

A Seat at the Table

One man's letter-writing campaign has helped break the glass ceiling for Canadians with physical disabilities. At the same time, there is still much more to do.

When Honourable Vim Kochhar first sat down to write letters to hundreds of companies in 2019, he likely already had an inkling of the story to come. The purpose of his letters was to ask these companies if their boards included anyone with a physical disability.

At the time, it seemed there was little awareness or interest in the issue. When it came to corporate Canada, the emphasis was on gender equality. Public companies were trying to add women to their boardrooms – a bastion of male power since the dawn of the public corporation. And they were required by the federal government to report progress on that front. But there was no such requirement for others who may be underrepresented, including people with disabilities. That would soon change as the Canadian Foundation for Physically Disabled Persons (CFPDP) launched a remarkable initiative that would not only draw awareness to an untenable situation but quickly pave the way for advancement.

"I knew at the time that a simple yet shocking statistic would not, in itself, be enough to change things," says Hon. Kochhar, Founder and Chair of CFPDP. "We needed to take strong action to upset the apple cart and ensure that Canadians with physical disabilities would start getting appointed to corporate boards."

Hon. Kochhar began working quietly behind the scenes, drawing together top CEOs and executives from Bay Street, charitable and media organizations, and the Chancellors of two of Canada's most prestigious universities. They agreed to form a committee that would choose highly qualified Canadians with a physical disability who they believed deserved a seat at the table in the boardrooms of the nation.

CFPDP's "A Seat at the Table" campaign kicked off with full-page public service ads in the *Globe and Mail*. Generously donated by the newspaper, the ads challenged corporate leaders to join the initiative. Suddenly, the 'elephant in the (board) room' was out in the open. While almost one in five Canadians identify themselves as being a person with a disability, not one person in a corporate boardroom did so at the time.

As it turned out, some major corporate investors were

already reading the public mood – the financial performance of corporations was not enough. They believed they also had to make a positive contribution to society. Companies could not do that by maintaining the boardroom status quo. And focusing solely on gender equality to meet self-imposed quotas was not going to be enough. The federal government recognized this soon after and in 2020 told corporations to also start reporting the numbers of other underrepresented persons in leadership roles.

The first numbers, published in the 2020 Osler Report on Diversity, confirmed Hon. Kochhar own informal research. They revealed that only 0.3 percent of boardroom seats at TSX-listed and Canada Business Corporations Act companies subject to disclosure requirements were filled by a disabled person.

In January 2021, Hon. Kochhar wrote an opinion piece that was published in the *Globe and Mail* under the headline, "Having a disability should not be a barrier to joining a corporate board in Canada. Why is it?"

It is certainly not because there are no qualified applicants.

To date, "A Seat at the Table" has received applications for board positions from approximately 200 candidates with disabilities. A total of 15 have so far been chosen by the Selection Board in three sessions. They are being actively promoted by CFPDP for board positions. Strong media support for "A Seat at the Table" is also contributing to positive change. In just three years, based on Osler Report findings and its own internal research, CFPDP believes the number of board seats filled by a physically disabled Canadian has almost tripled.

"We have set an initial goal to see at least one percent of directors on public company boards in Canada identify with a disability," says Hon. Kochhar. "Just a few short years ago, I was not able to identify a single public company that had a director with a physical disability. While the wheels of change are moving slowly, I am heartened to see that we have helped significantly grow that number between 2019 and today. We are continuing this important work so that these numbers will continue to rise."

