

A SPACE AT THE TABLE

Creating boardroom opportunities for Canadians with disabilities

The Honourable Vim Kochhar, chair of the CFPDP, believes that his latest social-change initiative, a multi-pronged effort to persuade corporations to appoint people with disabilities to their boardrooms, has the potential to significantly enhance opportunities for employees with disabilities at all levels of the workplace.

At present, roughly four million Canadians live with a physical, psychiatric or developmental disability, and as the population ages, that number is expected to rise to about nine million in 2030.

Yet despite the enormous size of the disability population, “there is basically zero representation at this time of people with disabilities on corporate boards,” said Kochhar.

“I believe our corporations can and will do better. Canadian society overall is empathetic, caring and prides itself on treating all its citizens fairly. I’m confident they will listen to our message, appreciate that an important group in our society is being left out and seek to give them the voice they deserve,” he said.

Sparking conversations and driving change

The new initiative, called “A Space at the Table,” will challenge corporate Canada in a very public way to appoint people with physical disabilities who have strong professional credentials, proven business acumen and significant board experience to boardroom positions.

“We’re saying that it’s time to look beyond the usual candidates and consider individuals who are equally qualified in the traditional way yet also have the experience of living with a disability,” said Kochhar.

A key piece of the initiative is a public-awareness campaign intended to spark high-level conversations across corporate Canada about why boards are lagging in this area.

The campaign will feature full-page ads in the *Globe and Mail* and a robust social-media plan. In addition, letters will be sent to the board chairs and the leaders of board-governance committees at 500 companies, encouraging them to begin appointing qualified people with disabilities to their boards.



Creating a candidate pool

Anticipating that companies are likely to have difficulty finding qualified candidates on their own, the CFPDP is also working to establish and nurture a candidate pool that will be made

accessible to board-member selection committees. Since corporate boards historically have not even considered people with disabilities for board roles, much less appointed them, very few individuals up to now have put themselves forward as candidates, noted Kochhar.

The CFPDP’s candidate pool will, for the first time, create a mechanism in the marketplace for candidates with disabilities and boards to connect and form relationships.

Qualified candidates are invited to visit cfpdp.ca and submit their resumes.

Additionally, the CFPDP has reached out to professional associations and disability organizations in every province across the country, asking them to inform their members of the opportunity to apply for acceptance in the pool.

To ensure the talent recruited to its candidate pool is top calibre, the CFPDP has formed a selection board composed of highly qualified individuals who are already serving on corporate boards and have appropriate experience and competence. (See list of selection-board members on pg. 19)

The selection board will meet regularly to assess applications and determine who gets added to the pool.

The business case for diversity

There is a powerful business case for why corporations should bring more diversity around the board table. When two or more board members have similar life experiences, think alike and always agree, their perspective could be represented by just one of them, and new ideas are less likely to flow.

Conversely, when a diverse group of people come together, constructive debate is more likely to take place and ideas pour out. In the modern economy where innovation drives results, diversity has become a precious business asset.

How the disability perspective can help business

Kochhar said the benefits to a company of having a person with a disability on its board are significant and many. For

example, a disability perspective can assist companies in being proactive about meeting the customer-service needs of the growing disability population and capitalizing on opportunities for increased profits through development of new products and services

Further, like women in the workplace, “people with disabilities have to be harder workers and better at their jobs than their colleagues to overcome the bias that they’re less capable,” Kochhar said.

“This means that if they’ve risen to the top in their professional roles and also have the right qualifications for appointment to a board, they are very likely to have what it takes to be a strong board asset,” he added.

Compared to able-bodied individuals, people with disabilities also possess the advantage of having had tons of practice honing their other abilities and skillsets, said Kochhar. “If a person is deaf, they have to use their sight more. A blind person learns to hear better. A person in a wheelchair learns to navigate differently,” he said.

The ongoing process of overcoming barriers to daily living — of figuring out new ways to perform what for able-bodied people are basic tasks — strengthens their ability to think ahead, manage problems and devise solutions, said Kochhar.

“They become better problem solvers, and boards need problem solvers,” he added.

The challenge ahead

Many of Canada’s leading corporations have implemented policies and strategies aimed at recruiting people with disabilities into their workforces, but they haven’t yet taken similar action at the board level.

When considering the challenge of convincing corporations to change their practice in this area, the obvious comparison is to the experience of women seeking board representation. In May 2019, Statistics Canada released new data, based on information collected in 2016 through the Corporations Return Act, showing women hold just 19.4 per cent of board seats.

Moreover, 56 per cent of corporate boards were filled entirely by men, while another 28 per cent of corporations had only one female member. Just 15.2 per cent had more than one woman.

Kochhar said he understands that change can be slow on corporate boards, even when companies are well intentioned. There are limited seats available in any boardroom, and other groups are likewise vying to increase their representation.

Measuring success

“But we have to begin somewhere,” he said. “If we place just one candidate on a corporate board in the first year, I will consider that a success, and we will build on that in the following year.”

Kochhar said he had been thinking of developing a project to help people with disabilities obtain board positions for a number of years. Last year, he was inspired to get started after hearing the Honourable Brian Mulroney speak at the CFPDP’s 2018 Hall of Fame Induction luncheon.

Mr. Mulroney related that, shortly after his Conservative government swept to power in 1984, he appointed one of his cabinet ministers to be his “Minister Responsible for Disabled Persons.” It was the first cabinet position of its kind in Canada.

According to the former Prime Minister, the presence of a senior-level advocate for disability issues at the cabinet table was instrumental in guiding his government to make numerous progressive policy and program decisions on behalf of the disability community.

“Listening to the Prime Minister tell his story, I realized that a government cabinet is like a corporate board, and so for a corporation, appointing a person with a disability to its board could similarly lead to many positive results,” Kochhar said.

Of all the initiatives the CFPDP has undertaken, A Space at the Table may be its most challenging. “We’re trying to change how corporations think and act at the most senior level — that’s never going to be easy to do,” he said.

At the same time, Kochhar says this initiative has the potential to be the CFPDP’s most rewarding to date. “In the past, we have always attempted incremental change from the bottom up. This is about creating historic change from the top down. What we’re doing has the possibility of transforming how corporations act with respect to people with disabilities at every level of the organization,” he said.

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