



**SOCIETY OF
ACTUARIES®**

Article from

Small Talk

December 2018

Issue 50

Lunch With an Ex-President in Chappaqua, New York

By Jonathan Pollio

I had lunch with former Society of Actuaries (SOA) president Jerry Brown to get his thoughts on the Smaller Insurance Company Section (SmallCo). We talked about many topics, the first being, why be involved in a section? He feels one great thing about joining a section is the networking opportunities. As a small company actuary, it is important to have people with whom to exchange and share ideas and learn what is new in the field. It is also important to talk to someone who understands the challenges of being a small company actuary. From a personal standpoint, the networking opportunities I have gained through my involvement have been invaluable.

SOA support for the small company was our next topic. He mentioned research projects, webinars and newsletters. He feels one way to grow our sections is with new fellows of the Society of Actuaries (FSAs). The SOA recently began offering new FSAs a free one-year membership in two sections of their choice. This program directly shows new FSAs the benefits of section membership.

We then talked about his thoughts on the future of small companies. The small company has a tough future. Bigger companies are starting to get interested in our niche products and will now throw resources at those products. He believes, though, that companies and people survive and thrive. I agree with this thought. Small companies develop a relationship with the customer that big companies cannot achieve.

We also discussed SOA meeting content that is relevant to small company actuaries. SmallCo runs a few sessions at every meeting, a fact of which I was not aware—I only knew about the small company buzz group. I looked at a few of the old meeting

agendas, and there are many SmallCo topics. If you have ideas for topics SmallCo should cover at future meetings, feel free to send any ideas to the section council.

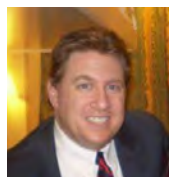
Jerry and I then talked about training from the SOA. He was very proud of the predictive analytics seminar that nearly 250 people attended last year. Seminars usually have about 30 attendees, so 250 is a large number. I have attended seminars in the past, but I didn't know how many seminars are available to members. For instance, the SOA Predictive Analytics Certificate program, a combination of e-learning and a seminar, provides an opportunity to improve your skills in this area.

Next we discussed areas where the SOA could improve. Jerry felt that we needed to work on our "soft skills." Communication, management, leadership and people skills need to be better developed. We need to learn to talk to our audience. Volunteering for SOA activities is an excellent way to develop and improve those skills. Joining a section council, writing an article for one of the newsletters or presenting at a meeting are all excellent ways to develop soft skills.

The final thing he mentioned is how we need more board diversity. We need representatives from small and large companies. We need consultants, company actuaries and nontraditional actuaries. We also need gender, age and geographic diversity. The resulting diversity of opinions and thoughts will only make the SOA stronger now and in the future.

After lunch, I thought of my takeaways from the meeting. The first thing was how accessible the president was. The lunch was set up with a simple conversation and an invitation. It also was surprising how willing he was to listen and talk openly and honestly with me about the SOA. Basically, if you have a problem with the SOA, talk to a board member or a section council member. They are people just like you who understand your issues and challenges. The SOA's goal is to help its membership, and it needs help from that membership to reach its goal effectively.

I want to thank Jerry Brown for a nice and informative lunch. ■



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