

Everyone deserves

A Seat at the Table



Things are progressing with CFPDP's social-change initiative to create boardroom opportunities for Canadians with disabilities

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES are Canada's biggest minority community. One in five – or approximately 20% of our population – lives with a disability. Why then is there so little representation from this demographic on the Boards of our country's corporations? Instead of just asking the question, Vim Kochhar, Founder of the Canadian Foundation for Physically Disabled Persons (CFPDP), is leading the charge to help bring about positive change.

Companies have made great strides in recruiting women for these director roles over the last 40 years. We are now calling on corporations from coast to coast to add people with disabilities to their Boards of Directors," says Kochhar. "Right now, I am not aware of any individuals with physical disabilities on any Canadian corporate boards."

And from this realization, A Seat at the Table was born. Drawing on his personal contacts, Kochhar brought together a group of senior business leaders who are eager to help. This group, which is being led by 11 CEOs and senior executives, is charged with choosing qualified candidates based on their credentials, competencies, and experience.

Additionally, in an effort to broaden the thinking behind today's important diversity and inclusion initiatives, CFPDP has launched a vigorous campaign to draw attention to its A Seat at the Table program.

"Having a disability should not be a barrier to joining a corporate Board," emphasizes Kochhar. "The attention that diversity and inclusion efforts are receiving is extremely encouraging, but we must do more to ensure that all Canadians feel included. This is the time to make corporations aware of the significant contributions that Canadians with disabilities can make."

Indeed, Boards often recruit new directors from their own contacts – so people they already know or who are within their existing networks are getting these opportunities. This, says Kochhar, creates a homogenous group that excludes diverse groups of people, including people with physical disabilities.

"There are many people with disabilities who are incred-

ibly accomplished, and we see stories every single day regarding their achievements. Part of our mission for A Seat at the Table is to highlight these success stories," adds Kochhar. "Bringing a disability perspective to the table is also another way that corporate Canada can further serve its bottom line. Imagine having a ready resource on your own Board, and being able to proactively tap into the thinking and customer service needs of more than 20 percent of Canadians. This is achievable if companies build leadership teams that more closely align with Canada's demographics."

A Seat at the Table aims to help companies do exactly this by identifying, vetting, and then recommending qualified Board-level candidates. CFPDP is also supporting educational opportunities for this demographic group by establishing scholarships. Currently, the organization has established endowment funds at Toronto's Ryerson University and York University and is looking to extend this program to other major post-secondary institutions across Canada.

People with disabilities have an advantage in their mindset and acquired skills," explains Kochhar. "It is often said that people who have hearing loss make broader use of their eyesight and that people with low or no vision make more use of the hearing. As well, we have seen people with disabilities prove themselves in a wide variety of sports, and a Paralympic gold medal is as widely recognized as Olympic gold. There are also already many successful professionals whose genius has propelled them to top positions in their fields."

Ultimately, as CFPDP continues to move its Seat at the Table initiative forward, Kochhar believes society as a whole must work together to remove physical barriers and create educational opportunities. At the same time, he and the dedicated group of Canadian corporate leaders will continue to encourage qualified people with disabilities to submit applications through CFPDP for Board positions.

"We will continue to raise awareness with the public and present qualified leaders to corporate Canada," says Kochhar. "I am ever so hopeful that we will see people with disabilities on Canadian Boards by the end of 2021."