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Group to push companies on increasing people with disabilities in director roles

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The founder of a charity for physically disabled people says he has yet to find a Canadian company with a board member from that growing demographic group. He's working to change that, and soon.

Despite increasing awareness of the need for diversity in senior leadership, people with physical disabilities are struggling to break into director roles, says Vim Kochhar, a former senator and head of the Canadian Foundation for Physically Disabled Persons. To address the gap, the organization is compiling a list of 10 candidates to send to more than 500 publicly traded companies for consideration.

"I've dealt with corporations for the past 36 years and I have never found that any of them, like banks and insurance companies, have people with physical disabilities [on boards]," Mr. Kochhar said. "They've started hiring people with disabilities in these low management positions.

"When you talk about diversity, they will tell you that they are going to hire people with disabilities, but they are all on the lower levels."

Canadians living with a physical disability that impairs their mobility, hearing or vision currently make up about 8 per cent of the population, and that group is expected to grow. The number of Canadians with physical disabilities is estimated to rise from 2.9 million in 2018 to 3.6 million by 2030, nearly double the pace of the population as a whole, according to a study by the Conference Board of Canada.

Considering those figures – and the number of lawyers, doctors and accountants he has met that have physical disabilities – Mr. Kochhar said representation on boards is not increasing quickly enough.

"We don't want to wait another 20 years to end up with zero representation," he said. "Sometimes you need to vigorously teach and inspire people at the top that this is a good business decision to have people with disabilities on corporate boards."

The CFPDP invited a group of business leaders – including former General Motors Co. executive Maureen Kempston Darkes, Deloitte Canada chair Duncan Sinclair and The Globe and Mail publisher Phillip Crawley – to select 10 candidates based on their experience and credentials.

The group plans to send its list of potential candidates to boards across Canada in the new year, with the goal of seeing at least one candidate appointed to a board by the end of February. The CFPDP will track companies based on the requests they receive for more information on the candidates.

To recruit applicants, the foundation reached out to disability advocacy groups and professional associations, including legal, medical and business groups, and have received 80 applications so far. Mr. Kochhar said he often hears business leaders say that they would be open to appointing a person with physical disabilities, but haven't found anyone qualified for the position.

The "closed shop" dynamic of board recruitment neglects people with physical disabilities and other marginalized groups, said Patrick Jarvis, a former executive director of Canada Snowboard and chief executive of the Canadian Paralympic Foundation.

Mr. Jarvis, an arm amputee who is assisting the CFPDP with recruitment, said that referrals tend to come from existing directors and that, without sufficient data on board diversity, it's difficult to assess whether discussions about inclusion translate into increased representation.

"You would hope that merit, skill and experience would stand on its own, but sometimes there needs to be a little nudge," he said. "But it comes down to the networks of the people sitting around the table."

Canadian public companies now have to publish information on gender diversity policies, a measure that has influenced more of them to add women to boards. Next year those requirements will broaden, as new rules will require federally incorporated companies to report numbers on disabilities, as well as race and Indigenous heritage.

But it will take more than enhanced disclosure policies to make space for marginalized groups, Mr. Jarvis said. They would benefit from more mentorship, career development and role models from the senior ranks to gain exposure to leadership opportunities.

"For a lot of people, [board positions] are not even within their line of sight," Mr. Jarvis said. "There are individuals out there that do have the requisite knowledge to participate, but they're not front and centre. But sometimes all you need is an example or two."

And the benefits of including people with physical disabilities stretches far beyond qualifications, according to Mark Wafer, a candidate for the CFPDP's program and a former Tim Hortons franchise owner who oversaw 14 stores in the Greater Toronto Area. As a hearing-impaired person who hired more than 200 employees with disabilities, he said biases and stereotypes against disabled people tend to outweigh their experience and qualifications.

"When it comes to the disability community, any competency, skill and experience is overlooked as the corporation, often through unconscious bias, sees only the disability and forms a judgement that this individual can't possibly contribute as well as a so-called abled person," Mr. Wafer said in an e-mail.

"But disabled people have different problem-solving skills. This is how innovation is brought to the board. This is how boards can become high performers."