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Finally, some good news on boardroom diversity

By [Shirley Leung](#) | GLOBE COLUMNIST



Every time I write about diversity on corporate boards it's rarely good news. It goes something like this: Too male, too white, and we have a long way to go.

But not today.

I'm using this space to highlight a collection of companies that get it. They have at least 50 percent diversity on their boards when you add up the number of female and minority directors. Or put it another way, a boardroom that actually reflects the world we live in.

The list comes from PR maven Colette Phillips, who hired a firm to survey public and private companies in Massachusetts to find the ones with the most diverse boards. Her list, dubbed the GK15, gives a shout out to 15 companies ranging from household names like General Electric, Staples, and TJX to lesser-known ones such as Juniper Pharmaceuticals and Leader Bank.

It's not an exhaustive list — many companies did not respond to her survey request — but she's also not starting from scratch. She was able to build on work done by Deloitte, [the Boston Club](#), and my Globe colleagues Todd Wallack and Sacha Pfeiffer, who created a [similar database](#) of Massachusetts public companies in 2015.

The GK15 stand out for going beyond the norm in most boardrooms. A [Deloitte study](#) published in February found that women and minorities hold less than 31 percent of board seats among the Fortune 500 companies.

"Truth to be told, I was a little skeptical. I was holding my breath," Phillips said, recalling when she launched the survey. "I was very pleasantly surprised and encouraged."

Topping the GK15 is Avid Technology, a Burlington audio and video technology firm. The eight-member board has four women and two men of color, including chairman and CEO Louis Hernandez Jr.

Hernandez said the company values diversity because it's good for business. People with different points of view bring

different ways to solve problems. There have been [plenty of studies](#) backing this up. The secret to diversifying Avid's boardroom is simple. "It takes more patience," said Hernandez.

A typical board search may take three to six months, but Avid will take six to 12 months, if necessary, to find the right candidate. Hernandez said talented female and minority directors are out there, but not in the same numbers as their white-male counterparts.

Hernandez — who himself came to Avid nearly a decade ago as a director — said companies feel the pressure to fill jobs fast, but that same sense of urgency shouldn't apply to the boardroom because directors play an oversight role rather than a day-to-day operating position.

"It's hard to make the same case," he said. "It's really a matter of whether you have a priority or not."

That priority must come from the top. CEOs like Andrew Dreyfus of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts and Roger Crandall of Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance have made it clear that diversity matters, especially the number of female directors.

The 14-member Blue Cross board is chaired by a woman, Phyllis Yale, and has five other female directors including Marcy Reed, the president of National Grid in Massachusetts, and Paula Price, the former chief financial officer of Ahold USA. The 15-member MassMutual board features six women, including former BJ's CEO Laura Sen and former Federal Reserve Bank of Boston president Cathy Minehan.

The tech and biotech industries have a reputation for being unfriendly to women, but four companies on the GK15 hail from those sectors. IRobot, the maker of consumer robotics such as the Roomba vacuum cleaner, has been around as a public company for 12 years and has always had a woman on its board. (One of its cofounders is also a woman, Helen Greiner.) Today, the Bedford company's 10-member board has four women and two men of color.

Eastern Bank rounds out the GK15 with three women and four men of color on its 15-member board. Director Diane Hessian, who has sat on a dozen corporate and nonprofit boards over her career, said the bank's board has been the most diverse she has ever served on. Not only that, women and minorities hold powerful positions on the board and throughout the company.

"Diversity is becoming a more and more important issue for boards at a time when political correctness in our country is on the decline," said Hessian, chairman of C Space, a Boston marketing company. "Diversity is not about making nice and being politically correct. The jury is in. Diversity — of not just gender and color, but of experience, of thought and age — can be an enormous source of competitive advantage for an organization."

Hats off to the GK15, and the hope that some day their boardroom makeup becomes the new normal.

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