



# Bringing Overlooked Talent to the Table

A group of CEOs and top leaders is promoting highly qualified Canadians with physical disabilities

## The Honourable Vim Kochhar

Five years ago, the Canadian Foundation for Physically Disabled Persons (CFPDP) launched an initiative to encourage Corporate Canada to appoint qualified individuals with disabilities to their boards of directors.

This journey to reshape the governance landscape started at a CFPDP event in 2018. During a speech, The Right Honourable Brian Mulroney told attendees how his decision to appoint the first-ever Minister for Disabled Persons was instrumental in guiding his government's progressive policies and program decisions on behalf of the disability community.

The former prime minister's words struck a chord with me. If a senior-level disability advocate could create positive change at the federal cabinet table, disabled professionals could do the same from the boardroom table. That's when CFPDP's "A Seat at the Table" initiative was born.

At the time, I couldn't point to a single director in a corporate boardroom who identified with a disability, even though one in four, or eight million, Canadians do today. Clearly, this absence had nothing to do with a shortage of qualified candidates.

I turned to an influential group of leaders to help drive the project forward. CEOs, top Bay Street executives, representatives of charitable and media organizations, and chancellors from prestigious universities joined forces. They shared a common vision – to identify highly qualified Canadians with physical disabilities deserving of a seat at the table in corporate boardrooms.

Fast forward to 2024 and the wheels of change are moving, albeit slowly.

The latest Osler Report on Diversity

Disclosure Practices revealed that 12 board positions at public companies operating under the Canada Business Corporations Act are held by persons with disabilities, with an additional seven disclosed voluntarily.

At the same time, more than 30 highly qualified candidates selected through the CFPDP program are being actively promoted for board positions. In the summer of 2021, one of the candidates was appointed to the Amex Bank of Canada board.

Crown Corporations are now seeking applications from CFPDP candidates, head-hunting firms are reaching out regarding board search projects, and public companies are expressing interest. The next crucial step is to match more qualified individuals with disabilities with opportunities.

With the current representation of disabled professionals on corporate boards at less than one percent, there is still work to be done.

Public service ads in The Globe and Mail have played a significant role in publicizing the initiative and candidates. New endowment funds to help create leaders of tomorrow have also been created at major universities.

As "A Seat at The Table" continues to advocate for qualified candidates with proven business acumen, we need a commitment from Corporate Canada to create more diverse and representative board leadership where individuals with physical disabilities have a strong presence and voice.

**Editor's Note:** This article was originally published in the January 2024 edition of *Director Journal*, a publication of the Institute of Corporate Directors.

## Endowment Funds

To help prepare the next generation of leaders for a seat at the corporate board table, CFPDP launched an initiative to create endowment funds that provide bursaries and scholarships for students with disabilities. CFPDP's goal is to launch the initiative at all major universities in Canada.

To date, the following endowment funds have been established:

- York University – CFPDP
- Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) – CFPDP
- University of Manitoba – Asper Foundation
- Pearson College, Vancouver – Vim Kochhar
- Ivey Business School at the University of Western Ontario – Thorpe Family Foundation in partnership with CFPDP
- Queen's University – Duncan and Michelle Sinclair Foundation in partnership with CFPDP's "A Seat at the Table" program

Further, additional endowment funds are being finalized at York University, Osgoode Hall Law School at York University and Queen's University.

CFPDP is inviting donors to commit \$100,000 and asking universities to match it. As an incentive, CFPDP will add \$10,000 and name the endowment fund in the donor's name. In addition, CFPDP will issue a tax/business receipt for your donation. This creates a \$220,000 endowment fund to grant bursaries and scholarships in perpetuity using the investment proceeds.

Donors who wish to make a meaningful donation of less than \$100,000 are also encouraged to contact the CFPDP office.

Reach our team at 416-760-7351 or [whynot@cfpdp.com](mailto:whynot@cfpdp.com).