corporate board should represent the diversity of the population.

Instead, we believe providing educational opportunities is the best way to tackle diversity and inclusion in all sectors.

In Canada, for gender equality, the challenge was to

bring in educational opportunities for women. It has been a key factor for some rising into senior positions and being appointed to corporate boards.

Similarly, the challenge for Canadians with disabilities is to have enough qualified professionals to hold board positions and senior executive roles. Therefore, we need to do more to help educate people with disabilities to have the required competencies, professional credentials, and proven business acumen that a corporate board requires. As more people become available, corporations can start looking beyond the usual candidate pool when filling board seats and consider those who are equally qualified for the role yet also have the experience of living with a disability.

Many Canadians with disabilities have financial challenges when it comes to post-secondary education and/or achieving professional designations.

That is why CFPDP, as part of its A Seat at the Table initiative, is working to create endowment funds for students with disabilities at all major universities in Canada. We are very encouraged with the success we have had so far at University of Manitoba and Toronto's Ryerson and York universities, and we are now looking to extend this program to other major post-secondary institutions.

At the same time, we need more corporations and foundations to establish endowments for scholarships and bursaries. Government can assist with university fee waivers and by helping to make education in Canada more affordable. We can also encourage the education of more diverse groups.

We must also do more to educate corporations about the advantages of diversity in the workplace, such as increased productivity and profits, less absenteeism, lower turnover and better staff relationships.

Finally, people with disabilities themselves need to know how to aggressively display their talents so they will not be overlooked when opportunities arise – and education can play a powerful role.

Ultimately, we must show that diversity is not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do to make Canada the best country in the world for people with disabilities.

