

Women remain underrepresented on boards

The Business Journal - by Corrinne Hess

Date: Monday, July 19, 2010, 12:00am CDT - Last Modified: Thursday, July 15, 2010, 6:35pm CDT

The number of women serving on the boards of directors of the largest publicly owned companies in the Milwaukee area has increased slightly over the last six years, but still vastly underrepresents the number of females in the work force, according to a review of proxy statements and annual reports by The Business Journal Serving Greater Milwaukee.

Of the 269 board seats at the 30 companies analyzed, only 30, or 11.2 percent, are held by women, which is up from the 8.8 percent of board seats held by women in 2004, the last time The Business Journal studied the number of women and minorities on local boards.

“There are a few more decision-makers out there who understand that gender diversity, as well as ethnic diversity, brings more informed decision-making on a board level, but we still have a long way to go,” said Sharon Canter, chair emeritus of Milwaukee Women inc. “More young women are getting master’s degrees, law degrees and becoming MDs. The pipeline of accomplished women is getting fuller, but that is not being reflected on boards.”

Milwaukee Women inc was formed eight years ago to call attention to gender inequality.

According to the group’s latest research, women have made no net gains in the executive suites and boardrooms of Wisconsin’s largest companies in the past two years.

The problem is nationwide, according to a recent study by Catalyst, a New York City-based nonprofit organization that promotes gender equality. Women make up 47 percent of the U.S. labor force but occupy just 15 percent of board seats.

“This is one of the last areas where it’s still a bit of a frontier for women,” said Mary McCormick, executive director of the Rotary Club of Milwaukee and vice chair of Milwaukee Women inc. “There is a strong business case for bringing women on boards. Once people realize it’s not just the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do, then we’ll see more success.”

Of the 30 companies analyzed by The Business Journal, 21 have women on their boards of directors. However, 13 of those companies only have one woman on their boards.

Journal Communications Inc. has three women on its board, the highest number of female board members in the Milwaukee area.

Mary Leahy, senior vice president and general counsel for Journal Communications, said the board values diversity, but also looks for the best person to fill the position.

Journal Communications does not currently have any ethnic minorities on its board.

Having only one woman on a board of directors can be problematic because she tends to stand out and might not feel comfortable expressing her opinion, Canter said.

Once a company adds two or three women to its board, then you will get the true perspective women have, Canter said.

“That’s when we are going to see more emphasis,” she said. “There are always going to be decision-makers who don’t get it and who don’t want to get it. Maybe it’s their loss. We’re not going to change their minds.”

While there is no question corporations should be more open to women on their boards, part of the responsibility starts with the women themselves, said Yvonne Lumsden-Dill, executive director of the Women’s Leadership Institute at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee.

Getting on boards is based on word-of-mouth and women should make sure they are visible in their communities so the nominating committees know who they are, Lumsden-Dill said.

Maria Monreal-Cameron, president and CEO of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Wisconsin, served on 11 different nonprofit boards at one time and is now a member of six boards, including Harris Bank. She said she is usually joined by other women on the boards she serves on, but is often the only Hispanic person on the board.

Having a board that is diverse in ethnicity and gender translates into a board that is diverse in thought and better for overall business, Monreal-Cameron said.

“When are they going to wake up and see we have something valuable to bring to the table?” she said. “It’s just that they haven’t opened the doors to let us in. We keep knocking, but there’s no answer.”