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Actuarial Careers—What Do We Need to Succeed? An Interview with Steve Kelner

Steve Kelner has served as the Chief P&C Valuation Actuary at GE Insurance Solutions since 2002 and his career with General Electric and various businesses has spanned 17 years. He is a Fellow in the Casualty Actuarial Society and a Member of the American Academy of Actuaries.

Q: To those who are still studying for the actuarial exams, what is the best piece of advice you can offer?

A: Study to pass, but also study to learn. Too many students focus on one or the other. We all know that career success is connected to both. One can pass without really learning the material. Similarly one can learn the material and still fail. Learning is a longer, slower process. It requires more repetitions if you want to learn for the long run. So start early, get ahead and retain more for later.

Q: What business and management topics are most appropriate for actuaries, and how does this best fit with an employer's profile?

A: I believe that actuaries are well suited to most business and management topics. We tend to have an affinity for the issues that demand strong quantification skills. Most employers tend to depend on actuaries more in the traditional "quant" areas both because of our strengths and experiences, but also the lack of competition. The greatest value that we often bring, though, is the ability to bridge our unique skills into the decision-making processes that we don't own.

Q: What are the key actuarial concepts and methodologies you might expect to see applied in everyday work?

A: The key concepts that I want to see more of are the application of informed reason and intellectual curiosity. Most actuarial work, without those two concepts, is simple arithmetic, easily performed by the untrained or inexperienced. Only when we dig into the issues to understand causes, drivers, trends, hidden patterns, etc. do we truly add value.

Q: What other working concepts would you like to see applied?

A: I'd like to see more effective leadership and more constructive open discussion. Communication is probably the most important working concept that we underemphasize.

Q: What are the three most important things every actuary needs to do to be successful?

A: *Listen, laugh and learn.* That's too easy of an answer.

First, I would encourage all actuaries (and all professionals) to invest more time in scoping of assignments to ensure that the product that is delivered meets the customer's needs instead of simply complying with their request. Understanding causes initially requires more time, effort and investment.

Second, I would encourage all actuaries to think like underwriters. We need to understand every aspect of the risk that we are analyzing to do our jobs exceptionally well. Understand causes, interrelationships, motivations, etc. Don't just look at the numbers.



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Lastly, remember how actuaries are perceived and be a model for how we should be perceived. Generally, we are “the math team.” Others don't always understand what we are saying, how we think or what we mean to say. How you communicate is many times more important than what you mean to communicate. It's not just about our willingness to use PowerPoint, but our willingness to think about how the recipient of our product is inclined to hear what we are about to say. This helps us to determine how to build background slides, summarize key points and ask key questions to ensure that we are understood. We also need to be careful to fight against the stereotype that we are always conservative. We need to demonstrate the reasonability of what we present even though the answer is generally not what is expected.

Q: What is your idea of actuarial career success?

A: Actuarial career success means maximizing one's capabilities. To me, that involves constant learning, growth and challenge. It means making the company more profitable and a better place. It means representing the profession and industry well. And, it requires that we do the right stuff, make difficult decisions, deliver bad news, and be empathetic, caring and respectful of our professional responsibilities.

Q: To serve as an inspiration, what talents should an actuary have?

A: People are able to inspire others in many ways. People who surprise me with what they accomplish or how they accomplish it inspire me. When someone does something that I did not think of or did not realize was possible, it encourages me to challenge how I do things. When someone is exceptionally graceful in handling a difficult situation or individual, it encourages me to try to act similarly. Generally, the accomplishment of others beyond what we would have expected drives us to be more than

what we expect of ourselves. (Too idealistic of me? I hope not.)

Q: What did you have to learn the hard way and why?

A: What have I not had to learn the hard way? We learn best from our mistakes; hence I am a great learner.

Learning how to learn in public is possibly the best career skill that I have developed. It requires trusting that others don't think less of you for not knowing the answers to all the questions, the humility to understand that you are not expected to know everything, but the confidence to ask (what feels like) stupid questions.

Q: Who has been your biggest influence in your career?

A: There have been several very strong influences in my career. The first is my wife. She has counseled me on many fronts, especially how to be better at being who I am, not just at what I do. Within the workforce, my initial boss was my biggest influence. He encouraged me to join the actuarial profession and to take exams. He had a quiet, but very effective leadership style, while demonstrating unyielding integrity and teaching how to be a model actuary.

Q: What is your favorite number?

A: When I was younger (and an almost athlete) my favorite numbers were related to jerseys that I'd worn in hockey or basketball.

Today my favorite number is 0, of course! :-)) □

