

OpenText, American Express Canada recognized for adding people with disabilities to their boards

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The Canadian Foundation for Physically Disabled Persons has given awards to two companies, one of them being OpenText Corporation, for the inclusivity of their corporate boards (Kevin Van Paassen/The Globe and Mail)

For the first time in its nearly 40-year history, a Canadian disabilities foundation has given awards to two companies for the inclusivity of their corporate boards.

OpenText Corporation and American Express Canada were recognized by the Canadian Foundation for Physically Disabled Persons, which raises awareness about the role of those with disabilities in Canadian business and policy.

Despite making up more than one fifth of the population, Canadians with disabilities are still severely under-represented on corporate boards, said Vim Kochhar, the foundation's founder and chair.

People who identify as having a disability hold only 0.3 per cent of corporate board seats in Canada, according to the foundation. Its challenge for corporate Canada: Raise that number to 1 per cent by the end of the year.

"We need to start from the top," the former senator said. "Once the stigma is clear, things move much more quickly. That's why it's important to recognize these pioneering companies."

Out of 2,200 board seats at 316 public Canadian companies, just nine people identified as having a disability in 2021, up from six the previous year, according to law firm Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP's annual diversity report.

In 2019, Mr. Kochhar said he was unable to identify a single board member with a physical disability after writing several hundred letters to Canadian corporate leaders. In response, he started "A Seat at the Table," a project through the foundation that identifies and promotes board candidates with physical disabilities.

Gaurav Upadhyya, an executive at insurance company Foresters Financial, was appointed to the Amex Bank of Canada Board in July, 2021. Mr. Upadhyya contracted polio when he was three years old while living in India, and has since walked with crutches and leg braces.

Retired major-general David Fraser joined Waterloo-based software company OpenText's board of directors in 2018 after serving for the Canadian Armed Forces for 31 years, including roles as a commander in Yugoslavia and southern Afghanistan. His experience in war zones left him deaf, and Mr. Fraser says he now uses hearing aids and reads lips to communicate. He only disclosed his disability in 2020.

"I never talked about my disability because I didn't think it was that important," Mr. Fraser said. "I want to share and hopefully other people with disabilities feel comfortable enough that they're willing to share their disability without fear of retribution."

Mr. Kochhar estimates there could be several dozen more Canadians with physical disabilities already sitting on boards, and encourages them to speak out to help remove the stigma and set an example for others.