



Council founder Pamela Jeffery said the list idea came after complaints about the difficulty of finding qualified candidates. DEBORAH BAIC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

Easing the path to boardroom diversity

Group hopes a list of 50 screened candidates will help companies change the makeup of its directors

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A coalition of Canadian business executives is championing a way to improve diversity on boards by using a new system to screen prospective directors and prepare a database of available board candidates.

The Canadian Board Diversity Council will announce Thursday that it plans to create a list of 50 screened directorial candidates who can bring diversity to corporate boards that are seeking new members. The "Diversity 50" list will include women, visible minorities, aboriginal candidates and people with disabilities.

Diversity council founder Pamela Jeffery said the idea to prepare a list of leading candidates grew from a series of town hall meetings last year with senior board officials, who frequently complained that they did not know where to find more highly qualified, diverse candidates for

their boards.

"Diversity 50 takes away the argument that a board doesn't know where to find diverse candidates," Ms. Jeffery said.

Databases of potential female candidates are not new in Canada, and have not previously led to a notable shift in corporate board diversity. The now-defunct Women in the Lead organization, for example, for years published a catalogue with hundreds of available female directors.

But previous lists focused primarily on female candidates, not a broader array of diverse directors based on ethnicity or other factors, Ms. Jeffery said.

Moreover, she said the diversity council's plan is not to create an open directory with hundreds of names submitted by would-be candidates, but rather to vet potential candidates and endorse a smaller list of people who are most qualified to serve as corporate directors.

"We hope this reduces the risk for a nominating or governance committee person to say 'I'd like to talk to this person - I'd like to meet them,'" she said.

Iamgold Corp. chief executive officer Steve Letwin, a member of the diversity council, said his company will "absolutely" draw from the list to improve the diversity of its board, which currently has one visible minority director and no women.

"We have a very strong board, but as the company evolves, it should be looking at diversification - and it will," he said.

The list will supplement the more "traditional" candidates typically identified by search firms that are hired to find new directors for boards, Mr. Letwin added. He said he and other CEOs involved in the project have also recommended people for inclusion in the database.

"I'm a big believer that the greater the diversity, the more

effective an organization is," he said.

The model for the Diversity 50 list comes from a program run by New York-based Governance Metrics International (GMI) and financed by two major California pension plans. Directors are selected based on a list of criteria developed by GMI, including not only work experience but also their broad skill sets, functional expertise and personal characteristics.

The diversity council has teamed with GMI to use the same criteria for the Canadian list, Ms. Jeffery said. GMI has agreed to add candidates on the Canadian list to the U.S. database as well.

The council is made up of 49 companies and member organizations committed to improving Canada's weak track record for diversity on boards. It is seeking applications until June 22 from would-be directors for the Diversity 50 list.