



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Your Career—It's Up to You

by Kelly Rendek

Career Development? What is it, anyway? Well, I'm not a human resources consultant, nor a recruiter, nor a life skills coach, nor in fact any one of the many different types of professionals involved in the field. So I can't tell you what the professionals would say. What I can tell you is what I've learned from my own experience.

Opportunity Knocks

My actuarial career started out as an accident. I wrote the first two exams because my brother told me to (he was worried about my career prospects as a mathematician!). I'm from a smaller-sized city, and the actuarial population at the time was about 15. The actuary proctoring the exams that day was understandably curious as to who I was, and what my qualifications were—in case I turned out to be a possible employment candidate. For my part, I didn't really know what an actuary was, so I wanted to pump him for information before I committed myself to anything. A few weeks after the exams, I called him up and he invited me down to the office to meet a few people and go out for lunch. It was only near the end of that day that I realized everyone else thought it was a job interview! But I was offered a job as a result, and thus began my actuarial career.

The most important lesson I learned from that experience was that anything can become an opportunity. I went out for lunch thinking I could learn what an actuary did and ended up with a job that turned into a career. I could have thought long and hard about whether or not it was what I really wanted to do—but what was important was to take the opportunity that was offered, and see what I could make of it.

In various guises over my career, the same lesson has continued to be applicable. Sometimes you have to do a bit more of the work yourself, in order to turn a chance encounter, or perhaps an otherwise uninspiring

incident, into an opportunity that you can take advantage of. But I believe that opportunity lurks around every corner, just waiting to be noticed.

Never Stop Learning

It's a cliché, but a useful one. If you don't keep learning and developing as a professional and as a person, your career isn't going to go anywhere. The end of your actuarial exams is just the beginning of your career. Technical skills are necessary, and initially it can take all of your time and effort to acquire them. However, if you want to advance in your career, you'll need to do more. You'll find useful ideas in *The Stepping Stone*, and through sessions put on by the Management and Personal Development Section, but don't stop there. Take a class, volunteer for a project, learn a new language, join Toastmasters—it might not be useful right away, or even directly applicable, but can ultimately add value.

One of the things that I started a few years ago was to set myself a goal of learning at least one new thing every year—not necessarily work related. One summer I took rowing lessons. It's a bit humbling to take instruction from an 18-year-old who knows an awful lot more about the subject at hand than you do. But I spent a number of early mornings on the lake thinking about the teamwork required in rowing, and how I could apply those principles at work.

My own opinion is that a traditional actuarial education is focused on specific technical skills, requiring a great deal of discipline and self-study, and consequently it ignores many of the skills needed to work effectively in an organization. To be successful, you'll need to expand your horizons, a lot.

Take Stock Every Once in a While

Even though my actuarial career started out as an accident, it doesn't mean I've never had to



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think about it between then and now. In fact, I believe that you need to regularly assess your career—where it's going, and what you want out of it—even if you don't make any changes as a result. It's a little bit like spring-cleaning: you find those long-misplaced items that you put away just in case you might need them someday and you toss out other items that aren't useful anymore.

Creating or revising your resume, if you do it properly, is a great way to analyze your career, even if you're not actually looking for a new job. It's an exercise that I've used several times during my career. There are a lot of tools out there to help you do it,—the SOA's Actuary's Career Planner is a good place to start. The key is to spend enough time and do it thoughtfully.

Think about skills that you might already have that aren't represented in your resume, and how you might go about using them more in the course of your work. Think about where you want to go and the skills you might need to acquire in order to get there. Think about the type of environment you like to work in, and how well it matches up with your current job and your "ideal" job. For a fresh perspective, consider careers and occupations that are completely different from what you're doing now—and whether or not any of the skills or aptitudes might be the same. Evaluate the risks you're willing to take to advance your career—and those that you're not.

Even if all you do is file your updated resume once you're done, it's a valuable exercise. If nothing else, when the next unforeseen opportunity comes along, you'll be ready for it.

Ask for What You Want

The biggest developments in my own career have come about because I asked for something I wanted. Sometimes it was a small thing—a chance to work on a certain project, or an opportunity to go to a conference or seminar that I was interested in. Other times it was a major request—such as creating a new position in the company for me so that I could do the work that I thought needed to be done. You won't always get what you want (I certainly don't!), but if the powers that be don't know you're interested, they're less likely to think of you when oppor-

tunities do come around. If you make your interests known, and if you get involved when the chance is there, then more opportunities will come your way.

(And just remember: "you can't always get what you want, but sometimes you get what you need"!)

The Choice is Yours

Sometimes you end up feeling like you're going nowhere, and you don't know how to fix it. You know you want something more out of your career, but you're not sure what. Even going through a thoughtful analysis only seems to highlight the problems, without offering solutions. Or, sometimes you know what direction you want to go in, but there are obstacles in the way.

Sometimes all you need to move your career forward is to realize that you do have a choice. The choice might well be to stay where you are, because it meets most of your needs at the moment. The choice might be to stay where you are for now, but go to evening classes and work on developing different career options for the future. Or, it might be that it is time to make a change, but you need to spend some time on research before you can make an informed choice. The first step is to identify that there are options open to you, even if you can't see them right away.

Early in my career, I was told that I couldn't apply for a job in another department because the project I was on was too important. I was furious, because I had been waiting for an opening in that area. My response was to fire out resumes in all directions, which netted me a

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So what's your track record for creating new ways of doing things? Have you ever suggested (or even better, implemented) new approaches to customer service or marketing? New methodologies, templates or tools? New ways to train and develop people? Where is the evidence of your creativity in running any aspect of your business?

4. Style

Finally, if all the other tests have been met, a follower will be interested in your style. Great leaders are effective coaches, helping everyone on the team to stretch and to fulfill their goals. Great coaches must excel at two seemingly opposing skills: they must be supportive and nurturing, as well as continually demanding—nagging their followers to stretch to the next goal.

You must demonstrate both of these skills. If you're only demanding, you'll be perceived as Atilla the Hun. If you're only nurturing, you'll be perceived as a wimp! In either case, people won't follow you. What people need in a leader is a friendly skeptic, a loving critic, a challenging supporter—someone who's not afraid to give both positive and negative feedback, and is involved enough to know when either is due.

It's been said that "A leader doesn't build a business—a leader builds an organization that builds a business." For you to be perceived as leader, you must be interested in building a team. And you must be prepared to get your satisfaction from the success of others. It's more about attitude than it is about natural talent. □

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couple of interviews. Ultimately, I ended up getting the job I had originally wanted, but it was a choice between several alternatives, rather than a default option. It was also satisfying in that I had reclaimed the power to determine my own career regardless of what obstacles had been put in my way. Your career is yours, and no one else's. You need to create the choices in your own life and then act on them. No one else can, or will, do it for you.

Take Risks

Sometimes you just have to take a risk. If that scares you, practice taking smaller risks that don't matter so much and work yourself up to it. Be willing to fail or even just to look silly. Most actuaries are risk averse, whether by nature or by training and it takes practice to break the habit. But if you want to succeed, you have to be willing to go out on a limb once in a while. (If necessary, start by standing next to the tree and looking at the limb).

After practicing with smaller risks, I recently decided to go all out: I packed up all of my be-

longings and moved from Canada to Ireland. In fact, I also switched from life insurance to P&C at the same time. It's a lot of change in the middle of a career, but hey, why not? Surprisingly, the reaction from most people was that it was something they wished they could do. We get stuck in a rut and then we get comfortable in it. Even if we want to change, we become afraid to take risks that will move us away from what we know.

You have to be willing to take a risk now and again if you want to move your career forward. It might be as simple as volunteering for a project that takes you out of your comfort zone. Or it might be as dramatic as moving to another country. Whatever it is, be willing to take the risk and make the most of it.

As I said to begin with, I'm not an expert. But I have had a varied and fulfilling career up until now and I expect it to continue that way. It's up to you to determine where you want to go and then figure out how to get yourself there. There are lots of good resources available, but it won't happen by itself. What you make of your career is up to you. □